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Levinas's Symbiotic Phenomenology of Infinity and Totality

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OF INFINITY AND TOTALITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
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Dedication

In loving dedication to my family—Chris, Hinano, and Galina.

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ABSTRACT

I present a novel interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenology wherein I argue that his *seemingly* antagonistic and exclusive notions of "totality" and "infinity" are best understood, rather, as symbiotic, interdependent, and mutually conditioning. My demarche uses close textual analysis, constant reference to Levinas's (admittedly sparse) comments on philosophical method, and an important return to, and then departure from, Cartesian thought in order to advance my thesis that infinity and totality are essentially intertwined and "symbiotic." As such, they are not essentially opposed in any sort of preferential, evaluative, or eliminative sense, to name some prominent (and misguided) caricatures that regrettably pervade many aspects of Levinas scholarship, whether *pro* or *contra* Levinas. I use this insight to show that certain Levinas commentators misunderstand the meaning of, and relationship between, "totality" and "infinity." Lastly, as against those who claim that Levinas essentially has no philosophical argument in such works as *Totality and Infinity*, I show that Levinas's argumentative rigor and strategy is best understood by way of a carefully

nuanced and textually documented interpretation of the way that "infinity conditions totality."

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Introduction: A Clarification of Levinas's Obscurantism

In what follows, I present an interpretation of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas's (1906-1995) that clarifies both his philosophical sources, as well as his phenomenological ambitions within what one calls his "middle period" (1946-67). This period begins with Levinas's reintegration into family, society, and philosophical life after his five-year internment in various German "camps" that were reserved for Jewish French officers during the Second World War.[1] This period ends with Levinas's appointment to Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris-Nanterre in 1967-8, during which he developed lectures and publications that would eventually form the core of his later period, including the publication of his second great work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). One could say that his "early" period begins when he receives his *License* (or, roughly, "Bachelor of Arts" degree) in philosophy in 1927, whereupon he embarked on an intellectual journey that led him to study under Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg (1928-9), and then to germinate the seeds for some of the 20th century's most interesting thought.

His middle period interests me the most because it is the most conversant with the history of Western philosophy and phenomenology, and its exposition is by far clearer than that of either his early or later period. That being said, the writing style of the most notable works from Levinas's middle period (such as *Totality and Infinity*, which receives the lion's share of my attention) has been characterized as "infuriatingly sloppy," by

[1] Levinas was taken prisoner in Dunkirk, June 1940, and the sole reason for which he did not go to a "death" camp for Jews is the fact that he was an officer in the French army, and Jewish officers were spared at least the most severe of "treatment" by their Nazi warders. As Solomon Malka notes in his wonderful biography, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and His Legacy*, Levinas was one of "1, 600, 000 French POWs (4 percent of the [French] population) in Germany spread out over more than 60 stalags and 20 oflags throughout the country" (67).

critical commentators such as Dermot Moran.[2] B.C. Hutchens, one of Levinas's staunchest *supporters*, even goes so far as to say, quite unapologetically, that "Levinas delights in paradox and contradiction" in such works as *Totality and Infinity*.[3] The general take on the clarity of Levinas's philosophical prose is perhaps most succinctly stated by Simon Critchley, who simply notes that "the obscurity of Levinas's prose troubles many of his readers."[4]

I have struggled with this admittedly "sloppy" and "obscure" prose for over seven years, and it is undeniable, for instance, that Levinas capitalizes terms inconsistently, that he rarely defines important technical notions, and that his language can oftentimes *seem* paradoxical and contradictory. This same prose, from a different perspective, however, is at once marvelously rich in description, suggestion, and, from the right vantage point, thoroughly replete with compelling philosophical arguments and critiques. In this last vein, then, I see the chief worth of this dissertation as a sustained attempt to elucidate, at least in large part, that which is truly lapidary in such works as *Totality and Infinity*. In the former vein, the philosophical diamonds that do, in fact, lie within the rough of Levinas's "sloppy" and "obscure" prose can easily remain unnoticed without the right kind of contextualization.

For his part, and no doubt to the chagrin of many readers, Levinas seems utterly dismissive of the worth of making one's philosophical method clear, as the following passage (perhaps too candidly) reveals.

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[2] Moran. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge (2000), 322.
[3] Hutchens. *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Continuum (2004), 5.
[4] Critchley. *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP (2002), 6.

> I do not believe that there is transparency possible in method. Nor that philosophy might be possible as transparency. Those who have worked on method all of their lives have written many books that replace the more interesting books that they could have written. So much the worse for the philosophy that would walk in sunlight without shadows.[5]

To write entirely in darkness would only lead to the converse problem, however, and in what follows I try, earnestly, to interpret Levinas with at least a modicum of methodological clarity and close textual analysis. This approach, when coupled with an emphasis upon situating Levinas's thought against the background of his philosophical predecessors, helps to bring out, and burnish, many of the philosophical gems in a philosophy that (perhaps too often) writes, and sometimes remains, in the shadows. Briefly stated, Levinas's thought is too valuable and insightful in general, as well as personally edifying to me in particular, to remain obscure.

I certainly do not claim to have shed light on all of the philosophical ambitions that one finds within his middle period. The three chapters that follow, however, do shed light on three important and related regions of Levinas's thought that are pivotal in such works as *Totality and Infinity*. In the first chapter, I show that many of Levinas's key technical terms, his notions of subjectivity and agency, and, importantly, his philosophical method, ought to be understood from an accurately nuanced return to, and then salient departure from, Cartesian thought. The main point to this comparative enterprise is not so much to revive or rehabilitate Cartesian notions, but rather to lend support and traction to key *Levinasian* ideas that his often obscure philosophical prose does not clearly exposit. These ideas include: "totality," "infinity," and "desire"; important aspects of the Levinasian self's mental economy and the same self's apparently

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[5] Levinas, "Questions and Answers." *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Bettina Bergo, (trans.) Stanford: Stanford UP (1998), 89.

paradoxical relation to an "infinite" Other; and, lastly, a retrospective reading of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* that elucidates a proto-philosophical version of Levinas's interhuman Other, as well as a prototype of Levinas's interpersonal phenomenology. Levinas's phenomenology is a *reappropriation* of Cartesian thought and so it does, however, importantly distance itself from Cartesianism in relevant ways. Levinas's re-minting of many Cartesian coins serves as a segue to the main labor of the second chapter, which articulates a symbiotic, or dual aspect, reading of Levinas's notions of "totality," "infinity," and their interrelation.

Chapter 2 develops my interpretation of both Levinasian and Cartesian "totality" and "infinity," which shows that they are two distinct and equally important perspectives that an agent can adopt on the world, oneself, and others. This interpretation is important both because it faithfully reflects Levinas's interpersonal phenomenology, and because it deflates some recent criticism that alleges that the implications of "totality" and "infinity" render Levinas's thought as either "quasi-philosophical" and or incoherent. I show that these critiques rest on a mistaken, yet pervasive, reading of these notions that ignores the tandem and interrelated nature of "totality" *and* "infinity," as well as the Cartesian inspiration that informs these Levinasian notions.

My interpretation of totality and infinity is of further value because it dispels many of the seeming "paradoxes and contradictions" that superficially inform Levinas's claims about self and Other, language, teaching, and erotic relations, to name some prominent examples. This same interpretation also helps to explicate the (implicitly indicated) ontological structure of the Levinasian self and his or her possibilities for "totality" and "infinity," and the third chapter attempts a systematic and rigorous

elucidation of the ontology of self and Other that Levinas does not, however, systematically develop. This elucidation helps to deflate recent critiques of Levinas that claim that his ontology is either insufficient to ground his claims about the self and the Other, or that his ontology is simply quasi-philosophical.

The general point to the dissertation is to showcase the brilliance and novelty of Levinas's thought in his middle period, which can lie fallow if one does not take pains to interpret it with a measure of clarity and consistency. His novel brilliance is arguably at its most remarkable when we highlight the primacy of the *personal and interpersonal* aspects of his thought. So, although I show that Levinas does indeed borrow, "sample," or repeat with a difference many of the key strategies of his philosophical precursors, I have also tried to vigilantly accentuate that which is distinct in Levinas's descriptions, arguments, and critiques of the *human* situation that imbues (literally, in his sense of the terms) "ethics" and "totality and infinity."

Lastly, I cannot express in written (or perhaps any other) words the extent to which I am thankful to my teachers for helping to instill the conditions and perspective out of which I am able to craft a work of this scope.

Chapter 1:

Levinas's Understated Debt to, and Reappropriation of, Descartes' Thought

René Descartes is not commonly regarded as a philosopher of alterity; indeed, conversely, he is often regarded as *the* philosopher of ipseity, or even as the "father" of solipsism. This chapter nevertheless argues that Descartes is a foundational philosopher of the Other and alterity, and further that this foundation is key toward understanding many of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical claims and argumentative strategies. By re-reading the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and *Discourse on Method* (1637) alongside texts from Levinas's middle period (1946-1967) I shall make a compelling case, by way of textual examination and extrapolation, for a shared nexus of philosophical kinship and methodological strategy.

We can readily see that Levinas the philosopher is in many respects preoccupied with Cartesian philosophy. With no fewer than 20 textual passages that directly consider Descartes' philosophy, *Totality and Infinity* seems to take a page from his teacher Husserl, in that it often reads like Levinas's own Cartesian Meditations. When commentators downplay the shared interests and direct lineage between Levinas and Descartes' thought, far too many essential themes and philosophical gestures get swept under the rug.[6]

The importance of clarifying and developing the points of similarity between Descartes and Levinas is significant for at least three reasons. First, although there are notable exceptions, the majority of Levinas scholars and commentators tend to take his appropriation of Descartes as largely, if not wholly, restricted to some version of his

[6] See, for example, Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, *On Levinas*, 26.

appropriation of the Cartesian idea of the infinite God. This unique focus often leads to an understated appreciation of what I shall show to be a much more complex and nuanced philosophical relationship that outstrips a more or less robust substitution of the Other for God. Even when many commentators rightly accentuate and ably amplify the philosophical transformation of Descartes' God into Levinas's Other, a further look at other shared thematics and points of similarity generally gets overlooked.

In the *Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2002), for example, we see only a handful of references to Descartes' contribution to Levinas's thought, and hardly any that go further than the Levinasian reappropriation of the Cartesian God and the subsequent idea of infinity. In *Face to Face with Levinas* (1986), a collection of 12 essays devoted to Levinas's thought, the same problem can be observed. My chief ambition, accordingly, more thoroughly and systematically fills in a relative lacuna in Levinas scholarship by augmenting the shared fund of similarity between the two thinkers. In making such a contribution to the scholarship, this chapter would serve as a check or counter-balance to such claims as Peter Atterton's and Matthew Calarco's, that:

> It should be noted that Levinas's reading of Descartes in *Totality and Infinity* is highly atypical and selective. Descartes supplies Levinas with a model of philosophy as "critique" understood "as a tracing back to what precedes freedom," but *nothing more*. (*On Levinas*, 26, my emphasis)

Second, scholars and philosophers the world over often dismiss Levinas as a rogue or patricide to the philosophical tradition. To an extent, he brings this reputation upon himself when he seemingly hastily criticizes many aspects of the Western philosophical tradition for their being systematically "egological," "narcissistic," and such. He can appear to corroborate the latter point by sometimes neglecting to *explicitly*

develop positions that he either borrows or criticizes. To better understand the letter of many key Levinasian claims, however, as well as the often implicit importance of his Western philosophical precursors, we should have a broader understanding of the debt he owes to such philosophers as Husserl, Heidegger, *and*, I argue, Descartes. Levinas's debt to his actual teachers Husserl and Heidegger (1928-9, Freiburg) is almost ubiquitously emphasized, yet his arguably deeper debt to Descartes is not; or, again, if it is, it is generally understated and under-appreciated in its complexity. By contrast, I shall advance an interpretation of Levinas as being at least as much of an intellectual pupil of Descartes as of Husserl or Heidegger.

Third, the robust notion of subjectivity or ipseity found in Descartes' *Meditations* arguably provides as good a starting point as any out of which to grasp the Levinasian agent perspective *from the inside*, or through what he calls "interiority" and "separation." In many respects the Levinasian agent of *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity* is far closer to Heidegger's *Dasein* in terms of the self's interaction with the world and the structures of Being revealed therein. This same agent nevertheless evinces a psychic economy that is in many respects fundamentally Cartesian. Levinas reappropriates these psychological features and transforms them phenomenologically, and so a better understanding of the shared roots between Descartes' and Levinas's notions of subjectivity will clarify the notion of subjectivity that Levinas first criticizes, and then phenomenologically rebuilds. I shall argue, by way of anticipation, that Levinas's work is at its most brilliant when he phenomenologically scrutinizes the self so as to show its social and ethical dependence on human others, as opposed to Descartes' divine Other.

As the scholarly literature on Levinas has amply demonstrated, Descartes' idea of God undoubtedly contains within it the seeds for the most basic formulation of Levinas's Other. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that, in addition, *many* other key Levinasian formulations ought to be understood against a more solid Cartesian background, out of which we see crucial concepts such as "atheism," "inner life," "separation" and especially "totality" and "infinity."[7] On a more methodological plane, we shall show that some of Levinas's notions of the self's philosophical maturity are analogous to those of Descartes', and in addition one can easily see (with proper context) that some of Levinas's thoughts on the nature of what he calls "Desire" and "exteriority" are originally Cartesian. Lastly, I make the interpretation that Descartes himself has articulated a proto-Levinasian notion of the "face" and "discourse" in the 5th section of his *Discourse on Method*.

It is important to show that Levinas's oeuvre seeks to diagnose certain basic philosophical problems putatively beginning with, and continuing in the wake of Cartesian philosophy, and then to surpass them through a phenomenological reappropriation and critique. One cannot fully contend with his middle period, however, without concrete recourse to seminal Cartesian ideas. If it is true, as Borges says, that many unique thinkers create their own precursors, then the first chapter of the dissertation shows how Levinas "creates" Descartes as one of the seminal proto-philosophers of the Levinasian Other.[8]

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[7] Since "totality" and "infinity" are the most important of his technical terms, they receive lengthy treatment in chapters 2 and 3 as well.

[8] See Borges, Jorge Luis, "Kafka and his Precursors," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, Eliot Weinburger, ed., New York, Penguin Putnam Inc., (1999), 363-5.

On the Very Idea Of an Infinite Other

The greatest possible idea as such, from Descartes' (and a retrospective Levinas's) point of view, is the paradoxical but pivotal notion of a finite human subject bearing a thought the content of which necessarily exceeds the capacity of the thinker. This ideal excess, or what Levinas will often call "a more in the less" or "Desire," is purportedly discovered at a point in the *Meditations* where Descartes has just established revealing truths about his mental economy, whereupon he turns his inquiry towards the "outside" or, in Levinasian terminology, the "exterior" of such an understanding.

It is not often mentioned, but Descartes is philosophically preoccupied with the problem of being alone in the world and finding a way out of the possibility that he may be the sole author of things and people judged "external"—all to the detriment of his philosophical enterprise. The Second Meditation's labors have enabled Descartes to be certain about a limited variety of judgments regarding both his mental existence and objects considered representationally, yet he nonetheless admits that such certainty has a provisional character.

This character in part stems from his concession that he can be certain about clear and distinct things *only while* he is judging them, that is, while he is "attending to the arguments by means of which we deduce things."[9] In order to be certain that things do not radically or chaotically change, he believes that a benevolent and non-deceptive God is needed to stably and rationally hold reality together, as it were.[10] And since Descartes

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[9] AT VII 140.

[10] Concerning the need to establish God's importance in philosophical matters, Descartes says of God that he is the being "in whom all the treasures of wisdom and science lie hidden." (AT VII 53) By comparison, the Other for Levinas will render conceptualization, objectification, and even rationality possible, as we see below, and especially in chapter 3.

believes that the moment-to-moment *preservation* of reality is effectively no different than its initial creation, he ultimately sees the supreme and benevolent Other (God) as its guarantee. A true *mathesis universalis*, therefore, will never get off the ground until God's supreme transcendence and non-deceptive character have been established.[11] Thus the letter of the *Meditations* clearly states that unless he can establish a transcendent bridge to the world through the supreme Other, all of Descartes' judgments about "external" things and people remain, over time, subject to doubt. As he puts the point generally:

> [A]s soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, is seems that I can never be quite certain of anything else. (AT VII, 36)

In this vein the Third Meditation's struggle encompasses Descartes' attempt to transcend his ipseity and concomitantly to affirm that what lies beyond it grounds and justifies his very existence as a rational and moral being over time. As is well known, Descartes will conclude that he must owe his creation, existence, and future to what he takes to be the preeminent transcendent being—God. Interestingly for the purposes of section 1C, furthermore, Descartes makes some proto-Levinasian remarks in this Meditation, such as stating that the infinite is "in some way prior" to the finite self, and that as a self he is, in the last analysis, "a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another."[12] As Colin Davis, whose *Levinas*: *An Introduction* (1996) makes significant

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[11] In a rather subtle and often misunderstood point, Descartes makes a distinction between the indubitable character of certain judgments made in real-time, i.e. the present, versus *recollections* of the conclusions of such judgments. The latter remain fallible precisely because the cogito and similar judgments depend upon an immediate intuition or unbroken chain of such in order to be indubitable. In a word, recollections are at a *distance* and hence the chain is broken, and thus dubious. A rational and non-deceptive God, presumably, would bridge such knowledge together. [Cf. AT VII 36, 69, 140]

[12] AT VII 45-6, 51.

strides toward fully understanding the Levinas-Descartes encounter, puts the point generally:

> For Levinas the significance of the Cartesian discovery lies in the encounter with the infinite as something beyond knowledge and utterly resistant to the solipsism of the transcendental Ego. Most importantly, this encounter does not endanger or annihilate the subject, but on the contrary enables its constitution. (39)

Descartes additionally concludes that the relationship between himself, *qua* finite being, and God *qua* infinite being cannot be one of adequate comprehension (or an aspect of "totality," as Levinas would call it) because, like Levinas with self and Other, there exits a radical asymmetry between the self and God, which we shall now develop.

We can further appreciate Levinas's idea of infinity and what he means by the Other having a priority over the self when we carefully analyze *Descartes'* notions of a mental subject's being representationally overwhelmed by what he terms the "infinite." Importantly for the comparison with Levinas, the Third Meditation could readily bear the subtitle, "Is there really an Other who informs the Self?" This is because its central strategy involves an argument by elimination whose purpose is to see if any true candidate for (infinite) alterity could possibly exist independently of Descartes' mental economy. In other words, Descartes would have asked himself, am I aware of anything that I could not possibly have created? From a different point of view, he again realizes that the conclusions of the Second Meditation provide only a restricted certainty about limited acts of thinking in the present—Descartes, then, needs to 'get out of his head' and connect to the world somehow if his philosophy is to have any real traction, and his argument for God's existence serves just this function.

To this extent, he founds a method of transcendental reflection that purports to be able to identify various kinds of thoughts the contents of which are gauged according to

the amount of "objective reality" they possess.[13] A patently odd notion at first glance, "objective reality" may well be one of the first contributions to phenomenology, in that it describes a methodical distinction between things themselves and their representation to consciousness.[14]

For his part, Descartes rather unhelpfully glosses objective reality as a function of "the way objects are normally in the intellect," by contrast to the "formal reality" of an object.[15] In reading his reply to the first set of objections to the *Meditations*, in which his contemporary Caterus takes issue with the very idea of objective reality, it seems like Descartes took the notion itself to be either unproblematic or obvious.[16] To augment the notion's cogency, however, objective reality refers to the *representational* reality *of a thought*, in the sense that the thought is both real in itself ('in' the Cartesian thinker's mental economy) and *about* something possessing "formal reality." In this sense, and looking forward, it is a prototype of Husserlian intentionality. Looking backwards, Descartes' translators have situated the notion by reference to the scholastic terminology that he liberally employs throughout the *Meditations*. As Cottingham *et. al.* put it,

> The 'formal' reality of anything is its own intrinsic reality, while the 'objective' reality of an idea is a function of its representational content. Thus if an idea *A*

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[13] By "transcendental reflection" I mean that Descartes, after arguing that the having of an idea, considered in itself, cannot be false, develops a method of distinguishing thoughts themselves according to what sort of thing they reflect or represent.

[14] We shall also see in chapter 2 that Levinas rebuilds a version of such interior 'reality' in my interpretation of his being "overwhelmed by the Other." This will involve a detailed reconstruction of what he means by "totality" and "infinity" in microcosmic and macrocosmic senses.

[15] AT VII 102.

[16] Caterus essentially deflates the very idea of a thought possessing objective reality by claiming that such a tag "adds nothing to the thing itself," i.e. the thing or external object in question. (AT VII 92-3) He then debunks the notion of strict causality between thing and thought by insisting that our ideas of things come about quite randomly, owing to our lack of perfect knowledge. Descartes, however, steadfastly replies that there is, indeed, a causal relation between idea and thing (such as the idea of an intricate machine being caused by seeing one) and that the more intricate and complex the thought the more "reality" there must be in the cause. This, of course, leads him to believe that the thought of God has the most such "reality." (AT VII 102-4)

> represents some object *X* which is *F*, then *F*-ness will be contained 'formally' in *X* but 'objectively' in *A*." (28ff)

So, if my idea-of-a-basketball ('A') represents a basketball ('X') which is, say, round ('F'), then 'roundness' will be really or formally contained in the ball but representationally or objectively 'in' the idea.

Things are a little more complicated, however, as objective reality admits of degrees; certain things are said to possess *more* objective reality than others. In one sense, the image "in" the mind of an idea that has more objective reality than another means that the referent of the former participates in a higher degree of ontological perfection. It would be more perfect by virtue of its being about something like a primary quality, as opposed to a secondary quality, for example. The sense here, something of an analogue to Plato's "divided line," is that a primary quality is more real or "more in being" than a secondary quality because secondary qualities are always parasitic on primary qualities. Something with more objective reality, moreover, would be less prone to alteration by virtue of its being distinguished by fewer comparable things—for example there are only two substances (mental and physical) for Descartes, which are each primary qualities. So, the objective reality about a "substance" as such, for example, would be greater than the objective reality about, say, shape as such, since any shape would be a far more contingent arrangement of reality, and would also be parasitic on substance itself. A color, furthermore, would be parasitic on the thing with shape, and hence be even more removed from "perfection" in being, as Descartes would say. Whereas substance *per se* simply is what it is, and presupposes far less than a shape or color for its being or ontological "perfection."

As Descartes puts it, "the ideas which represent substances [i.e. mental or physical substance] amount to something more, and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents."[17] And, not surprisingly, the idea that gives him his "understanding of a supreme God…certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances."[18] Before we see some implications of such an idea, we should bear in mind that *the point* here is not so much to revive Descartes' notion of representational reality as such; rather, the emphasis ought to be on Descartes' pioneer effort of reaching out to the Other and the subsequent Levinasian wake that it engenders.

Keeping in mind *Totality and Infinity's* subtitle, "An Essay on Exteriority," we should come to appreciate that Levinas gets a fair amount of his inspiration *for* the "exterior" *from* Descartes. If Levinas is preoccupied with certain privileged and fundamental personal notions of the exterior, it is Descartes who philosophically demonstrates that there *needs to be* an exterior in general upon which the subject depends, and continually needs to strive for, in order to become wiser, and, to an extent, more ethical.

So, after having eliminated just about every possible source for a notion of radical alterity, Descartes throws his whole weight into proving that of all his ideas, only his idea of God or the Infinite remains as a real transcendent opening to a wholly Other and external source. To recapitulate, by Descartes' lights he could, in principle, have created every other kind of idea based upon his self-understanding—but how could a finite and

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[17] AT VII 40
[18] Ibid.

limited being arrive at the idea of an infinite God? Descartes puts the argument in terms of an if-then clause, with the implication of course that he will demonstrate the antecedent's truth and thereby cinch the syllogism. He writes:

> If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me…and hence that I cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that *I am not alone in the world*, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists. (AT VII 42, my emphasis)

In a causal argument of sorts, since something cannot come from nothing, and since his idea of the infinite strictly speaking is something, it must have for its cause something with "at least as much reality" as the effect (his idea). And since he *qua* finite being cannot engender something infinite, he concludes that the source or cause of this idea must have as much "formal reality," the mental analogue of which is the "objective reality" in Descartes' mind—that is, the source must be what the idea in fact represents: God. The referent of the idea, moreover, connotes a degree of ontological perfection (that is, it is even more perfect than a substance *per se*) such that Descartes believes that nothing could be conceived as more perfect or, in his parlance, more "in being." Briefly stated, there can be no more perfect being since this being is supremely perfect—the "most high" as Levinas would say—or, put differently, its objective reality implies that it is the source and guarantee of everything, and this Descartes claims to see "clearly and distinctly."

The consequences of this discovery force Descartes to tarry with a new set of implications, the other-regarding scope of which now awakens him (or "infects" him as Levinas might say) to such notions as the priority of the Other and the consequent dependence entailed by this priority. If Descartes, in *Meditations* One and Two, could

live entirely off of his own thoughts, as it were, the Third *Meditation's* findings leave him with both an acknowledgment of a certain debt to, as well as a kindled desire for, this Other.

> When I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without limit to even greater and better things; but I also understand at the same time that he on whom I depend has within him all those greater things. (AT VII 51)

The aspiration described in this passage, which I argue in section C serves as a prototype for Levinasian "Desire," stems from a preceding admission that Descartes is essentially a finite being who realizes both that his knowledge will never reach infinity and that he *qua* himself cannot guarantee his existence and future.[19] For the former, rather than seeing this limitation as a human flaw, he instead delights in the "contemplation" of the Other, and sees a way out of the possibility of external world solipsism, and an opening to become more complete, to "even greater and better things." For the latter, this necessary dependence on the Other is not described as a bond of servitude, but rather as a sort of ultimate stop or foundation of reality, one that, as with Levinas and his Other, truth and sincerity presuppose (*T&I* 51, 72, *passim*).

It is important to note, for the sake of future claims about Levinas's reinterpretation of Descartes' 'discovery' of the infinite exterior, that what Levinas finds important here is not a deductively sound argument that proves something, strictly speaking, but rather a way of conceiving the self and its limitations *qua* the Other as

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[19] Levinas expresses both this aspiration, and the seeds for what he means by "totality" and "infinity" in the following: "The other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell…I can "feed" off these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself as though I had been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*" (T&I 33). His distinction between the subject's ability to fully assimilate or "totalize" something, and that which both informs and resists the subject's full grasp, shall serve as one of the distinguishing marks of my interpretation of totality and infinity in chapter 2.

something of real phenomenological and ethical worth, rather than mere limitation, frustration, or even necessary conflict, as Sartre famously asserts.

Hilary Putnam, who examines Levinas's appropriation of Descartes' God in his article "Levinas and Judaism," rightly goes so far as to say that far from trying to "prove" the Other's existence by way of Descartes' style of argumentation, what Levinas seizes upon is the subject undergoing:

> an experience…which might be described as an experience of a *fissure*, of a confrontation with something that disrupted all [Descartes'] categories. On this reading, Levinas is not so much proving something as *acknowledging* something, acknowledging a Reality that he could not have constructed, a Reality which proves its own existence by the very fact that its presence in my mind turns out to be a phenomenological impossibility. (42)

Of further importance for the next chapter, in which a much more direct confrontation with Levinas's own texts leads us to see how his thought clearly revamps several key Cartesian problems, it must be noted that what Levinas retains from Descartes' idea of the infinite is the formal structure of the idea, as opposed to the purported content (for example, the Judeo-Christian God). Levinas writes, regarding the history of philosophy, in *Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity* (1957), "what we find most distinctive is the Cartesian analysis of the idea of infinity, although we shall retain only the formal design of the structure it outlines" (PII, 8). Adriaan Peperzak, who devotes many pages of thoughtful analysis to Descartes and Levinas's philosophical similarity, explains Levinas's central purpose in appropriating Descartes' formal structure concerning the idea of infinity as follows:

> Descartes maintained…that the infinite is originally present in consciousness, rejecting thereby every attempt to construct or compose its idea on the basis of other finite ideas…Retrieving the expressions with which Descartes qualifies the infinite, Levinas characterizes it by the terms "exterior"…or "having absolved

> itself" from the relation (i.e. from our idea of it) and "overflowing" our capacity of thinking it. An immediate "too much" has always already awakened and oriented human consciousness and has undermined…the full circle of reflection upon itself…This has, then, nothing to do with the "bad infinite" of an endless series or a quantitative or qualitative "more" or "most." (*To the Other*, 141)

So rather than, for example, rekindle Scholastic debates about the character of the infinite, Peperzak ably points out that Levinas's Cartesian intention is to reawaken the interior economy to a position where it must acknowledge certain psychological givens (for Levinas, I would say, this includes being originally taught, presently spoken to, and or surprised by the Other's infinite capacity to do so, as examples) as unaccountable in terms of the self alone. The next chapter's task, by way of anticipation, is to thoroughly explicate such notions as the "too much" and absolution to which Peperzak refers by concretely referencing them to Levinas's examples of discourse, being "faced," loved, and taught, among others. For now, however, it is important only to note that the notion of the infinite borrowed from Descartes' pioneer effort toward accounting for an overflow of consciousness is nowise related to a mathematical or "bad" infinity, but rather, as Putnam notes, more a question of a fundamental experience ("Levinas and Judaism," 42).

One has good reason, of course, to distance oneself from the strictest of appropriations of the letter of Descartes' argument. In addition to the well-known allegations of circular reasoning, concerning which Descartes is perhaps rightly accused of presupposing what is at issue (God's existence) in order to justify the clear and distinct idea that he has of God, there is a further problem concerning his entitlement to reliably describe God's existential attributes. In other words, even beyond the assumption that there is a perfect symmetry of representation between the objective and formal "realities" at issue, there is a further question about how a finite being or thinker can have access to

the "really infinite, omnipotent, omniscient" character of such a being. Since, like Levinas, Descartes has emphatically rejected that his idea of the Infinite is a purely negative notion (i.e. the negation of the finite), he seems to have to justify the positive aspects of his description—so whence his certainty about what God, exactly, is like? Descartes seems to rely on the clarity and distinctness of his idea, but things get more complicated, as we soon see. Levinas, for his part, will have to come to terms with a similar problem about describing the Other.[20]

Part of the brilliance of Levinas's work, however, is that by situating the Other in personal, as opposed to divine, terms, we get an account of an Other who can speak to, teach, and love us, as examples. Levinas, furthermore, avoids some of Descartes' problems by insisting that strictly speaking, the Other is never assertively known and hence unthematizable. His predicate attribution concerning the Other, as opposed to Descartes' positive labeling (the Other is, e.g., "omnipotent" and "morally perfect") is almost entirely agnostic in its formulation—Levinas's Other is, strictly speaking, unthematizable and unpredictable.

In chapter 2, by way of anticipation, we shall see a phenomenological account of the way that the Levinasian self both relates, in one aspect, and does not relate to the Other, in a different aspect. For now, I simply note that the difference between the two thinkers regarding access to, and the description of, their respective Other precisely lies

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[20] This is one reason for which I attribute a bivalent description of self and Other to Levinas's thought in the next chapter. Under one aspect of the description ("totality"), the self or same situates the Other entirely through the self's innate comprehension. In the other aspect, the self finds itself disrupted, overwhelmed, or simply on the passive side of an experience that it did not orchestrate but that is nonetheless meaningful ("infinity"). The reasons for attributing this polyvalence to Levinas's phenomenology stem from the need to be faithful to Levinas's actual descriptions of self and Other, and to dispel certain paradoxes in them—up to and including the question of attributing predicates to the Other.

in the self's active and passive dimensions—for Descartes, the self attributes qualitative descriptions to the Other, and these descriptions (in)famously lead Descartes to the problems mentioned earlier. For Levinas, the self plays a more passive role in heeding the traces of an independent agency, the passivity of which is described in detail next chapter.

It is noteworthy that Descartes has an interesting way of reconceptualizing the relation between himself and his Other. Descartes admits that beyond those things of which he has a clear and distinct idea, there could be myriad attributes concerning God's existence that would be either unattainable, or even a priori unknowable to a finite thinker. This concession to a lack of knowledge about the infinite Other, far from being a problem for Descartes, simply speaks to the asymmetry that the relationship implies. As he puts the point:

> It does not matter that I do not *grasp* the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps even *cannot reach with my thought*; for it is in the nature of infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. (AT VII 46, my emphasis)

We see more support for this acknowledged asymmetry in a rather unheralded remark, wherein Descartes claims that although he cannot "grasp" the infinite other, he can "understand" God or "touch" him with his thought, "just as we can touch a mountain but not put our arms around it."[21] For Levinas, this notion of "touching," I argue in the next section, is best exhibited in his account of the "face" and, later, the "trace," and which are arguably analogues to Descartes' "touching." For Descartes, however, it is a question of the necessary and respectful distance that the asymmetry of the relationship implies—the finite being cannot fully comprehend the transcendent and infinite other, yet

[21] Letter to Mersenne, May 26th 1630.

the experience of the self's limitations, and the transcendental-phenomenological traces of this other's presence, respectively "touches," or can be touched by, the self without being totalized (in Levinas's sense) or "grasped."

From a different tack, it is important to remember that Descartes' finite yet unique existence implies, to him, an existential lack; a dependence upon the exterior is now simply regarded as an essential and not fully knowable structure upon which wisdom and goodness are based. Because he cannot, however, "guarantee" his own existence and future (or because, as Levinas might say, he can neither master death nor fully predict the Other and the future) he "touches" this other precisely when he sees the possibility of a beyond that he cannot see or lucidly master, or when he sees his own limitations that stem from the 'traces' of this Other.

Descartes and the other person reconsidered

The *Meditations* seems to offer little philosophical resources for breaking out of a solipsistic position with respect to the existence of another person *as* another *person*. The Sixth Meditation purports to give strong arguments for an adequate resemblance between things clearly judged and the way that they exist in external space, at least considered ratio-mathematically, yet Descartes' own terms seem to efface the possibility of acknowledging a human reality beyond or in addition to physical stuff—which is what he would need, by his own terms, to distinguish a *human* being from a particular configuration of "extended" substance. If Descartes is most certain about his existence as a *res cogitans*, and even if, during the Sixth *Meditation*, he is just as certain about external reality, then what would make him certain about another *res cogitans* "very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled" with the corporeal reality that he is now

entitled to correctly judge?[22] To bluntly put the question in Descartes' own terms, how would he know that any other configuration of *res extensia* is legitimately coextensive with its own *res cogitans*?

Drawing upon the spadework done in his *Meditations*, it seems inevitable that Descartes' epistemology and account of learning, as examples, close the door to any robust external contribution from another person. This is because in order to make things intelligible, the Cartesian representational model only arrives at clarity when the mind has made a clear and distinct judgment whose criteria for judging correctly come from ratio-mathematical structures within the mind (and/or brain) coupled with the subject's "assent" about a judgment. Interestingly, and perhaps in the starkest of contrast to Levinas's view of learning and justification, the lesson for Descartes is that he "is not so much learning something new as recalling something [he] knew beforehand," that is, something that comes solely from within the self in the guise of innate ideas.[23] On this model, the mental subject only gets *his* clear and distinct representation of the object, leading to a position like the famous "wax example."

> But I need to realize that the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. Nor has it ever been, even though it previously seemed so; rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone. (AT VII 68)

Even if, as mentioned earlier, the fruits of the Sixth Meditation (and the bulk of Descartes' writings on empirical reality, for instance, the *Principles of Philosophy*)

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[22] AT VII 81. Descartes is here referring to the "union" of his own mind and body, which would seem to have to hold true of all other people as well.

[23] AT VII 64. Although one may rightly claim that these innate ideas were somehow "implanted" by God, and therefore from Descartes' Other, there still remains an important difference between this view and Levinas's, namely that Levinas's Other, as we shall see, is patently *personal* and capable of speaking to the self, for example. Interestingly, at the ontological level Levinas does, however, pattern a model of "innate ideas" that are based on an interhuman superstructure, as we see in chapter 3.

warrant him to be certain about properly conducted object cognition in general, there is still the aforementioned problem about the perception of a *person* as such. Descartes (at the end of the Sixth Meditation) can arguably see the Second Meditation's wax as real, for example, but can he now see the hats and coats to *which* he referred in the Second Meditation as the people to *whom* one should refer? In the Second Meditation, following on the heels of the wax example, he writes:

> Were I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say that I see the men themselves just as I see the wax. But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge them to be men…grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind. (AT VII 32)

To put the problem more clearly, consider the actual Descartes, who at the end of the *Meditations* now sees a particular configuration of hats and coats moving by his window. Well, just as he now can judge the piece of wax and claim that it really exists as an extended thing (i.e. considered by its geometrical shape and relative position), so too can he make similar judgments about hats and coats—this seems unproblematic, given his method and conclusions of the *Meditations*. From where, however, would he arrive at the certainty of his judgment that he sees "men," even given the Sixth Meditation's warrant about reliable object cognition? That is, by what criteria would he be able to distinguish things from persons, when it seems that all he has access to, aside from his own mental being, is extended substance? Or, if Descartes preferred to ask, why don't these hats and clothes (still) conceal automata?

As mentioned, and as is now perhaps well known, the Descartes of the *Meditations* seems to have no good solution to this particular question implied by the very terms of his philosophical system. Claim as he does that souls or minds and human

bodies are "very closely joined," it seems that a "human" body with no soul or mind is not a person on his account; for, on his view, the essence or definition of a person includes both a mind and a body, and all Descartes has access to is *his* mind and bodies in general (and, no doubt, an idea of God). And since one of the Sixth Meditation's labors involves proving a "real distinction" between mind and body, it seems now that there is a *real problem* when it comes to appreciating another human being as a person and not merely as a concatenation of physical matter with, say, no volition or reason, or more importantly for Levinas, no spontaneous capacity to overwhelm the self through teaching and learning, for example.[24]

If it is true that the *Meditations* themselves offer no viable resources to come to terms with this seemingly intractable but nonetheless interesting problem, a look at *Discourse on Method* makes us keenly aware that Descartes previously anticipates a version of the problem. His treatment of it is on the one hand highly sophisticated, and, on the other, trivial, as we shortly make explicit. Additionally, as we see in the next section, I argue that his thoughts on the human capacity for meaningful speech anticipate a Levinasian strategy that can be extracted from *Totality and Infinity* and, to a lesser extent, *Time and the Other*.

Initially published in 1637 (and anonymously, probably due to Galileo's recent condemnation) the *Discourse* itself presents a somewhat different philosophical snapshot of Descartes than the *Meditations*. In addition to containing several pages of anatomical

[24] A broader reading of Descartes' oeuvre, specifically the aforementioned *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), as well as *Passions of the Soul* (1649), reveal an account of human beings as more or less reducible to their bodies and "passions" or fluid interactions of body parts, and hence such an account would seem to obviate the need to prove the existence of another soul as such. It is the *Meditations* and the *Discourse on Method*, however, in which I see the most striking kinship and similarity, respectively, with Levinas's thought and reappropriation.

contributions on the human body, he also candidly treats of the importance of social customs, the brevity of life, and of building a broader scientific community that would rely heavily on experiments to confirm empirical truths, which at least implicitly challenged the Church's authority on such matters. Interestingly for the present purposes, Descartes takes seriously the "problem" of other minds when he confronts an aspect of the problem by laying out criteria for distinguishing a person from an automaton, for example.

He lays out these criteria immediately after giving an account of the nervous and circulatory system of human beings and animals, the anatomical study of which no doubt led him to pose the question of what distinguishes human beings from other animals, and even other "machines." He directly admits both that one could conceive of the human body as an organic "machine" and that one could build a machine such that it "bore a resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions as closely as possible for all practical purposes."[25] Even if such machines exist, however, "we should still have two very certain means of recognizing that they were not real men."[26]

> The first is that they could never use words, or put together signs, as we do in order to declare our thoughts to others…Secondly, even though such machines might do some things as well as we do them, or perhaps even better, they would inevitably fail in others, which would reveal that they were acting not through understanding, but only from the disposition of their organs. For whereas reason is a universal instrument which can be used in all kinds of situations, these organs need some particular disposition for each particular action; hence it is for all practical purposes impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act. (AT VI 56-7)

[25] AT VI 56.
[26] Ibid.

These two criteria for recognizing personhood among certain objects can be heavily criticized for either presupposing what is at issue (that a *human* would necessarily have *thoughts*) or for leaning too heavily on the universality of rationality without giving a sufficient, and sufficiently independent, account of rationality. In other words, the first point seems to presuppose that if it is really a person it is because it has thoughts (which is what is to be proven) and is thereby not a machine. The second, moreover, seems to assume that the *person* would possess rationality, which, again, presupposes what it at issue. For our purposes, and similar to the treatment of Descartes' causal argument in the Third Mediation, the point here is not so much to salvage the cogency of Descartes' arguments but rather to thoroughly exhibit his philosophical overtures to the other person in so far as it does some spadework for a subsequent Levinasian reappropriation.

From one consideration, his criteria presuppose what is at issue, and so they are thereby indecisive. They are, from a different point of view, however, quite intuitive and plausible. Descartes appears to give a sort of definitional (and thus perhaps trivial) distinction between a human being and an automaton, but it is not difficult to see where his intuition came from—modern examples are legion. As evinced in literature and film, for example, the human type, in contrast to the sophisticated machine or android, is often represented in one of two ways that make it stand out from such machines. Formally distinct, these criteria do, however, share a common trait, namely the capacity to resist complete programming, and to adapt creatively or spontaneously—whether through "reason," or, we might add in a further Cartesian vein, through will or volition.

On the one hand, call it the "universally rational," the human being is portrayed as capable of, say, appropriately answering a prolonged and varied series of questions,

whereas the machine (eventually) breaks down, demonstrating its interpretative limitation.[27] On the other hand, call it the "adaptive," the human being is shown as un-fettered (or less fettered) by programming and constraint, which thereby enables the person to intuitively adapt to a new situation, or even to do the "irrational" (that is, self-sacrificial, romantic, etc.) or gratuitous thing when necessary or desirable.[28] By contrast, the machine or artificial intelligence typically is limited by such programming or constraint and therefore cannot adapt, cannot "act on all the contingencies of life," as Descartes puts it. In speaking of such human capacities, Descartes' important (if poorly stated) insight is that *through communicative and interrogative processes* we can take a more than physical stance on another person, and further that such a stance best shows us something like *the superfluity of meaning over rote programming,* that is, over a purely mechanical description.

It is in a similar vein that I shall argue that Levinas's intentional analyses from his middle period attempt to describe the surfeit of meaning beyond simple calculation and totalization, which is a human surplus (of what Levinas calls "infinity") that the phenomenologist can describe and heed through transcendental and genealogical argumentation. As the next chapter shows, I argue that one should extract two distinct, but simultaneously incompatible agent perspectives that emerge out of his middle period, one of "totality" and one of "infinity" if one prefers, and although Levinas is almost always displayed under the auspices of the latter, chapter 2 makes the case that one needs

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[27] See, for example, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, or the film version, *Blade Runner*. One can also observe this phenomenon with the Turing test.

[28] See, for example, Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*; *The Matrix*; and *Star Trek*, especially with the characters of Spock, Data, and "the Borg."

to understand his agent-centered phenomenology as always a conjunction of the two; totality *and* infinity.

At any rate, while a machine would be capable of "totality," or the internally motivated ability to precomprehend the outside through autopoetical terms, it is a distinctly different affair to be capable of "infinity," or the passive ability to allow passage to the novel, spontaneous contribution that emanates from communication and contact with another agency, and, more generally, being "faced."[29] For Descartes, though, these criteria lead to an important consideration of speech itself as being more than a mechanical function when treating of human beings. He claims that even if a machine were capable of uttering words "which correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs" there would remain, nonetheless, an adaptive lacuna in its capacities.

> But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to *whatever* is said in its presence, as the *dullest* of men can do. (AT VI 56-7, my emphasis)

In accentuating both the universality of human communication and the ubiquity of its application, Descartes introduces an important notion towards considering the other person's independent reality in more than "totalizing" terms. Since he rejects human speech as a purely mechanical affair, he brings in a dimension of interiority that is necessary to understand the difference between sounds or parroting and *discourse*. He writes, first, that we "must not confuse speech with the natural movements which express passions [i.e. sense perception] and which can be imitated by machines as well as

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[29] Although a "passive ability" may seem initially strange, we shall see in Chapter 2 that Levinas's agent perspective of "infinity" is arguably best explained by such a notion, which can provisionally be described as "heteropoetic" in that it supposes a dynamically meaningful interplay between self and other that describes two distinct stances that the agent can take on his or her experience.

animals."[30] And even if he begs the question when he declares that machines "cannot show that they are thinking what they are saying" (because it presupposes that humans alone have mental thoughts) the key insight consists in recognizing an abyss of sorts between one person and another. Each person, from a totalizing view, cannot see across it and see the other's mind or interior life purely in terms of "extended substance," yet it is precisely through *meaning* and *semantic adaptation* that we 'see' what we cannot see, that we appreciate the person as distinct from the machine, precisely insofar as the person might resist the self's programmatization or a completely totalizing perspective. With some rehabilitation, this Cartesian insight amounts to saying that we appreciate the person as not just physical matter to be manipulated or calculated, but also as an independent agency that (or who) can flourish.[31] To put another of my interpretative cards on the table, Levinas's phenomenology shall provide strategic insight into such rehabilitation, as chapter 2 makes clear.

As with previous reconstructions of Descartes' arguments about exteriority, the infinite Other, and the other person as distinct from a totalizing point of view, the purpose is not to rehabilitate Descartes' position as such—rather, it is to show the philosophical debt and kinship between his and Levinas's notions so as to better elucidate and support the latter's—to which we now turn.

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[30] AT VI 58.

[31] As an interesting corollary, recent ecological movements trying to protect various animals are leaning ever-increasingly on demonstrating that such animals have hitherto unacknowledged adaptive and communicative abilities. The thought, I take it, is that such abilities exhibit an interior life of sorts, one that is both independent of human "totalization" and yet still purposive and autonomous.

Levinas's Reappropriation of Descartes

This section shows the degree to which Levinas carries the Cartesian torch with regard to the ideas of self and alterity. Although many commentators have robustly explored the connection between God and the Other, nevertheless Levinas's reappropriation of the Cartesian subject has not received due attention. We shall also see several Cartesian themes and terms that are highly influential to Levinas's thought in his middle period (1946-67) that help to inform the central ambitions of this same period.

The Levinasian self of *Totality and Infinity* and *Time and the Other* bears striking thematic resemblances to Descartes' subject or ego in the *Meditations*. The robust notions of interiority, dependence, and especially the priority of the Other must not be underestimated in Levinas's description of the self. To be clear from the outset, though, Levinas's characterization of the self (or *Moi)* is not purely that of a *res cogitans*, although as we see in what follows there are many structural similarities between the two. We are also *not* making the claim that Descartes' Other *strictly* resembles Levinas's, for Levinas's Other, at least in his middle period, is generally a personal other, an interlocutor or lover or enemy, and not typically a theological entity. To put another of my interpretative cards on the table, I shall suggest that we generally understand the Levinasian self as drawing its identity from the world and other people, and as always orbiting around a personal, as opposed to a theological, Other. Yet (in a Hegelian move of sorts) I would also argue that Levinas draws upon the Cartesian model in order to depict a *potential* development of human being that his novel phenomenological approach subsequently shows to be deficient in certain respects, and necessary in others.

It is not often mentioned, but *Time and the Other*, and, to a lesser extent, *Totality and Infinity*, exhibit a genetic phenomenology in which the self comes to fruition through stages. The following seeks to better explain and situate Levinas's notions of self and Other by comparative reference to Descartes' seminal attempts to carve out their respective conceptual space. As we shall see, Levinas often gives them a different name, but many of his thoughts about ipseity and alterity are clearly analogous to Cartesian ideas.

Given the previous work of this chapter, we are now in a position to recapitulate the numerous points of similarity in order to better augment their salience and, especially, to explain both why Levinas arguably needed to use such a launching pad to propel his philosophical enterprise as well as why, as we see next chapter, he needed to surpass it phenomenologically. Levinas needed to begin with Descartes' problematic because he follows Heidegger's view that Descartes' modern conception of subjectivity has been historically determinative for the Western worldview, and Descartes' problems concerning the other person are, at least potentially, Levinas's problems, so to speak. This is not to say that Levinas is ignorant of, or willfully blind to, the differing "postmodern" or "deconstructive" Western worldviews that themselves seek to displace, deconstruct, or in a word raze what they take to be the modern conception; as a student of Heidegger and a teacher/colleague of Derrida, Levinas was as much *au courant* of such rival views as anyone.[32]

[32] Levinas also needs to begin with Cartesian themes because he will arguably found his bivalent phenomenology on *Descartes'* understanding of "totality" and "infinity," as the next chapter argues for in a nuanced way. We will see the case for Levinas's attempt to "salvage" and rehabilitate Descartes' under appreciated comments on the philosophical importance of conversation and discourse.

Rather, on my reading, Levinas sees Descartes' labors as a potential step in the development of consciousness, and the possibility is evinced by virtue of Levinas's genetic phenomenological descriptions in *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*. So, that which Levinas describes is not arbitrary, but actually essential to the development of human consciousness and perception. For Levinas, Descartes' worldview of the *Meditations* is not a stillborn aberration, but rather a well-developed position that consciousness *can* and often does take; as well as one that it may never shed in certain respects. From a different tack, the positive side to his appropriation of Descartes is not limited to critique, but is actually reflected in the self's dependence upon the human Other.[33]

Oddly, some recent commentary has flatly rejected the notion that the Levinasian self develops through a series of phenomenological stages or insights. B.C. Hutchens, in his *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2004), unequivocally leads such a charge when he writes of Levinas's description of the self, that:

> In fact, he does not seem to be offering a depiction of the self that develops by stages at all. He is isolating aspects of a self that exhibits degrees of hypostasization while embedded in a complex social arrangement. (100)

I would agree with the positive component of Hutchen's interpretation here, because as he goes on to show, quite accurately, that notions of justice and the "third party" (i.e. the Other's other, and the Other considered in a general way) do indeed commit Levinas to certain restricted descriptions of the self as becoming ethically or responsibly reified out of its "complacency" or "arbitrariness" (Levinas's terms) in certain "complex social arrangements." But Hutchens is wrong in his claim that the Levinasian self does not

[33] This feature of Levinas's reappropriation is deeply explored in the next chapter, when we consider the phenomenology of conversation, teaching and learning, and erotic relations.

develop by stages "at all," because it is *both* the case that Levinas offers a description of the self's maturation through stages *as well as* the sort Hutchens just outlined.

In *Time and the Other,* for example, we clearly see reference to a description of the subject as initially individuating through "hypostasis," then eventually recognizing the "*first* morality" (64) of earthly nourishments by a recognition of their (lower case) otherness, leading to an encounter with the Other which both brings forth a sense of death and temporality (78-9, passim), and the transcendent possibilities opened by this encounter through erotic love and "paternity" (Part IV). And one could easily make similar interpretations of *Totality and Infinity*, since one can observe the progression from self to labor and economy, from economy to the dwelling, and from thence to "beyond the face."[34] Indeed, the notion of a self's development through stages, ethical, theoretical, or otherwise, is arguably one of the lynchpins of Levinas's middle period, and by way of anticipation, I intend to show how the "whole work" of *Totality and Infinity* "seeks only to present the spiritual according to this Cartesian order" (*T&I*, 180), with the "spiritual" arguably referring to the "interiority" of the self.

Levinas, then, critically revives and reappropriates a Cartesian thematic precisely because it is both very much alive and highly problematic. Put differently, his re-minting of Cartesian coins into 20th century language is sympathetic to Descartes' description of the subject and its dependence on the Other. And rather than merely trying to eclipse or fragment the modern self, he instead initially embraces it in order to get closer and thereby genetically surpass it. Such a surpassing is also "genetic" in the sense that

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[34] Richard Cohen, for example, sees a clearly "genetic or developmental design" to *Time and the Other* and *a fortiori* in *Totality and Infinity*, in which the "emergence of subjectivity…to its shattering relationship with the alterity of the other person" marks the former, and in the latter the developmental stages are "brought into an even closer focus" (135).

Levinas deepens a source of intelligibility that genealogically precedes standard interpretations of the Cartesian model of intelligibility, as well as models built after it, up to and including Husserl. This source, clearly analogous to Descartes' idea of God, is essentially grounded in the other person's "infinity"—the Other—and in starting with the Other as personal, as opposed to theistic or pantheistic, Levinas arguably repays his *maître* Descartes well by surpassing his thought and contributing to an understanding of the other person that preserves his or her independent and non-egoistically formed reality.

In this vein we know that for Descartes it is problematic that another person has a mind or interior life. I suggest that the seeds of one of Levinas's key uses of "totality" lie hidden in plain sight in Descartes' oeuvre, for in the Fourth Meditation he describes his relation to God *qua* the question of implicit perfection or imperfection as that of a "totality" to the presumed "infinity" of the supreme exterior (God).[35] In an attempt to show that he knows himself to be imperfect, he claims that, "had God made me this way, then I can easily understand that, considered as a *totality*, I would have been more perfect than I am now" (AT VII 61, my italics). The French version, furthermore, qualifies this sense of "totality" from the Latin version with the addition of: "as if there were only myself in the world" (*comme s'il n'y avait que moi au monde)*.[36] We see, then, an obvious, if unacknowledged, seed to the sense(s) of Levinas's individual meaning of totality and infinity, as well as the implications upon subjectivity therein.

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[35] Levinas is either highly reluctant to define, or dismissive of the importance of defining, many of his key technical terms, and "totality" and "infinity" are not exceptions to this trend. In the next chapter we shall see several suggestions from the secondary literature about what these terms actually mean, as well as my own interpretation of these terms. On my interpretation, Levinas borrows a microcosmic notion (i.e. one that relates to the self and its ability to "totalize" the external world) of "totality" from Descartes.

[36] Descartes. *Les Méditations Métaphysiques*. Paris: Bordas (1998), 60.

The very fact that each individual has such a distinctly "interior" life, far from being a scandal for Levinas, actually sets the stage for the possibility of ethics, as it is only from the perspective of "a totality" that one can begin to try and account for "more than one can contain" and acknowledge the "fissure" in being that Putnam aptly described earlier.[37]

Levinas likens the totalizing aspect of the human condition of "interiority" or "atheism" to Gyges' character in Plato's *Republic* (*T&I* 61, 90, *passim*). That is, the fact that each one of us is, in a sense, always invisible to every one else constitutes a radical asymmetry between the first and second person, as well as first and third person perspectives. In addition, this asymmetry brings with it certain ethical implications, such as a lack of direct reciprocity or analogy between my (ethical) expectations and the Other's (*T&I* 53, and elsewhere). For Descartes, the discovery of the Other also brings ethical implications with it, as his Other (God) now sets standards of perfection, wisdom, and morality. The extent to which Levinas borrows from Descartes' work in this respect is not obvious, yet we will now see the case for a starker Cartesian coloring of Levinas's notions of self *via* his accounts of atheism and separation, as well as a certain prioritization regarding the self's dependence on the Other.

Levinas's polysemical characterization of "atheism" may lead one to think of a misnomer, as some senses of the term go against the conventional grain. When coupled with a retrospective Cartesian understanding, however, the term regains traction, and more importantly it sets the stage for Levinas's description of the budding stages of

[37] For Levinas, the paradoxical "more than can be contained" aspect of the subject's mental economy is simply what he means by the "idea of infinity," since this "idea overflows the very thought that thinks it" (T&I 197, and elsewhere). It is an analogue to Descartes' notion of God's infinity, and it both resists full conceptualization and provides the self with an independent standard of evaluation.

mature subjectivity and rationality. By "atheism," he would first have us understand the stage of a subject's being whereby, arguably in direct analogy to Descartes' self-sustaining subject in Meditation 2, the subject comes to a realization that it needs no other source than itself; that it can be the master of its domain—whether it be in terms of perception, or thinking, in Descartes' precise sense, or in terms of simply *being at home with oneself* ("eco-nomic" and "ipseic") in Levinas's. For Descartes, whether there be no god (a-theism), or an evil one, the self can still lead a sort of sustained existence, with one's 'sustenance' deriving principally from one's "egology," as Levinas would put it, or from one's intuitive self-certainty and preexisting modes of comprehension, as Descartes does. As Levinas explains it in *Totality and Infinity*:

> One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated—eventually capable of adhering to it by belief…The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheistic. By atheism we understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I. (58)

By "maintains itself in existence all by itself," we should see a direct connection to Descartes' self-certainty through methodical doubt (that is, even if one is ontologically alone, or a "totality," and or methodically deceived about reality, then one exists so long as one is thinking—whether one believes that one participates in extended being in general). The isolated thinker of the Second Meditation feeds off of his own mind, as it were, in the sense that thought and perception themselves are seemingly sufficient to guarantee both the self's existence, as well as a limited version of perceptual veracity. As Descartes puts the point,

> I know now that bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood; and in view of this I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else. (AT VII 34)

Levinas's self is also atheistic or "separated" (he generally fuses the terms together, as on *T&I* 148, for instance) in that one can only welcome the Other from the stage of being a robust and self-maintaining ego; by virtue of being a unique totality of self-identification that remains "identical throughout all its changes, " and "recovers its identity throughout what happens to it" (*T&I* 36). As the Cartesian meditator needed, at least provisionally, to assert his identity, and his (albeit limited) existence and knowledge *prior to* affirming the existence of an exterior and the Other, in a sense so too does the Levinasian self need to maintain its separation, its unique self-hood, prior to its being able to "welcome" the Other as such. "The atheist separation is *required* by the idea of infinity" (*T&I* 60).

For his part, Descartes also sees the need to first individuate himself as something unique and self-sustaining, however minimally, prior to finding his Other, and in the last analysis, he can only "somehow touch God with [his] thought," rather than form some kind of closed, monistic whole with God (as Spinoza would have it). In a gesture that betrays more of a Modern understanding of the subject's capacities, Levinas, again showing more of his Cartesian roots, maintains that "separation is produced by thought," (*T&I* 54) and that, like Descartes, the self's "inner life is not epiphenomenal," but constitutes more of an "event in being" (*T&I* 240). This "production" of the self by its unique ability to identify its own existence as if it were all that exists in the universe, and

this characterization of a mental "event" with ontological, and not just epiphenomenal ramifications, clearly smacks of Cartesian underpinnings.

The Levinasian chronological priority, moreover, mimics the *Meditations*, in that after this stage described above the Cartesian soul will have *ethical* need to turn out of itself and towards exteriority in general; that is, towards God and the world, on Descartes' understanding. This outward orientation eventually leads to a guarantee concerning reliable object cognition and a possibility of living beyond one's death by way of 'having' a soul or mind as distinct from the body. For the first point, as the Fourth *Meditation* suggests, if we assume that Descartes respects the bounds of will and certainty that his supreme Other has put into play, and we assume further that the Other is supremely good (and thereby non-deceptive, unlike an "evil genius" would be) then whatever Descartes sees clearly really is at it seems, at least insofar as simple geometrical qualities are concerned (Meditation Six).

For Levinas in both *Totality and Infinity* as well as *Time and the Other*, upon mastering the stage of "interior life" and "dwelling" (which reflect a sort of self-sufficient and auto-poetical existence, one that strictly speaking needs no true Other) "the same," which is in this case one's interior, one's personal "totality" or active psychic economy, is at some point breached by "the presence of the Other." With the exceptions of "Eros" and "Death" (*via* the transcendent paths they open to the same from the Other) Levinas is not however very clear on the actual interpersonal structures that constitute this "breach of the same." This is why in chapter 2 we shall further explore the implicit mechanisms through which Levinas articulates more concrete instances of such interpersonal situations, such as conversation, teaching, and learning.

In addition to this breach of one's own totality, in which an "exterior" is "offered" to the hitherto same," which is an exterior that the same could not presumably have created, the subject is presented with possibilities that open it up to an empirically stable and reliable world, in much the same way God "guarantees" all of the "treasures of wisdom" for Descartes. Such possibilities, for Levinas, render language, object cognition and conceptualization "objective," and they further serve to make objects in general "common" by virtue of their being named and disseminated by the Other. That is, since the Other introduces language and teaching, and language "conditions the functioning of rational thought" (*T&I* 204) as well as "makes possible the objectivity of objects" (*T&I* 210), a stable and "plural" or intersubjective reality takes shape, one that was inconceivable and/or inessential to a purely isolated subject or pure *res cogitans*. Such an intersubjective "breach" of the self enables the self to reckon with the world in terms that bring in ethical and evaluative standards. For Descartes, the Other's goodness and the laws (in this case, of nature) that this being puts into play are rational, ethical, and now open to the thinker who "delights in contemplation" of this Other. This leads Descartes, who initially began in a provisionally atheistic position, to a discovery of his epistemic and moral limitations through the Other, and subsequently, in the latter Meditations, to a reliance upon this Other's infinite perfection for an objective and stable world.

Perhaps more importantly, with Descartes and Levinas a real measure of *ethical* worth is now in play, as once the Other has been welcomed, there comes the need to be justified in the Other's eyes (or God's standards, with Descartes), as well as the concomitant sense of limitation, lack of perfection, and inability to cope with one's own death—or an inability "to guarantee my existence and future" by myself, as Descartes

might say. For Levinas, as alluded to above, it is precisely the Other who opens up transcendent possibilities beyond one's own death, whether in the guise of "paternity" through the "feminine" (*T&O* Part IV, *T&I* Section IV: C, "Fecundity") or in the sense that the Other conditions the future and justifies the present (*T&O* 79, *T&I* 281-3). With Levinas, we should add, further, that the Other's "breach of the same" conditions a normatively intersubjective perspective on the world, self, and others. We may, furthermore, read some Cartesian sense into Levinas's claim that, "Infinity opens the order of the Good" (*T&I* 104), and the more sustained claim that, "goodness consists in taking up a position in being such that the Other counts more than myself" (*T&I* 247, passim). For when one retrospectively tarries with the Cartesian constellation of meaning out of which many other Levinasian notions emerge, one can recognize a connection between the dependency of self on the Other in each case, as well as the ethical horizons that this asymmetrical relationship implies for each thinker.

As we saw, a dimension of the ethical relation for both Levinas and Descartes consists in the limited self's dependence upon and "continuous striving for" the supreme Other, in Descartes, and the crucial "welcoming of," or "breach by," the Other in Levinas. In one sense, this dependence occurs by way of being overwhelmed by that which each thinker calls "the infinite," one that the agent realizes in his own psychic economy. From another perspective, however, this need for the Other is also prior to any particular thought or situation on the subject's part, as, for Levinas, the subject's ability to use language, conceptualize the world, and "represent to oneself" already presuppose or are *conditioned* by the Other, as chapter 3 makes clearer (*T&I* 204,9). For Descartes, although he *chronologically* arrives at the idea of the infinite only after he itemizes, as it

were, his mental taxonomy in the Third Meditation, he subsequently admits that without certain innate ideas implanted by his supreme Other, presupposing of course the Other's existence, he would not have the conditions to philosophize and make accurate judgments about the world in the Fourth *Meditation* (AT VII, 64).

This need to reach for the transcendent Other in Descartes' thought, in whom "all the treasures of science and wisdom lie hidden" (AT VII, 53) is also, as some have noted, a direct bridge to Levinas's notion of "Desire." Peperzak, for instance, devotes several pages of generally good analysis on this score in his *To the Other* (65-8). He traces the evolution of Levinas's thought regarding the importance of the Cartesian idea of the infinite for Levinas's notion of desire between *Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite* (1957) and *Totality and Infinity* (1961). He seems mistaken in his following claims, however, namely that for Levinas, "the nucleus of the Cartesian idea of the infinite is only the negative side of desire" because, he says, *Totality and Infinity* begins chronologically prior to the "experience of the encounter with the Other," with "an analysis of the desire for the absolute as the primary and original intention that replaces the *cogito* and the freedom of the moderns" (68).

In other words, Peperzak is claiming that the *positive* content that one would find in *Totality and Infinity* will both supplant the foundational importance of the *cogito* and the default understanding of freedom inherited from the Modern period with, say, notions of Levinasian responsibility and justice (I assume something like this to be the case, as Peperzak does not explicitly describe what the positive component would be.) He is also claiming that *Totality and Infinity* places the desire for the exterior as prior to, and hence more important than, the actual or ontic experience with the Other. Hence he is saying

that this gesture supplants Descartes' order whereby the Other is encountered in the Third Meditation, and is thereby not originary. Peperzak claims, then, that the structure of desire that precedes and enables such an encounter represents a positive change in Levinas's appropriation of Descartes' notions of self and Other.

I would argue, though, that just as Descartes needed the innate ideas, as well as certain other implications deriving from God's existence and character in order to be *capable* of empirically discovering such an exterior in the Third Meditation, so too does the structure of desire in *Totality and Infinity* embrace a similar strategy. That is, the thought is not, as Peperzak claims, that Levinas radically prioritizes the idea of the infinite in comparison to Descartes. The thought, rather, is that Levinas *preserves* or reflects the priority as found in Descartes' thought, which thereby makes him more of a Cartesian than acknowledged.

To clarify this point about priority, just as Descartes claims that his "perception of the infinite, that is of God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself" (AT VII 45-6), so too is Levinas claiming that the structure of desire precedes any particular empirical encounter with the Other, but is rather originally 'implanted' by the Other in the sense of a shared genealogical fund of meaning by way of an "originary" teaching (as chapter 3 clarifies), or simply given to the structure of consciousness (*T&I* 33-4). That is, Levinas thinks that it is both the case that the Other is encountered in empirical life and that the Other plays a formative role in the development of consciousness. From this point of view, Peperzak's claim ought to be restricted to a logic of substitution rather than of surpassing, as a different reading of Descartes clearly shows that the yearning for the Other, which does not seek to fully master or comprehend it, pre-

exists the actual encounter of the meditator's idea of infinity, just as the "breach of the same" is in a sense preceded by the Other's traces in the self's formation, education, and cultural inheritance.

For further support against Peperzak's interpretation, we draw on John Llewelyn who, in his *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (1995), argues for a related point, namely that Descartes' (and Levinas's, by implication) metaphysical priority is indeed more original than the self's "having" of the idea of infinity:

> To learn this is to learn the lesson of the third Meditation of Descartes, that although the truth of the *cogito* is first in the order of learning, the ego is not altogether its own master; the ego is not self-taught. (125)

Returning to the first claim that Peperzak makes, it is undeniable that Levinas will try to surpass (or bypass, rather, since Levinas's concern is not to "prove" something about the union of mental and physical substance) some of the egological and solipsistic notions that Descartes' philosophy entails with such interpersonal notions as conversation, responsibility, and social justice. I will argue, however, that Levinas also wants to maintain certain stages of the subject's development, including the *cogito* and Cartesian will, as potential, and in certain respects necessary, steps in the evolution of consciousness. Briefly put, Levinas, as is evinced in his middle period, clearly describes a genetic maturation on the part of the self and its interaction with the world and others. Such maturity begins existentially through hypostasis, and culminates in an ethical maturity that leaves the self acutely aware of its need for, and responsibility to, others. The further claim is that this structure mirrors the Cartesian self's development, and this thereby goes against Peperzak's claim that Levinas solely seeks to "replace" such notions.

Such notions and their related counterparts, rather, form part of the essential stages of consciousness that the Levinasian agent can and does adopt, as we have seen in more detail above. In Levinas's middle period, to which Peperzak refers, the Levinasian self comes to fruition through various Cartesian stages bearing important Cartesian analogues, and they elucidate both the terminology that Levinas employs as well as a few of the guiding principles that are key toward understanding his thought such as, but not restricted to: subjectivity, shared objectivity; ethical wisdom in addition to the theoretical; a recognition of asymmetry between self and Other; and, lastly, and account of how the same and Other interrelate, even though they are independent beings.

It is in from such a vantage point that we can re-read further sense into Levinas's initially cryptic claim that "this whole work seeks only to present the spiritual according to this Cartesian order, prior to the Socratic" (*T&I* 180). By the "Socratic order," Levinas means an understanding of Being and existents as monistic and in principle similar, which for him implies a complete precomprehension of each particular being through a "Neutral" or theoretical system—this is what he means by "totality" in a macrocosmic sense. Such an ordering technically renders each part as just a footnote to exactly one system wherein each term is assimilated monologically. In contrast to this "monistic" order, Levinas seeks to preserve a philosophical system wherein each term or interlocutor maintains its uniqueness yet meaningfully relates to other radically distinct "intelligences" or agencies. Levinas's "system" of self and Other, if one wanted to put it that way, is patterned on the way that the Cartesian subject both relates and does not relate to the supreme Other, and this relation depends on the purview in question.

In this vein, he sees in Descartes' thought exactly such a prototype, since the self and the Other are distinct in certain respects, and yet meaningfully related in others, as we have seen. With both philosophers, additionally, the Other serves as a transcendental condition for intelligibility and ethics. Levinas preserves a great deal more than just this kernel of method, even going so far as to base many of his notions of subjectivity, ethics, and objectivity on a Cartesian model. This chapter's emphasis has been placed on his reappropriation of Descartes, yet we shall also see significant ways in which Levinas borrows from Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty in order to further his Cartesian reappropriation. Lastly, and as the next chapter makes explicit, the very idea of "infinity" founding "totality" is thoroughly Cartesian. In these senses and others, then, we ought to read Descartes' "spirit" back into the letter of Levinas's text. When we reread Levinas's text, we can now better appreciate his "creation" of *Descartes'* philosophy as a precursor to *Levinas's* philosophy of the human Other.

Chapter 2:

The Case for a Dynamic Consideration of Levinas's Thought: A Dual Aspect and Symbiotic Reading of "Totality" and "Infinity"

Abstract

The Problem: certain Levinas commentators either misunderstand the meaning of, and the relationship between, "totality" and "infinity," or they wrongly import misleading ethical values into the very notions. It is argued that such misinterpretations lead to errant and or tendentious conclusions about Levinas's philosophical sources, ambitions, and conclusions.

The Projected Solution: a more accurate reading of *Totality and Infinity* reveals that totality and infinity are *both* essential aspects of his phenomenological *description* of human being. The dynamic interplay between totality and infinity represents two sides of a coin, as it were, and I thus argue that it is misleading to claim, for example, that totality and infinity are necessarily antagonistic or fratricidal. It is furthermore inaccurate, for the same reason, to claim that Levinas attempts to supplant totality so as to champion infinity in its stead. Descartes' philosophy genealogically leads the way, moreover, for an accurate situation of Levinas's thoughts about totality and infinity. We also see (against the grain of recent scholarship) that Levinas significantly *departs* from Cartesian thought by regrounding infinity on the personal, and not divine, Other.

Introduction: The Problem and its Topography

This chapter defends my (initially) odd assertion that the most crucial word in the title of Levinas's *magnum opus* is "and." The point of this assertion is to highlight the pivotal importance of understanding totality and infinity as equally important aspects in

Levinas's phenomenology. Levinas's thought is often detrimentally portrayed, however, under the auspices of an apparent dilemma: either one privileges the "totality" aspect—for instance, his critique of reason and the self's agency; or, one privileges the "infinity" aspect of his thought—for instance, his philosophical consideration of alterity and the transcendent Other. It is regrettable that certain commentators, whom we soon consider, tend to read his middle period in a way that leaves little-to-no room for an interpretation of his thought as necessarily hinging on a dynamic and equally important interplay between totality *and* infinity.

When commentators characterize totality and infinity as essentially antagonistic, it leads to a mistaken view of how Levinas really understands these terms, as well as their interrelation. They ought to be understood as complementary, yet they are often described in a way that pits them against each other in a misguidedly hostile sense. Such a misreading of his most crucial technical terms leads to an inaccurate depiction of Levinas's important philosophical ambitions. His accounts of subjective and intersubjective experience, for example, get falsely distorted *via* facile caricatures that are based on interpretations that neglect this dual and dynamic aspect of his thought. His philosophical commitment to truth, language, and social justice, moreover, can be erroneously interpreted as hostile to rationality and progress if one is not careful to accurately situate and balance the roles that totality and infinity play.

Richard Wolin leads this misguided charge when he claims that adopting Levinas's thought amounts to a harmful "denigration of cognition or knowledge," as well

as an equally caustic denigration of "intersubjective communication."[38] His insight is that Levinas falls into a camp of suspect philosophers who "vilify" theoretical reason, and favor instead "quasi-mystical experiences" [read "infinity"] upon which to ground their respective philosophical systems. Wolin argues, furthermore, that Levinas actually champions anti-rational and anti-progressive positions because of the way he understands "totality" and "infinity."

> The *binary* opposition between "totality" and "infinity" that governs [Levinas's] work makes it *nearly impossible* to conceptualize meaningful intersubjectivity. (241, my italics)
>
> Since, given the limitations of creaturely existence, we can never satisfy the Other's claims, at issue is a relationship of "infinity" or "transcendence." Theoretical reason, conversely, aims at a type of totalizing comprehension—an essay at finite closure—that Levinas *belittles* as "totality." Thus the animating *antithesis* of his work: totality *versus* infinity. (230, my italics)

Wolin's polemically sweeping brushstrokes consistently paint Levinas into a corner where "totality" is associated with "predatory" and "pernicious" intentions, "excrescences and misdeeds," and the "subjugation" and "domination" of individuals, to name but a few examples from his caricature.[39] "Infinity," conversely, is said to be divinely "superior" in Levinas's eyes; precisely through such a misguided preference for the latter over the former, Levinas's thought allegedly amounts to a naïve attack on theoretical reason, communication, and important social and democratic institutions.[40] Wolin's polemic will be the object of much analysis and criticism in section C, since it represents the most consistent and virulent Levinasian caricature on this issue of arbitrarily classifying, and then implicating, totality *versus* infinity. I shall carefully

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[38] Wolin, Richard. "Levinas and Heidegger: the Anxiety of Influence." In *Heidegger's Jewish Followers*, edited by Samuel Fleischacker. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP (2008), 235, 244.
[39] Ibid., 243, 244, 236, and elsewhere.
[40] Ibid., 228, 240-1, and elsewhere.

make the contrasting case, then, that such characterizations of Levinas's thought rest on a mistaken (yet pervasive) view of his philosophy—namely, the mistaken view that Levinas seeks to eradicate essentially pernicious totality so as to champion infinity in its place.

A sympathetic Levinasian might retort to such a caricature by claiming, for instance, that Levinas actually defends such claims as "reason makes human society possible" (*T&I* 119); additionally, numerous passages can be pointed out that precisely ennoble intersubjective communication and social responsibility. To simply reply *quid pro quo* against a radical polemic like Wolin's, however, would be to ineffectively encourage "the mere displacement of pawns in an interminable game," as Derrida cautions us in a different, but no less exasperating, context.[41] We shall instead get to the *radix* of such misguided polemics so as to examine the general misunderstanding upon which such caricatures rest.

I will also address a similar problem that usually arises from less polemical (but no less misleading) sources. The allegation, in a nutshell, is that Levinas's philosophical position *needs* recourse to "quasi-philosophical" sources in order to justify itself. These sources are alternately registered as "theological" or "religious" (for example, Wolin, and Alain Badiou—albeit for different reasons), literary, for instance, "Russian Literature" (Wolin), and sometimes even "quasi-mystical" (Wolin and Moran, for instance). These allegedly necessary supplemental sources relate, moreover, to how the commentator in question understands "infinity," "totality," and their (lack of) conjunction.

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[41] Derrida, Jacques. *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*. Jan Plug, trans. Stanford: Stanford UP (2004), 169.

In addition to frequently misunderstanding aspects of these terms and their interrelation, commentators draw upon them to expound a (pseudo-)Levinasian account that ultimately needs a quasi-philosophical supplement. Such supplements are "quasi-philosophical" in the sense that they kill off *philosophical* possibilities *within* the text by insisting, instead, upon the necessity of something other than the resources of his phenomenological and philosophical argumentation. Levinas, under such scrutiny, would "really" be: a crypto- or negative theologist; a misguided proto-multiculturalist; or simply a failed mystic, to name some characteristic examples. These *ad hoc* supplements needlessly betray the letter of Levinas's own text and philosophical ambition, however, and thereby arbitrarily *supplant*, more than support, or truly criticize, his work.

The point in demonstrating that we do not need to view Levinas in these quasi-philosophical ways is not to denigrate other disciplinary approaches to understanding Levinas *per se*; it is, rather, to criticize a growing and misleading trend of thinkers—*pro* and *contra* Levinas—who argue that such supplementation is necessary to interpret his philosophy.

Dermot Moran, for instance, claims that Levinas's phenomenological notions are "never systematically explicated by him," and Levinas therefore needs recourse to a brand of quasi-philosophical supplementation, as the following passage reveals.

> His style is to make assertions, followed by further assertions, without any attempt to justify them, other than through some kind of appeal to deeply human, perhaps even mystical, intuitions. (321-2)

Such appeals to "deeply human" or "mystical" experience that allegedly undergird Levinas's thought are common, even among otherwise masterful interpreters of the phenomenological tradition like Moran. These mistaken appeals, as we shall see in

detail, owe their origin to a neglect of the Cartesian perspective that informs Levinas's thought, on the one hand, and to a misreading of what totality and infinity actually mean, on the other. Levinas does not help his own case in such matters, as it were, to the extent that his language *is* often "hyperbolic" and or "obscurantist," as myriad commentators have observed. When we will have situated Levinas's thoughts on totality and infinity within a Cartesian framework, however, his thoughts about the complementary importance of these crucial terms will thereby become clearer, as well as clearly resistant to the pervasive caricatures that would render them as essentially antagonistic or non-philosophical.

Levinas's departure from Cartesian thought also paves the way for a more faithful reading of what he means by "totality" and "infinity," since his phenomenology resituates the terms of the importance of self and other(s), and because it stems from the personal, and not divine Other. This phenomenological shift from the divine to the personal arguably highlights Levinas's most brilliant philosophical move, yet contemporary scholars of all stripes still neglect this transition and insist, instead, that Levinas really needs certain "quasi-mystical" or (quasi-philosophical) "religious" supplements.

Alain Badiou, who is a contemporary spearhead of those who read Levinas as a quasi-philosopher, claims that sitting at Levinas's philosophical table amounts to being served a "dog's dinner" (*de la bouillie pour les chats)* precisely because Levinas ultimately needs the dubious supplement of an "ineffable God," and perhaps "Jewish Law," in order to "justify" his philosophy.[42] Badiou's analysis, although it is quite respectful of Levinas's "exemplary confrontation" with the thought of Husserl and

[42] Badiou, Alain, *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. P. Hallward, trans. London: Verso, 2001, 23.

Heidegger, nevertheless attempts to crucify Levinas's thought on the assumption that without God ("who does not exist"), Levinas leaves us with "a pious discourse without piety."[43] We shall see, however, that Levinas's Other need not, and should not, be referred to the Judeo-Christian God—this will require reconstructing a faithful dynamic between totality and infinity *via* a temporary return to (and then salient departure from) Cartesianism.[44]

A similar problem emerges when we consult the scholarship on the extent to which Levinas is a transcendental, *or*, an empirical philosopher. The letter of much scholarship implies an exclusive disjunction between the two possibilities, whereas we shall see that an authentic appreciation of his thought hinges on accepting that he is *both* an empirical and a transcendental philosopher. This duality, moreover, arises from the cultivation of an accurate reading of totality and infinity as both empirical and transcendental in varying respects.

There is much debate, for instance, about whether Levinas's notion of "the Other" actually refers to an empirical person *or* a transcendent signifier. According to William Large, Simon Critchley, for example, favors the former, while Edith Wyschogrod favors the latter, since she (like Badiou and Wolin, albeit at cross-purposes) situates the Other as something "divine." Some scholars have gone as far as to sketch interesting notions of

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[43] Ibid.

[44] As we see in much detail below, the claim is that Levinas preserves certain methodological insights and formal features of Descartes' philosophy, but he also abandons the idea that God is the self's ontological guarantee. In addition, and as chapter 3 makes more explicit, Levinas articulates an ontological structure of being that is anthropo-genealogical in essence.

"trauma," as well as the unconscious, in order to situate the Other in a unique *topos*.[45] On my reading, however, the Other is best understood through an interpersonal phenomenology that shows *both* that the Other is empirical, in one distinct sense, and transcendental in another sense. This interpretation, as we shall make explicit, is consistent with Levinas's text, and it owes its roots both to a Cartesian-Levinasian understanding, as well as to a dynamic and conjoined reading of totality *and* infinity. I shall also argue that my interpretation of his two key technical terms importantly dispels apparent contradictions and paradoxes in the language of many of Levinas's claims.

The Projected Resolution

This chapter will elucidate the agent or self's perspective in Levinas's middle period that clarifies how he uses and contextualizes these seemingly problematic notions of "totality" and "infinity." This will involve a more carefully nuanced and well-documented reading of Levinas's use of "totality" and "infinity," as well as certain technical terms like the "face," "Other," "the same," and "desire," which are deeply interrelated with infinity and totality. The choice of starting with the agent perspective is not arbitrary, but instead it seeks to remain faithful both to Levinas's Cartesian roots, as well as to one of the chief ambitions of his middle period: namely, a "defense of subjectivity," as he emphatically puts it in the first-person, that shows how "alterity is only possible starting from *me*" (*T&I* 40).

The first task is to clarify these technical terms and then demonstrate their essentially *tandem* importance in Levinas's thought. To better understand them, we shall

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[45] For an interesting analysis of the transmutations of various commentators' views of the very idea of the Other in Levinas, see William Large's "On the Meaning of the Word "other" in Levinas," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 27, No. 1, January 1996.

draw upon our previous spadework, which exhumed radical notions of totality and infinity in Descartes' corpus, as well as draw upon our interpretation of a Cartesian underpinning to Levinas's interpersonal phenomenology (which we saw in the latter half of Chapter 1, Descartes and the other person reconsidered). The task thereafter is to show that Levinas distinctively bolsters these terms in a unique metaphysical and phenomenological way, which thereby surpasses Cartesian thought. We shall also deconstruct and criticize certain misguided caricatures of Levinas scholarship regarding what is meant by "totality," "infinity," and the very idea of their conjunction.

By way of a final introductory caveat, we should note that such philosophers as Colin Davis have commented on certain aspects of the necessity of reading the conjunction of "Totality and Infinity" into Levinas's thought. Davis remarks, for instance, in his noteworthy *Levinas: An Introduction*, that what Levinas calls "the Same and the Other" often maps on to Levinas's understanding of totality and infinity, and he deftly points out that a denigration of *either* term goes against the grain of Levinas's letter and intentions.

> Levinas's book is called *Totality and Infinity*, not "Totality or Infinity." To privilege the Other rather than the Same would end up reproducing the totality thinking from which Levinas is trying to escape: it would lead to the invasion of the Same by the Other, so ultimately suppressing one of the terms. (41)

Davis's insight is spot on, then, to the extent that it stresses the need to read totality and infinity as essentially conjoined.[46] His thought is also important since it presumably undercuts such a misreading as Wolin's, as it indicates that Levinas does not champion a

[46] It is my contention, though, that Levinas is *not* trying to "escape" from "totality thinking." Levinas, rather, is trying to phenomenologically carve out conceptual space for a dynamic *blend* of what he means by totality and infinity, as we see below in our phenomenological analyses.

suppression of one notion to the other's benefit. Since Davis's study is essentially introductory in scope, however, it does not explore some of the robust possibilities of the conjunction between totality and infinity that our interpretation unfolds below. Our work will flesh out the skeleton of the phenomenological possibilities that are indicated by the insights of commentators like Davis.

The Tandem and Coequal Importance of Totality and Infinity

Situating the very notions of totality and infinity. Levinas rarely gives straightforward definitions for most of his key technical terms, and "totality" and "infinity" are not exceptions to this trend. Levinas only conjointly discusses totality and infinity in one passage in the text, and his glosses on what they mean individually are often nebulous. We will, of course, draw upon the secondary literature to better understand these notions, although in certain cases the literature will misleadingly indicate the arbitrary importation of values that our interpretation resists, and then criticizes. My interpretation strictly maintains that "infinity" and "totality" are best understood as working in tandem, and further that they have a coequal worth in Levinas's philosophy. Levinas does tend to focus on a critique of "totality," but this is because he thinks that this aspect (as opposed to the infinity aspect) of human endeavor has received all the attention, as it were. That is, his critique is designed to accurately situate and balance the role of totality and infinity, and thus not to pit them against each other *tout court* so as to "champion divine infinity" and eliminate "pernicious" totality, as Wolin puts it.[47]

[47] Wolin, "Levinas and Heidegger," 228, 236.

I argue that a better understanding of these notions consists in identifying both a microcosmic and macrocosmic sense, and that Descartes' philosophy is as guiding light for the microcosmic sense of "totality" and "infinity." In the microcosmic sense of totality (as opposed to an ontology, which would be a macrocosmic sense of "totality") it is the self that is capable of "totalizing," that is, capable of adopting a stance on "external" reality that attempts to subsume everything by its own lights. Levinas's usage supports this reading, since "to totalize" involves imposing "more of the Same," and both the self and an ontological system can be "the Same" in his vernacular, depending upon whether he is referring to a particular agent, or a particular ontology or worldview.

In the microcosmic aspect of totality, the self can view everything or anything as a pre-comprehended extension of its innate rational capacity. In different terms, the self in this aspect attempts to assimilate everything as similar to its own intelligible nature. Levinas suggests this sense of totality in the following passage (and elsewhere), where he is discussing "a question of what in Cartesian terminology becomes the clear and distinct idea"; his analysis here also extends to "Husserl's thesis of the primacy of the objectifying act," where the "object of consciousness, while distinct from consciousness, is as it were a product of consciousness" (*T&I*, 123).

> In clarity the object which is first exterior *is given*, that is, delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him. In clarity the exterior being presents itself as the work of the thought that receives it. Intelligibility, characterized by clarity, is a **total** adequation of the thinker with what is thought…in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes. (*T&I*, 123-4, my boldface)

It is important to highlight both that Levinas is speaking about an individual or self, and that a certain way of looking at the world ("total adequation") has the

consequence of overlooking an "object's" *perspectival* resistance *qua* its possible independence or "exteriority" to the same self's lucid comprehension. This resistance is thus importantly not a value-laden resistance, as some commentators interpret it below. In addition, totalizing perspectives are essential to complete the basic existential structure of many key Levinasian interpersonal situations, and hence we can appreciate a preliminary indication of how "totality's" function is not intrinsically "pernicious" and "to be denigrated," as Wolin would have one believe (see Chapter 2, Conversation, Teaching and Learning, and Eros and the Caress).

To elaborate totality's nature in a more robust fashion, "totality," and its variations, "to totalize," "totalizing," etc., ought to be provisionally understood as aspects of what rational beings do in order to arrive at a clear and distinct conception of things. If such a view tends to overlook "the unexpected," it is not necessarily a fault in the view itself: construction, scientific research, agriculture—in a word, many *fundaments* of human existence—all tend to operate more or less effectively, and importantly, with such totalizing hypotheses. They hold, implicitly or explicitly, that the world is just so…that X, Y, and Z will be required…at this time exactly…etc. In different terms, the human need to reckon with, chart, and make plans about the world and others generally involves features of totality. The totalizing aspect is thus intimately related to a static and stable organization of reality. From a certain standpoint, then, to totalize is simply a feature of being *a rational agent*.

A "totality" (in a macrocosmic sense) can also refer to a metaphysical or ontological framework that attempts to subsume reality *in toto* under conceptual

categories.[48] The general run of modern physics would also represent a totalizing perspective insofar as its claims extend to "everything" about the universe. When considered in themselves, however, such views do not connote anything pernicious or unethical. *Pace* commentators like Wolin, we shall see that Levinasian totality is actually an important aspect of the human situation, and not rather some pernicious aspect that Levinas seeks to "vilify," as he puts it, and then jettison.

This is because Levinas actually situates totality's function within a wide array of possibilities whose scope can foster any number of activities, many of which are thoroughly ethical, moreover. We shall see many examples of important intersubjective situations below, in which we examine the structure of conversation, teaching, and love, all of which importantly require aspects of totality to complete their structure. An accurate reading of Levinas reveals, then, that totality, like infinity, is just plain pivotal toward understanding his essential phenomenology. Like the more abstract cases mentioned in the previous paragraph, furthermore, totality's function in interpersonal situations is more authentically human than any sort of ethical aberration.

"Infinity," alternately, connotes a fund of meaning or potential that "overflows" the self (or system) in Levinas's idiom, since it leaves the self surprised and receptive to contributions it did not anticipate or reckon with. The perspectives that show up in the infinity aspect are presumably not salient from a totalizing perspective, or at least not simultaneously salient from the agent's perspective. Something's or someone's capacity

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[48] As Bernard Waldenfels puts it, in his "Levinas and the face of the other": "*Totality* has to be understood as the reign of the same wherein everything and everybody exists as part of a whole or as a case under a law" (66). As Simon Critchley notes, in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, "the domain of the same maintains a relation with otherness, but it is a relation in which the ego or consciousness reduces the distance between same and other" (15).

for infinity thereby represents the unforeseen or unpredictable aspect of our cognitive attempts to understand and predict them. Infinity gets us to add ellipses, as it were, on to things and people as we realize that their independent reality is not wholly reducible to our individual or collective understanding. It also suggests an activity, or curious remainder, that orbits the periphery of our conceptual horizon. In this aspect, we often find ourselves receptive to, or informed by, such phenomena, rather than merely actively and lucidly grasping them.

We can also importantly see, however, that the "general run of modern physics" mentioned above arguably partakes in a macrocosmic sense of infinity, if we put the accent on the more speculative claims that it makes about, for instance, empirically unverifiable "dark matter," "black holes," or unobservable particles that nonetheless are argued to contribute to the "totalizeable" reality with which modern physics predominately operates.

Infinity roughly resembles, on a different scale, Heidegger's Being-as-such, especially insofar as it suggests a source of intelligibility that is presumably infinite, on the one hand, and it is only accessible in piecemeal fashion, and with the proper attunement, on the other. Infinity, furthermore, both reveals and conceals itself in the sense that we become aware *that* we did not know or expect certain things, yet we presumably cannot master the unpredictable or unexpected as such. Levinas grounds infinity on the "infinite" and personal Other, as opposed to what he calls "impersonal" Being, but the points of similarity remain concerning an aspect of reality that constantly eludes our total grasp. With the proper attunement, however, this aspect can also inform us in unpredictable but important ways. Levinas's account of infinity normally confines

itself to interpersonal situations, moreover, whose dynamic scope implies aspects of both infinity and totality, as we see in Chapter 2, "Totality" and "Infinity": Passing the Torch from Descartes to Levinas and Conversation.

Totality and infinity, then, generally refer to the dynamic structure of reality within which human beings comport themselves in matters ranging from the everyday to the most abstract theoretical and metaphysical contemplation. We, as purposive agents, need to plan on, and reckon with, a stable conception of the world—this often leads us to a totalizing perspective on things. We *also* find ourselves shocked, surprised, or informed by what we could not ourselves account for or create—this leads us to a recognition of the indefinite, uncertain, and "infinite" character of reality. Infinity and totality, strictly speaking, are themselves value-neutral, and it is hence arbitrary to associate an ethical preference to the one over the other simply *qua* their activity. We will analyze the terms and their interrelation in Levinas's more precise sense in the next section, but for now it is important to keep in mind that just as it would be grossly misleading to call Kant's conceptual categories "worse than" or "threatening of" intuition, so too is it misleading to designate totality as ethically inferior than infinity.

Many commentators, however, situate Levinas's thoughts about infinity and totality within a misleadingly value-laden framework. We saw that Richard Wolin holds the most egregiously distorted of these views, but it is important to point out that even *sympathetic* Levinasians can overstate or inappropriately contextualize the relationship between totality and infinity. B.C. Hutchens, whose analysis of Levinas's thought is usually excellent, nevertheless situates the relationship between totality and infinity as one of hostility, with a clear aggressor and victim, as it were. This largely stems from his

operating definitions, which unnecessarily import values into the dynamic functioning of the terms:

> 'Totality' is the term used to describe the Western rationality's enormous project to attain a total synthesis of knowledge under rational themes, to 'reduce the other to the same'…'Infinity' is the multifaceted term used to suggest the *resistance* that things pose to totalization by virtue of their being more than what they simply are. There is an *irresolvable conflict* here: totality is always *threatening* to reduce the other to the same, and infinite [*sic*] is always the other's *resistance* to this *threat*. (56-7, my italics)

Hutchens seems committed to the view, held by other Levinasians as well, that totality is somehow *versus* infinity in senses that connote hostility or rapacity, rather than one of two sides to a metaphysical coin, as it were.[49] Such definitions regrettably leave ample room for an interpretation of totality as imperialistic and predatory, à la Wolin.[50] The language in which such passages are couched suggests a martial logic in general, and a sort of metaphysically originary David versus Goliath in particular. Such characterizations can easily lend themselves, additionally, to an ethically loaded binary evaluation of Good (infinity) vs. Bad (totality), or Threat/Victim, Hegemony/Resistance, and many other misleading tags. I argue that this misreading derives, at least to a large extent, from a lack of due attention to the formative role that Descartes' philosophy has on Levinas's phenomenology, wherein a totality is always in a strict, and sometimes even ethical, rapport with infinity.

This is not to say that Hutchen's understanding of the terms (and his general analysis of them) is wholly inaccurate; it is to say, though, that there is something wrong

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[49] Also see Cohen, Richard. *Elevations: the Height of the Good in Rosensweig and Levinas*. Chicago UP (1994), 135. Cohen, a more than sympathetic Levinasian, also overstates the oppositional character of the totality-infinity structure.

[50] "The modish postmodern inclination to deduce "totalitarianism" ideationally from the concept of "totality" is a Levinasian inheritance" (Wolin, "Levinas and Heidegger," 236).

with reading preferences and evaluative criteria into Levinas's *description* of human reality. In other words, Levinas's *phenomenological ontology* of important interpersonal situations can be dubiously lent to *political or moral* agendas that ignore Levinas's robust philosophical claims and, instead, latch on to a few misleading caricatures. And Wolin's caricature is not the least of Levinas's worries, so to speak. Alain Badiou, for instance (and quite keenly in this context) has pointed out that Levinas is often falsely portrayed as the "father" of such self-defeating slogans as the "recognition of the other," "the right to difference," as well as the cloying "contemporary catechism of good will with regard to others."[51]

Badiou does not explain this phenomenon's genealogy, but the reason behind such dubious paternity arguably comes from a misreading of "totality," "infinity," "the Other," and related accounts that buy in to versions of the loaded binary caricatures that we recently saw. "Totality" would be mistakenly transformed into "totalitarian," for example, or the other's "infinity" would mistakenly imply some sort of angelic innocence that is always on the verge of being tarnished by a "threatening" totality.

It is our contention, and in the starkest of contrast to the aforementioned caricatures, that totality and infinity are originally two aspects of (or perspectives that we take on) the world, and importing certain moral judgments and perspectives into them yields a distorted view. Levinas's actual misgivings about totality regard the scope and attitude of the "totalizer" or totality in question, and hence do not concern totality *per se*, as we will clearly see. His point in critiquing totality is similar, moreover, to Kant's critique of reason, especially insofar as the purpose is to show certain *limitations*, and

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[51] Badiou, Alain, 20.

not, rather, to lend support to misology, as Wolin would have it. To illustrate Levinas's proper ambition by a further analogy: if it is accurate that Husserl's main preparatory task is to critique and resituate the allegedly foundational character of the "natural attitude," we may say that Levinas's task is to critique and resituate the allegedly foundational character of the totalizing attitude. This task can be genealogically traced back further than Husserl, however, since its roots begin with Levinas's appropriation of Descartes, to which we now turn.

A Re-Cartesianized reading of Totality, Infinity, and Their Conjunction

Descartes' thoughts about the self and its foundation serve as the ground upon which Levinas gets his key inspiration for the very idea of an "infinity" founding a "totality." We have already seen a few different aspects of what Descartes means by a "totality" (Ch. 1). In addition to the somewhat vague characterization, in the Latin version's translation, of a unique thinking entity that questions its ontological "perfection" (AT VII, 61), it also conveys, in the French version's addition (literally) "as if there were no one but me in the world" (*comme s'il n'y avait que moi au monde*).[52] These aspects do a lot of work toward understanding Levinas's use of them; namely, a potentially closed system in the whole, on the one hand, and a potentially isolated individual, on the other.

For Descartes and Levinas, a totality implies both a robust and systematic principle of autopoetical assertion, as well as a specific individual who can relate to the world through his or her own innate terms so as to arrive at a clear and distinct conception of it. So, Levinas alternately harbors an understanding of totality that sometimes refers to an *individual's* autopoetical capacities (which he often calls the

[52] *Les Méditations Métaphysiques*. Paris, Bordas (1998): 60.

"imposing more of the same"), and sometimes to a *system's* selfsame capacities ("totality," sometimes "the Same"). Levinas's slippage into these different uses of "totality" and "same" can seem arbitrary, then, without a Cartesian background. Levinas describes various situations, for example, where sometimes a rational agent, and sometimes an ontology (for instance, or simply any total metaphysical description), can have a "totalizing" perspective, or can impose "more of the same" (that is, impose the ability to *assimilate* everything as *similar* to one's own innate nature).

For Levinas and Descartes a "totality" also implies a lack, however. The Cartesian lack is revealed, as we saw last chapter, by way of his argument that purports to discover God's existence and "infinite" nature. Descartes' idea of infinity comes from a comparison between his own nature and God's presumed nature, and the analysis of these "data" yields at least two distinct beings—God, the superior, and Descartes, the inferior. Levinas, in a transformative gesture, situates his "infinite" as coming from an "Idea" that is born in "commerce" between people. Levinas's notion of the Other importantly differs from Descartes' in at least two different ways, though. First, Levinas's primary data concern analyses of interpersonal, and not theological, situations: conversation, teaching and learning, and erotic relations, to name some examples. *Pace* certain commentators, then, Levinas' middle period is a thoroughly human matter, as we soon see in more detail (see Chapter 2, Conversation, Teaching and Learning, and Eros and the Caress,).

Second, Levinas's Other (that is, in the infinity aspect) ought to be phenomenologically situated as more of an organizing activity than an entity. Descartes infamously claims, in abstract, that God is the kind of being who bears the predicates X, Y, and Z. Critics, however, famously retort that God's character may be P, Q, and W, for

all one knows, since human nature is not commensurate with something like God's. Descartes' analysis, under such scrutiny, commits a fallacy of attribution, since for all he really knows the supremely infinite being may have myriad unknown or unknowable attributes. Levinas's understanding of alterity and the "infinite Other," however, more accurately resembles Kant's notion of an organizing activity, because it is a limit to what conceptualization cannot grasp, but a limit that the self can regress upon, and heed.[53] Infinity enables a change in the self's perspective as a totality, as the analyses below describe.

More precisely, Levinas's Other and its "negative" predicates ("alterity," "otherness," etc.) need to be understood through a passive faculty within the *self*—this faculty should be understood as a capacity for "infinity." The self's receptive faculty, then, is capable of being overwhelmed in meaningful ways, and its "catalyst" for change is primarily triggered in interpersonal situations by way of the "Other," or sometimes "the [Other's] face." It is equally important, however, to attribute an active faculty to the same agent, one that appropriates, grasps, or, in a word, "totalizes" the novel contribution with which it finds itself confronted.

This is importantly similar to Descartes' situation, namely when he actively finds traces within himself of what he could not account for; yet we should understand Levinas as saying that this totality-infinity structure is one of the fundaments of experience *tout*

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[53] The affinities between "infinity" and the noumenal are intriguing and important. Levinas hints that the Other is some kind of noumenal analogue, but never fully states it. He writes, for instance, "to disclose, on the basis of a subjective horizon, is already to miss the noumenon. The interlocutor alone is the pure term of experience…" (*T&I* 67). I have encountered several articles that treat of the proximity of Kant with Levinas, but on the whole they tend to explore the moral or practical affinities, and not the metaphysical. [Cf. Anthony Beavers, Paul Davies] In Chapter 3 we see the case for a metaphysical kinship between Kant and Levinas.

court.[54] We should further understand that what the Levinasian self finds is not a trace of God; the self, rather, finds *itself* meaningfully changed in such interpersonal situations, whose structure always indicates another human being. The scope of this totality-infinity structure also encompasses theoretical and metaphysical perspectives, such as claims about object-cognition, and a rejection of epistemic closure. For now, though, we will stress the importance of the first-person perspective in which the self comes to a realization of that which "overflows" its capacity.

Levinas, following Descartes' lead, locates this totality-infinity structure in what he calls the "idea of Infinity." In chapter 1, we saw that Descartes realized that his idea of the Other led him to a self-critical position upon which he recognized there are things of which he cannot be the author. Descartes thereafter concludes that this lack of "perfection" implies both that a supreme Other exists, and that the pursuit of knowledge and ethical wisdom could only be furthered through some sort of "striving" for this Other. Levinas, as many commentators have pointed out, preserves merely the form of this argument and not the content.[55] It is not generally acknowledged, however, that Levinas also draws upon the necessity of "totality."

Totality and Infinity and *Time and the Other* emphasize the need to understand the agent as one who is quite capable of appropriating, grasping, incorporating, and rationalizing things in the world through preestablished inner criteria and preferences (i.e., through a totalizing perspective of "the same"). The Levinasian agent, in a word, often *totalizes* what it finds; whether in its aspect of categorizing, and theorizing about,

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[54] "The idea of infinity is experience *par excellence*" (*T&I* 196).
[55] See, for example, Atterton and Callarco's *On Levinas* (2005).

the world; or, in its intentional aspect of "being able to represent things to oneself." The self, moreover, often needs to be a totalizing agent so as to be lucidly responsive to others, as well as appropriative of its environment. As we see below, the ability to totalize helps to render the intersubjective world thematically stable and common to interlocutors, teachers, and lovers, for instance.

The Levinasian agent, under this aspect, is interestingly much closer to the Cartesian than is generally acknowledged. For the Cartesian agent initially seeks, as we saw in chapter 1, to totalize reality; whether in the guise of its own innate structures, or by considering "extended" stuff, the Cartesian project is the dawn, and perhaps *a priori* failure, of such a purely totalizing enterprise. It is not mentioned enough, however, that what the Cartesian agent actually discovers is that he is a limited, dependent creature that needs the "infinite" to "guarantee" the very reality that he is rationally subsuming within a clear conceptual system. Descartes, according to the letter of his text, does not merely discover something new and then totalize it as if it were some trivial ontic footnote—his infinite Other, rather, is recognized to be the ground or anchor of *being able to totalize*.[56] The infinite Other for both Descartes and Levinas, then, *conditions* the capacity for totality, and hence does not "belittle" or "vilify" it.

The content that Levinas substitutes for Descartes' Other is the other person, in one sense, and an anthropologically genealogical structure of human being in another (I

[56] There is no exaggeration here: Descartes claims that he owes "his very existence," and the "guarantee" of wisdom, to his Other. Colin Davis, whose work we considered earlier, clearly sees the Levinasian connection too. For he writes: "This is why Descartes' Third Meditation occupies such an important place in *Totality and Infinity*: it provides a model of the subject existing in relation to infinity, and founded by that relation rather than destroyed by it" (41).

argue for the latter interpretation in chapter 3).[57] Levinas is not so much interested in the problem of being alone but rather in the phenomenological *significations* that "face-to-face" relations entail—both for the agent, as well as for social institutions. Levinas begins his genetic phenomenology with the agent as already embodied in the world, and he tries to account for this agent's capacities through his reappropriation of the "Idea of infinity." This reappropriation is both more a matter of human beings, as opposed to a supreme deity, as well as more global than Descartes' idea. The Levinasian idea of infinity both "moves consciousness," and presupposes the "individual and the personal" (*T&I 27, 218*). It is both "experience *par excellence*," and "produced in the opposition of conversation" (*T&I 196*, 197).

The essentially interpersonal character of Levinasian infinity cannot be overstated. It is important both because it clarifies Levinas's transformation of Descartes' insight, and it gives clear support against some of the "quasi-philosophical supplement" detractors whom we considered above, and to whom we shall return in the last section.

Levinas unambiguously states the anthropological essence of his philosophical enterprise, and he contrasts it in the starkest of terms with the theological. He qualifies this essentially human dimension of our relationship with the Other's infinity in arguably the most pivotal passage of *Totality and Infinity*, and certainly one of the most inspirational for this dissertation. A close analysis of his language and conclusion is essential if we are to appreciate the shift away from theology as a ground, and toward an

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[57] Hilary Putnam, for example, points out that "Levinas transforms the argument by substituting the other for God" (Putnam, 42). Myriad commentators see this as *the* essential substitution between Descartes and Levinas's Other. The next chapter's work, however, shows a different but complementary sense in which Levinas understands the Other to be a transcendent superstructure as well. It also interestingly bears some resemblance to Freud's notion of the superego and its "ancestors."

ontological anthropological phenomenology. Since the passage is lengthy, we shall analyze it in two parts.

> The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face [the face of the human other], in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. It is our *relations* with *men*, which describe *a field of research hardly glimpsed at* (where more often than not we confine ourselves to a few formal categories whose content would be but "psychology"), that give to *theological* concepts the ***sole*** *signification they admit of*. The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man—signification, teaching, and justice—a primacy of an *irreducible structure upon which* ***all other*** *structures rest*…is one of the objectives of the present work. (79, my italics and boldface)

Some may interpret the first sentence as an indication of God's supreme or foundational character, and this would be highly problematic, as we saw with Descartes, and simply inaccurate. The tempting thought is that one somehow "accesses" God (i.e. the foundational Judeo-Christian God) through the human Other's "face" (the means for such access). Richard Wolin claims, for example (and without any direct textual support for his claim) that for Levinas "the Other's absolute alterity—the fact that the Other resists appropriation or assimilation by the same or ego—is patterned after the Almighty's absolute alterity."[58] A closer analysis of this passage helps to dispel such a reading.

For Levinas clearly states that "ethics" is what is uniquely foundational, that is, an essentially anthropological relationship ("man to man") that involves interpersonal structures ("signification, teaching, and justice"). This chapter and the next, by way of anticipation, attempt to fill-in the lacuna to which Levinas refers in this passage, namely, "a field of research hardly glimpsed at." For now, however, it is important to point out that *intersubjectively human structures* subtend, or are conditions for, theological (and

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[58] "Levinas and Heidegger," 228.

presumably any) structures. The "height" referred to in the first sentence is precisely a human category for idealizing human infinity to the highest of degrees—if one calls this "God," then so be it. It is mistaken, though, to claim that Levinas needs "God" in the first sense described in order to ground his phenomenology. Levinas learns this from Descartes' error, as it were, and an analysis of the sentences that immediately follow further reifies this deliberate rerouting of the divine into the interpersonal.

> Metaphysics is enacted in ethical relations. Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks. The role that Kant attributed to sensible experience in the domain of the understanding belongs in metaphysics to interhuman relations. The ethical relation is defined, in contrast with every relation with the sacred, by excluding every signification it would take on *unbeknown* to him who maintains that relation… Everything that cannot be reduced to an **interhuman** relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion. (79, my boldface)

"Metaphysics," which Levinas glosses as "an aspiration towards radical exteriority" (*T&I 29, 42*), simply takes place ("is enacted") in an originally intersubjective arena. As opposed to merely striving for an "empty and formal" theological notion with no real content, as Descartes putatively did, Levinas insists, rather, that interhuman ("ethical") relations imbue "metaphysics" with real content; further, this is analogous to Kant's insistence on the coeval primacy of intuition ("sensible experience") and logical form ("the understanding") in the sense that the self's capacity for totality (that is, the conceptual form) and the human Other's "noumenal" infinity (that is, the novel and indefinite intuitive content) are needed to understand this structure. Our originary relation with the radical exteriority ("infinity") of other people and reality, then, need not bend knee to a mysterious yonder (God, for example), but can precisely be experienced from the agent perspective by virtue of recognizing novel and meaningful contributions from the Other's "exteriority."

So Levinas furthers Descartes' search for the "exterior" by grounding infinity in phenomenologically human, and not abstractly theological terms. This means that totality and infinity are clearly understood in interpersonal Levinasian terms, as we see in much more detail below. This also means, as we see in chapter 3, that Levinas's more speculative or theoretical arguments have as their *telos* the establishment of an anthropologico-ontological genealogy that claims to be more basic than any other structure. For now, though, we should return to the similarities between Levinas and Descartes, since they shed further light on how totality and infinity relate in interpersonal terms.

The Levinasian idea of infinity, like Descartes,' requires "atheistic separation," that is, a being who is capable of withdrawing into itself and asserting its representations of "external" reality. The agent in this aspect maintains a distance from reality from which it actively judges things and others through innate conceptual structures. We note this stance as a chief mark of the "totality, or totalizing, aspect." Both thinkers would agree, from a different perspective, moreover, that the self also encounters meaningful contributions that it "cannot account for it by [it]self" (*T&I* 60, 267). We shall call this the "infinity aspect." These two aspects of lucid agency and overwhelming receptivity, generally speaking, shall inform our interpretation of Levinasian totality and infinity.

Levinas's description of "totality" and "infinity" *can* lead to a seeming paradox, for two reasons. First, he characterizes the agent's experiential relations of these two distinct things as happening "at the same time," or as the "door" to them being "at the same time closed and open," and second (and even more paradoxically) the relation between the same and Other is "both present and still to come" (*T&I*, 149, 148, 225).

This "idea of infinity" is governed by a seemingly paradoxical structure, that of a "more within the less," as Levinas often puts it, and without recourse to our dynamic interpretation of them beginning in Chapter 2 Conversation, totality and infinity, and their related terms "same" and the "Other," will often seem incoherent or paradoxical. What he really means, by way of anticipation, is that under one aspect, infinity happens, and under another, totality happens. These aspects interrelate in the "immediacy" of what Levinas calls the "face-to-face," that is, in the dynamic proximity of self and Other.

To sketch a preliminary illustration of the totality-infinity aspects just described, we can see that they refer to the phenomenological organization of (originally intersubjective) experience. I, or Jack, or Jane, often find ourselves overwhelmed, shamed, informed, refused, etc., *by others*. One aspect of such phenomena is that the self finds itself *altered*, as it were, and Levinas dubs the "source" of such interpersonal alterity the "infinity" that we receive from the Other. This alteration, furthermore, relates to the Cartesian notion of what the lucid self cannot account for *qua itself*, but nonetheless recognizes as placed "within" itself from the "exterior." In the second aspect, the self *actively* grasps, interprets, denies, doubts, affirms, etc., the novel contribution it has "received" or "been taught," in Levinas's idiom. It is most important, though, that we see these functions as necessarily tandem and dynamic. What the self totalizes is often parasitic on its being altered by what Levinas calls the infinite, and without an active capacity to totalize, the self simply could not assert itself—that is, it could not be lucid, organizing, or discursively reciprocating.

If we do not see these aspects as essentially interrelated, one might be led, first, to misconstrue what they mean in interpersonal analyses. Second, one might be naively

tempted to privilege the one over the other in some hierarchical or preferential sense—inexactly implying, for example, that the one is set out to eradicate the other. We are provisionally ready, then, to advance the seemingly strange assertion that puts Levinas much closer to Kant than one normally thinks: for Levinas, infinity without totality would become blind, and totality without infinity would become empty.

With this sketch of the conjunction between totality and infinity in mind, it is important that we now turn to Levinas's text in order to ramify, and of course justify, the central claims. The first claim is that Levinas's notions of totality and infinity *should* be understood as his dual and complementary view of experience. This experience and its conditions are originally intersubjective, and they are clearly seen in conversation, teaching, and erotic relations. Analyzing totality and infinity in these ways, moreover, dispels the paradoxical character of many of Levinas's claims because it situates seemingly contradictory claims as merely two interrelated aspects of interpersonal phenomena—hence our phenomenological approach also helps to dispel the tendentious accusations that Levinas's claims are inchoate, "infuriatingly sloppy," or simply "virtually impossible" to understand, as Moran and Wolin respectively state. The manner in which we should understand totality and infinity in speculative and ontological senses, which also supposes a two-fold understanding, is rigorously explored in the next chapter.

Second, given that these notions are complementary, tandem, and coeval, they are not "opposed" in any necessarily vitriolic sense, as Wolin and others would have it. Third, this situation of Levinas's thought in a post-Cartesian background, when coupled with his interpersonal phenomenology, yields interesting and provocative ethical consequences. These include, but are not exhausted by: his critique of narcissism, his

account of ontological debt, and a novel way of conceptualizing altruism and social justice.

"Totality" and "Infinity": Passing the Torch from Descartes to Levinas

Levinas's description of the self as being overwhelmed in interpersonal situations forms the demarche of *Totality and Infinity*. These descriptions range from such mundane activities as conversation and teaching, to the more abstract activities of consciousness and intentionality. In each case, however, the description is designed to expose and diagnose the seemingly paradoxical structure of "a more within the less," as he puts it, or "the idea of infinity." This structure, which is genealogically linked to Descartes' (the lesser's) idea of God (the greater), is evinced phenomenologically through analyses of the dynamic character of the activity in question—conversation, teaching, and erotic relations, to name some activities. This dynamic, generally speaking, includes a source of "exteriority" (the infinity aspect) and an appropriating self or agency—both aspects, moreover, are necessary to enable or condition the full scope of the structure's possibility.

The totality-infinity structure exhibits, furthermore, a coequal blend of agency and receptivity. The "welcome of the Other," which is Levinas's most general gloss on an individual's encounter with someone who "overflows" the self in interpersonal ways, "expresses a simultaneity of activity and passivity" (*T&I* 89). We ought to read both an active and passive component as simply built in to the very structure of such experience, rather than, say, dismiss the passage as hyperbolic. This reading, then, amounts to saying that the agent's perspective on the experience implies a Gestalt-switch possibility; under the "infinity" aspect the self is enduring a transformative experience that it did not

assume, and under the "totality" aspect the self is seizing and appropriating this experience. The further claim is that these two aspects, although simultaneously incompatible from the agent's perspective, can nonetheless transpire at any given moment within the ontic field in question, as the phenomenological study below reveals.

The self's actual phenomenological attunement will, however, play a big role in which aspect counts as salient from the agent perspective. One often finds oneself, in a manner akin to Descartes' meditator in the Second Meditation, privileging the totalizing aspect—in such cases reality simply appears as an extension or translation of our (precomprehended) conception of things. One also finds oneself, however, largely overwhelmed, shocked, or simply not in control of the novel contribution received from the infinity aspect. Levinas seems to imply, however, that one may never see things under the aspect of infinity, although such a person would be incapable of what he means by "ethics." Just as Descartes could have interpreted reality entirely from a totalizing perspective (even if by the letter of his *Meditations* he would thereby have missed, from the first-person perspective, an important feature of reality), so too can an agent, under Levinas's description, *potentially* never see things and others under the aspect of infinity.[59]

We will now segue into an applied study that is designed to flesh out this sketch. Since the structure is ambivalent (or simply symbiotic, co-dependent, and essentially intertwined) in its scope and application, we will be well served to see it at work in more

[59] This, perhaps, is a Levinasian distinction that mirrors Heidegger's authenticity insofar as one remains in the "they," as it were, when he or she has not learned to appreciate infinity. In other terms, such an agent has not realized one's ontological potential.

precise cases. These are divided, then, into three sections: conversation; teaching; and erotic relations.

Conversation

When Levinas analyzes the structure of conversation he emphasizes the self's dependence on the Other for a necessary semantic contribution. The point in doing so is *not* to ontically "belittle" the self or to "encourage an attitude of submissive adulation" toward the Other, as Wolin would have it, but rather to *point out* an aspect of the self's *ontological* dependence on a source of intelligibility (the Other's "infinity") that it cannot account for by itself.[60] Part of this indication, however, also points to the self's need to lucidly organize, and contribute to the conversation or activity in question. This structure, then, importantly requires aspects of both infinity and totality. An important kernel of this structure, moreover, arguably comes from Descartes' thoughts about the appreciation of a person as distinct from a machine.

Chapter 1 studied the unheralded but nonetheless important Cartesian insight concerning the appreciation of the other person as such *qua* the capacity for speech and conversation. John Llewelyn, in his *Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (1995), rightly points out that Levinas's appropriation of Descartes is not merely limited to critique. Llewelyn's following reflections on Descartes, although they are a segue to a point that touches on Levinas's *later* period (*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*), nonetheless strike the right chord in situating the *phenomenological* importance of *simple conversation*.

[60] Wolin. "Heidegger Made Kosher." *The Nation*, 2/20/06.

> It is worth recalling that when Princess Elizabeth asks Descartes to explain more clearly to her the union of the body and the soul, he begs her not to ask for a philosophical explanation of this and assures her that she will best understand the connection through taking part in *conversation*. (146, my italics)

Descartes' "non-philosophical" explanation can certainly seem exasperating, especially to the likes of Princess Elizabeth, whom we know to have been keenly astute in philosophical matters. Descartes' thoughts on language and the subsequent Levinasian appropriation that they engender, however, provide the seeds for a first-person account of totality and infinity.

Descartes, then, actually paves the way for the interpersonal totality-infinity structure that we are establishing as pivotal to Levinas's phenomenology. Recall that Descartes' insight (chapter 1) into the difference between understanding a person as linguistically distinct from a "machine" (which, in principle, "perfectly resembled a person according to the disposition of its organs") hinged upon his insistence that only a person would be able to "act on all of the contingencies of life" (AT VI 56-7). His answer implies, in a gesture that anticipates the Turing test, and films like *Blade Runner*, that the machine's limited programming and parts would be unable to adequately respond to the indefinite vicissitudes implied in sustained conversation. A person, by contrast, would not have such an adaptive lacuna in his or her responsiveness because of the universality of reason's application. As Descartes puts the point,

> It is *not* conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to *whatever* is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do. (AT VI 56-7, my emphasis)

Descartes' "philosophical explanation," which he later "begs" Princess Elizabeth not to hear, *begs the question*, as we saw in chapter 1, and Elizabeth keenly suspects this

in her correspondences. The formal argument presupposes what is at issue, since his assumptions state that only a human would have a soul (i.e. mental substance) out of which it would communicate—this, however, is what is supposed to be proved. Machines, further, only have extended parts, which are *a priori* incapable of "reason" on Descartes' assumptions. So, if the "philosophical" explanation of the mind-body conjunction (and the linguistic implication that follows from it) is unsound, how, then, will Elizabeth "profit" from "taking part in conversation?"

Descartes, on our retroactive Levinasian interpretation, is pointing out to Elizabeth that there is something important and privileged in interpersonal, face-to-face situations. Descartes knows both that he can take a totalizing stance on "extended" reality *and* that he can appreciate meaningful contributions from beyond a consideration of himself "as a totality" ("*as if* there were no one but [him] in the world"). This dual stance is *intersubjectively deepened*, moreover, in his insight concerning a machine's semantic limitation vis-à-vis the person's. He might assume, of course, that the sophisticated machine and the person are "totalizingly" identical simply *qua* a possible enumeration of their respective extended parts. Matters are quite different, however, from a consideration of the self's being meaningfully overwhelmed in conversation.

This is because such features of conversation as the dynamic give-and-take of sincerity and guardedness, or the moment-to-moment need to vigilantly attend to the interlocutor's expression, tone, utterance, and myriad other contingencies can all contribute to a responsive dislocation of the self. Such features, then, argue for a stance on things beyond that of the lucid subject who innately pre-comprehends a fixed reality (that is, one who adopts a totalizing perspective). These interpersonal features of

conversation, rather, require a dynamic structure of lucid comprehension *and* meaningfully intersubjective receptivity; in other words, they are precursors to Levinas's totality and infinity, as we soon see in detail.

One can get the impression while reading the *Meditations*, however, that the universe is comprised of exactly two beings—Descartes and God. The *Meditations*, then, seem to offer no resources for a consideration of important interpersonal structures. We can gather, however, from Descartes' writings in *Discourse on Method*, and more pertinently in his actual correspondence with Elizabeth, that he has a modicum of awareness regarding an important person-to-person perspective that includes a receptive, as well as an active, faculty. This perspective does not solve the "philosophical" problem of how the mind and body are "conjoined" (or, as Derrida might say, the problem of how Descartes' reification of two mutually exclusive *substances* deconstructs itself) yet such a perspective still sheds a sort of proto-phenomenological light on the dual and reciprocal nature of conversation.

This change of perspective importantly suggests an "infinite" aspect in addition to a purely totalizing aspect. Levinas preserves, moreover, the spirit of such a gesture in his appropriations of Cartesian thought.[61] His analyses of the "face" and "discourse," however, clearly surpass Cartesian thought by virtue of his phenomenological strategy and exposition of the totality-infinity structure. Levinas, in addition to rerouting the divine into the personal, also resituates the very terms of phenomenological inter-subjectivity.

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[61] Both John Llewelyn and Anthony Beavers are correct in their insight that Levinas's Other, and the self's receptivity to it, needs to be situated in line with the Cartesian subject's sensibility. Beavers also thinks that Levinas teases out moral claims from Descartes practical writings on the virtues and vices.

In doing so, Levinas describes "the face" (*le visage*) as the immediate site of discourse and conversation.[62] The face, in one sense, is a technical term for a diachronic nexus of meaning that gets negotiated between two people, and this diachronic aspect shall inform our interpretation of totality and infinity. Since Levinas makes many of his claims from the agent's perspective, the face usually refers to the Other's face; that is, her or him to whom one speaks, for example. In a basic sense, the face simply refers to the always unfolding, as opposed to static aspect of our encounters with others (this is an important part of what is meant by "diachronic"). It is also worth noting that the face need not refer to the other person's actual face, for Levinas's description extends to physical gesture of all sorts, given that it takes place in an interpersonal situation.[63]

When Levinas says that the "face undoes the form it presents at each instant" (*T&I* 66), we should understand the phenomenology through our totality-infinity structure. As Descartes suggests, and Levinas makes explicit, we often find ourselves in conversation with an interlocutor whose attempts at signification both inform and resist our grasp. We think we understand Jim's point—"Aha!"—only to find that he meant something else; or, we think that Susan's forthcoming utterance is obviously going to amount to X, but it in fact, and to our surprise, it amounts to Y.

We often maintain, then, an interlocutory give-and-take in which the phenomena are marked by punctuations of lucidity and surprise, and clearly assessed criticism and stunned appreciation, to give some potential candidates of the distinguishing marks. These marks refer, alternately, to the totality-infinity structure—under one aspect, the self

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[62] "The manifestation of the face is already discourse" (T&I 66).

[63] "The whole body can express as the face" (*T&I* 262).

clearly sees the data, and under the other aspect, the self recognizes its receptive position with respect to the Other's contribution. The face, then, can immediately evince or signify this ambivalent structure—that is, it "undoes the form it presents at each instant" *during* a conversation, for example.

Levinas further qualifies this dynamic structure of the face's activity in terms that seem eccentric, especially without recourse to an interpersonal dual aspect view. He writes in this vein that "in the face's epiphany, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp" (197). The other's face being "sensible" and "graspable," however, hooks up with the totality aspect—suppose that I see clearly what is being said by the other person, I get the point, etc. But suddenly she says that she was "clearly kidding," or that what I took her to mean by P was actually Q—"Were you not paying attention?" she might ask. In such cases the other's "face" turns into "total resistance" to my grasp while the conversation is transpiring.[64]

The face's dynamic structure is evinced in far more subtle ways, however, since the face also attests to the nigh-imperceptible changes and contortions that take place *within instants* of conversations.[65] *As* Jack is about to laugh convivially at what Bob is saying he notices a malicious gleam in the latter's eye, which importantly re-routes Jack's laughter into…something nebulous, at first, which Jack must assimilate, and then perhaps channel into lucid irony or scorn, for instance. Jack's initially clear and distinct appraisal,

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[64] One can point out that such situations are rather rare—how often are we really conversationally behind the 8-ball, as it were? In more general terms, moreover, how frequently is it *really* that we notice disconnects between our lucid and total appreciation of an interlocutor's semantic contribution and the source itself? Although perhaps somewhat rare from an ontic perspective, if Levinas is right this sort of totality-infinity structure underlies the interpersonal as such. Its "evidence" should have led to a "pluralist philosophy of being," for Levinas, i.e. a dualistic phenomenological-ontology of *Totality and Infinity*, on this interpretation.

[65] "To speak to me is at *each moment* to surmount what is necessarily plastic in manifestation" (*T&I* 200, my italics).

then, gets precisely altered by Bob's infinity, as it were, and this takes place in the blink of an eye. Discourse *qua* the face is thereby susceptible to this dynamic structure at more or less obvious purviews that signal an "exterior," or simply "other," source.[66]

This structure's dynamism importantly attests to a "distance" between self and interlocutor that is properly speaking *not merely* a spatial distance that refers to "extended" reality. To this extent the letter of Levinas's phenomenology most clearly surpasses the letter of Cartesian thought, for Levinas resituates the dynamic between self and other into one of "separation" and "exteriority" that *begins with the possibility of being disrupted and informed by others*, and does not merely begin with extended stuff the nature of which we must somehow reconcile with non-extended souls.

An important part of the meaning of self-and-Other is the "signification" revealed through the totality-infinity structure that we see while analyzing conversation, for instance. "Signification," through such activities as conversation, "is preeminently the presence of exteriority" (*T&I* 66).[67] Following our interpretation, then, the "Other's presence is heard as language" in the infinity aspect, and not rather thematically *seen* in a totalizing aspect, nor seen in Cartesian ratio-mathematical space, for that matter (*T&I* 297). Levinas's relevant criteria for the importance of appreciating the other person as "exterior," *in addition to* considerations of spatial contiguity (which is a part of our

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[66] Levinas's phenomenological descriptions, then, ought to be linguistically situated in the perfect or progressive forms of English to make them more concrete. In French there is no morphological distinction between the simple present and the present perfect tenses—"*Il dit*…" can mean either "He says…" or "He is saying…," and it is up to the context or the reader's mind, or both, to decide which is meant. The "is saying" as opposed to "says," however, more sincerely reflects the dynamic we are describing since it stresses the *time* and hence capacity for *alteration* that our verbal utterances evince in the presence of others. Additionally, adverbial qualifiers like "as," "while," or "during" help to evince it, especially since they reinforce the element of the self's potential *disruption* by the Other.

totality aspect's activity), take into consideration the unpredictable vicissitudes inherent in language and communication—for example, in such interpersonal cases as we just examined. These latter cases reflect an aspect of infinity insofar as they show the self's disruption and dependence upon such "exterior" or "separated" beings.

The essentially conjoined (and, in a sense, ambivalent) totality-infinity structure thus signifies a consideration of the "exterior" being as *both* a transcendental activity and as a concrete, extended object. That is to say that in the aspect of infinity, the self more or less passively recognizes changes, disruptions, or "alterity's" alterations of the self, in Levinas's vernacular. The infinity aspect points more toward an external agency than to any particular extended thing or person. Levinas, then, inverts Kant's famous move of treating the transcendental "I" as an activity and not a substance—in the infinity aspect it is the *Other* who is best understood as a transcendental activity, as opposed to an object or substance. Totality's perspective, by contrast, *cannot but* situate the Other as a concrete person at such and such a distance, within a certain relational relativity to the self, having predicates A-Z, etc.

Levinas suggests this two-fold perspective when he describes aspects of the hold *and* the resistance that the self has with regard to the other person considered in conversation:

> Language is a relation between separated terms. To the one the other can indeed present himself as a theme, but his presence is not reabsorbed in his status as a theme. The word that bears on the Other as a theme *seems* to contain the Other. But *already* it is said to the Other, who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and *upsurges* inevitably behind the said. (*T&I* 195, my italics)

The first sentence fleshes out the (not merely spatial) separation between self and Other in conversation, and it is important to read a dual aspect into his description. We

see, on the one hand, that it is "indeed" possible for the self to view the other as a "theme," which is Levinas's multifaceted term for an object of representation[68] (that is, as considered through a totalizing aspect).[69] This particular view of the other, however, does not fully contain or "reabsorb" the other person considered through the infinity aspect. The self's totalizing stance initially "seems" to "contain" the other, that is, it appears to clearly hold and comprehend the Other, but in the infinity aspect the Other's agency contributes to something novel that surprises or disrupts the self's timing and grasp. This is to say that the Other "quits the theme" through which the self initially represented him or her. When considered as a transcendental activity (or, as an aspect of infinity), the Other as interlocutor "upsurges behind" what was previously "said," and thereby maintains an ungraspable but acknowledged presence, as it were; or better yet, s/he maintains an activity that the self cannot fully register but nonetheless reacts to. This upsurge, then, is Levinas's description of an agency that operates "behind" or beyond the self's totalizing sphere of representation.[70]

The Levinasian self can thus adopt an empirical perspective on things that is consistent with a Cartesian agent as a "totality," on the one hand. This aspect or drive requires, generally speaking, a fixed conception of reality that precomprehends its objects, and in doing so it determines which objects are to count as salient ahead of time.

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[68] Cf. *Totality and Infinity* 99, 96, and elsewhere. To thematize can mean, for instance, to have a distinct representation of something, but also to render something into a sentence or some kind of *objective* linguistic or cognitive unit.

[69] Levinas's translator likely uses the lower case "other" here because Levinas uses "autre," and not "autrui" in *this* sentence of the passage. I argue that Levinas uses the lower case other precisely to make the point that it is only through the self's totalizing aspect that the other is "absorbed"—the Other, qua its infinity, remains intact and "out of reach" from totality's perspective.

[70] In the infinity aspect, then, "no concept can lay hold of exteriority" (*T&I* 295) and the Other is "refractory to categories" (*T&I* 40). "To think the infinite, the transcendent, and the Stranger is hence not to think an object" (49). In the totality aspect, however, the self precisely thematizes and conceptualizes the other person as an extended object in a fixed world.

Objects (and people considered objectively) under this aspect's scrutiny seem to "offer no resistance," as Levinas puts it—that is, they never seem to "upsurge behind the [totalizer's] theme," as we saw. We have dubbed this the "totality" aspect. The same self, on the other hand, *can be* perfectly hospitable to a different aspect that relates to the same situation in question. This aspect or drive is attuned, neither a-rationally nor irrationally, but *phenomenologically*, to the margins of experience that resist our grasp, or that are seen only in their elusive aspect.[71] Salient "objects" refer, in this aspect, to novel and meaningful transformations that occur primarily through the unpredictably rhythmic cadence of language and expression, on Levinas's view.

In interpersonal situations like conversation the self can also "receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity" (*T&I* 51). That is, an attunement to the infinity aspect can precisely *inform* the self in novel ways. In receptively appreciating the initially shocking "overflow" of meaning that comes from the Other's "exterior," the agent can then appropriate this donation so as to truly learn something other than what it already knew or perceived. The significance of this reception, which Levinas calls an originary "teaching" that comes from the Other, will be the object of the next section. We can see, however, that an analysis of the structure of conversation reflects this seemingly paradoxical character of a self who receives something "beyond" its own capacity—in this sense the self can "think more than it thinks," to use Levinas's recurring, and initially strange expression.

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[71] We have seen descriptions of *intersubjective* situations that attest to a possible attunement to this structure. *Candidates* for "objects" that *speculatively* count as salient in this category include the following: black holes and so-called "dark matter;" sub-atomic particles, which in one aspect resist static conceptualization when one accounts for their activity and interaction; the universe's alleged "infinity;" and no doubt a host of other candidates.

The structure of a "more within the less" or the "idea of infinity" additionally suggests, then, an ambivalent (or symbiotic, mutually interdependent) fund of meaning whose potential admits of two distinctly possible but simultaneously incompatible interpretative stances from the agent perspective—either the totality aspect, or the infinity aspect. The aspects themselves, *when considered through their ontological activity*, however, can function at the same time in the Gestalt-switch sense that was mentioned. At any given time in interpersonal experiences, the agent *can* experience the situation through the one aspect or the other, depending on the agent's attunement—hence a further reason for Levinas's strange insistence that these seemingly incompatible aspects can function "at the same time." What he means on our interpretation, however, is that the structure is precisely ambivalent in the senses we have illustrated.[72]

Teaching and Learning

Levinas's analyses of teaching and learning are similar in intention to those of conversation. They demonstrate that the ability to learn exhibits this structure of a "more within the less," with "the more" referring to the radical exteriority of the Other's teaching, and "the less" to the self and its passive ability to learn. Learning is most basically a learning-from the Other and hence the Other's meaningful contribution "overflows the same" to the extent that the self "receives from the Other beyond the capacity of the I," as we also saw, in different respects, with conversation. Teaching, then, reflects this totality-infinity structure as well. "Teaching comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain" (*T&I* 51). The self must, however, reciprocally

[72] To deepen the Gestalt analogy, in one aspect the agent can see the "duck," as it were, and in another aspect, the "rabbit." We should stress, though, that the agent does not clearly see in the infinity aspect, but rather "sees" that he does not see, or "sees" that he has been altered.

and assertively thematize the novel content it has "received" in order to truly appropriate and understand it, or else the teaching would be stillborn. "Teaching…is a thematization of phenomena" (99).

There have been numerous debates in the history of philosophy regarding how, exactly, the self learns. From Plato to Locke, and Locke to Levinas, the question arises concerning the fit between content "learned" and its packaging, sender, and recipient, as it were. On one interpretation, Plato favors the "pre-packaged" version wherein the self is its own recipient to the extent that it recollects something that was fundamentally innate. Locke's account states, by contrast, that learning must come entirely from sense data, which amounts to an anonymously empirical "delivery" wherein the recipient receives the content *as* already packaged from the outside. Levinas's view, on my interpretation, suggests both a personal external sender who delivers the content, and a process of internalization on the part of the recipient that assimilates the content as one's own.

Levinas's language on the subject, furthermore, lends support to our ambivalent, symbiotic totality-infinity structure. It is, first, clearly against a *purely* nativist account of learning; second, when coupled with his above remarks about how the self "receives" a teaching, we can see the need for reading tandem aspects into his verbiage.

> Teaching does *not simply* transmit an abstract and general content already common to me and the Other. It does *not merely* assume an after all subsidiary function of being midwife to a mind already pregnant with its fruit. (98, my italics)

> Teaching is a way for the truth to be *produced* such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from myself. (295, my italics)

> Teaching, the end of equivocation or confusion, is a *thematization* of phenomena. (99, my italics)

The teaching structure reflects, as the second citation makes clear, both Descartes' and Levinas's idea of infinity insofar as the self comes to appreciate and depend upon something it could not itself account for in terms of the teaching's *origin*. Levinas's description of this origin indicates an interpersonal source that enables the self to acquire intersubjective norms and standards. His account of teaching also highlights, as the third citation indicates, the need for the self to lucidly see the "teaching" within its own economy, since the "phenomena" received need to be "thematized," which, as we saw, is totality's proper activity. The structure becomes distinctly Levinasian, moreover, when we stress the *personal* character of the teacher, as opposed to the impersonal nature of sense data or ideal recollection (or of God, in Descartes' case).

The ambivalent character of "not simply" and "not merely" thus attest to the need for both a personal teacher's "external" activity as well as a totalizing aspect on the teaching that can render it intersubjectively stable or "common," as the first passage suggests.[73] The "production" of "truth" in the account of teaching and learning signifies, then, "not merely" a need for a clear grasp of "abstract and general content," but also something that the self cannot "derive" from itself.[74]

Teaching, and the dynamic structure that it entails, furthermore, opens-up an interesting view on traditional philosophical problematics. He writes, for example, that

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[73] The next chapter's work details how the Other, considered ontologically, renders the world "common," that is, conditions normativity and intersubjective evaluation.

[74] Levinas's verbiage can *seem* to imply, however, that the self's dependence upon the Other's teaching leads to an "attitude of submissive adulation," as Wolin puts it in his article, "Heidegger Made Kosher." For Levinas writes, for instance, "teaching is a discourse in which the *master* can bring to the student what the student does not know" (*T&I* 180, my italics). Levinas's invocation of such "mastery" is legion, but what he really means is simply that the Other serves as a condition that enables the process of learning. As we saw with the Other's necessity in the structure of conversation, Levinas's point is ontological and not "belittlingly" ontic, as Wolin puts it.

the "contradiction between the *free* interiority *and* the exteriority that *should* limit it is *reconciled* in the man open to teaching" (*T&I* 180, my italics). Levinas's language here is at its boldest insofar as it flirts with over-hastily melding numerous problems in the history of philosophy: free will and determinism; metaphysical dualism; and an account of knowledge acquisition to boot. What Levinas means, however, is that two aspects weigh-in on the structure of teaching and learning. The teacher *qua* the face brings the self something novel and initially overwhelming—it brings the self, as we have seen, "more than it can contain" hitherto as a totality. This aspect is "limiting," however, in the sense that the self is passive, receptive, or simply reactive *to* the Other's meaningful activity. In the other aspect, though, the self *qua* its "interiority" is "free" to lucidly totalize (that is, one can lucidly appropriate and assimilate) the teaching. *As* appropriated, the potential of the structure thereby becomes realized.

The totality-infinity structure, then, precisely "reconciles" seemingly antagonistic or incompatible perspectives because it points to "not merely" the one or the other, but rather to both, as equally necessary constituents of the experience's potential. It is also important to highlight, as we saw when we analyzed conversation, moreover, that the two aspect of the structure are equally important in order to make sense of the situation. If this structure is now clearer, we will turn to Levinas's analyses of erotic situations in order to further develop the importance of both aspects in his thought.

Eros and the Caress

Time and the Other anticipates a key gesture in *Totality and Infinity*, namely that the "pathos of love consists in an insurmountable duality of beings" (*T&O*, 86). The invocation of this "duality" informs our dual aspect interpretation of totality and infinity,

since *Totality and Infinity's* analyses of interpersonal erotic situations, like those of conversation and teaching, aim to reveal two distinct and important perspectives on the same situation in question. Levinas's descriptions of erotic situations emphasize, for example, both the blend of the self's totalizing need for gratification and the always elusive desire for transcendence that accompanies it. They also show that the self's effort to erotically "totalize" the beloved can be coupled with the lover's "caress," which intentionally "seeks," or "forages for," that which it cannot account for by itself.

In this vein, Levinas speaks in the following passage of the seeming paradox between the self's need be completely satisfied (as a totality) *and* its awareness of something it cannot fully possess (the desire for the Other's always elusive infinity):

> The possibility of the Other appearing as an object of need while retaining his alterity, or again, the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse—this position with regard to the interlocutor which **at the same time** reaches him and goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic, which, in this sense, is *the equivocal* par excellence. (255, my boldface)

"The equivocal," literally of *equal voices or callings*, clearly maps onto our interpretation of totality *and* infinity as an essentially ambivalent and symbiotic structure. For this passage highlights the possibility of seemingly antagonistic or incompatible forces that are in fact merely two aspects of the experience. In our Gestalt-switch dynamic, the Other can be appreciated as both an *object* of gratification and as an un-totalizable activity who is "refractory" to the self's autonomous grasp; or, as both a warm, desirable body that satisfies the self *and* a source of unreachable surprise, refusal, or encouragement. These contrasting aspects reflect Levinas's distinction between "need" and "desire," moreover, in that the former "consumes" and sates its object (rendering it

merely other, like nourishment, for instance), whereas the latter is attuned to the Other's infinity and thereby recognizes a source that it cannot lucidly master or fully assimilate.[75]

We should also notice that the "equivocal *par excellence*" character of the lover's attunement is *neither* a prioritizing of one aspect over the other, *nor* is it an exclusive disjunction—it is, rather, the "originality" of the erotic structure, that is, the most basic potential of the structure. It states, then, that *both* are important aspects of the erotic situation in question. Within a discrete interval ("at the same time") therefore, the Other *can* have both an empirical and a transcendental function. Put differently, the erotic phenomena in question admit of two distinct perspectives that suggest differing, but nonetheless equally important, attunements. His language on the subject is quite clear, and it does not say, or even hint, that one of the two aspects is to be eliminated in some kind of preferential sense.

Levinas's analyses of the "caress" provide us with good grist for the dual-aspect, ambivalent mill as well. For in the span of two sentences he writes (in paradoxically Levinasian fashion) that the "caress, like contact, is sensibility," and that the caress "transcends the sensible" (*T&I* 257). An important part of what he means in such passages, though, is that from the agent perspective two distinct things can take place.

Jim, for example, desires his girlfriend Sandy's person and presence. When they are next together he finds himself possessively reaching out for *her* and rather arbitrarily finds his hand caressing her shoulder, where it meets the neck, say. To enable this action, let us say that Jim needed some kind of spatial representation of the situation, for instance, as well as physical "contact" and "sensibility" and such. *But* what is it that Jim

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[75] *T&I* 33, for example.

is really seeking? Is it *merely* the possessive feel of Sandy's trapezius muscle and the soft, warm skin that houses it? Is it simply a calculated ruse, moreover, that aims at weakening Sandy's prudent defenses so as to later satisfy Jim's lucid and precomprehended ambition?

Not necessarily, and perhaps not at all. In addition to sensible contact and its lucid precomprehension, then, the lover's caress may also "transcend the sensible." This is so because the aforementioned "duality of beings" description can contribute to Jim's attunement in this situation. This other kind of attunement recognizes an abyss of sorts between self and Other, and it desires, in Levinas's sense, a being or activity of a different register than the self's lucid anticipation, as the next few paragraphs illustrate.[76]

During the span in which Jim is reaching for Sandy (as an object in his theme), then, he might *also* be aiming for something elusive and still to come, that is, the Other's unpredictably futural activity, which is of an order that Jim cannot fully anticipate—"the caress seeks what is not yet" (*T&I* 258). He might be intending, further, to be evaluated in unpredictably revealing terms—"You really think I'm that kind of person? Interesting…I never saw it that way…" He may also simply realize that what he is "reaching" for, *as* he is reaching *and* Sandy makes him laugh, is unanticipated but nonetheless desired—the caress, then, "is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible," that is, this kind of stance on another agency is refractory to pure anticipation (258). In all of these latter aspects, furthermore, Jim's attunement reveals an intentionality of the voluptuous that does not seek to return to its point of origin (that is, it

[76]This attunement may desire, furthermore, a surprising change that may or may not be pleasant to the self—how can one truly know, since that which is desired is precisely the activity of a "separated" and "exterior" being (in the infinity aspect)?

is *not* a movement back to what Levinas calls "the same"). It seeks a repetition with a real difference, and a (temporary) breach of its lucid self-conception. In a sense, then, the caress's infinity aspect plays Dionysus to the totality aspect's Apollo.

In one possible aspect, Sandy's shoulder offers no Levinasian "resistance" to Jim's grasp, that is, it may only appear, say, as a calculated object that fits in with Jim's clear intention and design—this, importantly, is what Levinas (and numerous partners the world over, we might add) would call "more of the same." In another possible aspect, however, that which Jim "seeks" (or "forages" about for, as Levinas also puts it) is neither any particular thing about Sandy's body, at that time or any other, nor is it necessarily any precalculated intention whose anticipation is clear; the seeking, rather, is for what Levinas calls "the invisible"—that is, the self's desire for something truly Other, something that "transcends the sensible" and freshly informs or critiques the self.

We may say, then, that in the totality aspect, Jim can indeed lucidly caress Sandy. In the infinity aspect, we say, however, that Jim can "aim" at a part of Sandy that he cannot fully predict or control—that is, he can appreciate her as a source of alterity. These aspects are quite compatible and equally important within the same situation, moreover, as we saw with the "equivocal" point above, even if they are not simultaneously compatible. When we consider the aspects in tandem, they most basically *complete* the erotic relation rather than *compete* with each other, since clearly both can coexist in the same person, and in the same situation. Jim can thereby "need" and "desire" a future with Sandy, and it is both the future with which he clearly reckons, in one sense, and an interpersonal future that he cannot totally predict, but nevertheless desires as such, in another sense.

In different terms, it is significant that Jim be capable of both attunements, since this dual capacity would fulfill the relation's existential potential. To eliminate one or the other aspect would therefore be *to the detriment of the structure's meaning*. Without a totalizing aspect to the relation, Jim would be conceptually blind to important features, and he thereby might merely "search" and "forage" for some mysterious yonder—that is, he might become one of those poets who merely, and passively wait (no doubt in vain) for the "ethereal" and "eternal" feminine. To put the point differently, he might literally have no idea of whom it is that he really wants. Without the infinity aspect, however, Jim's attunement would be auto-affective and auto-poetical—"more of the same," or, quite simply narcissistic in more common terms. Erotic relations, like conversation and teaching, then, admit of a diachronic and ambivalent interpretation whose duality is basically complementary.

If the erotic component of the dual aspect totality-infinity structure is now clearer, we should turn our attention to a recapitulation of totality, infinity, and their tandem function as it has been evinced by our interpretation. Our analysis of the totality-infinity structure in general has indicated that totality and infinity are simply interpretations of varying aspects within Levinasian interpersonal phenomenology. Our initial assertion that the aspects themselves are essentially complementary (rather than antagonistic) has been vindicated to the extent that we have seen such descriptions at work in the analyses of conversation, teaching, and erotic relations.

The next chapter's work, by way of anticipation, more thoroughly elucidates the *ontological and metaphysical* totality-infinity structure of Levinas's phenomenology. For now, though, we will critically return to Wolin's interpretation of "totality" and "infinity"

that seeks to drive a harmful wedge between the two, especially since we now have the phenomenological wherewithal to get to the radix of the debate concerning "and" or "versus."

A Levinasian Defense Against Wolinesque Totality Versus Infinity

Richard Wolin's account of totality and infinity fails to be persuasive for at least two reasons. First, it uses loaded language to misrepresent what infinity and totality really mean, and hence it mistakenly attributes activities and evaluative standards that do not pertain to their essential function. Wolin's interpretation of totality and infinity is thus specious, as we soon see. Second, Wolin's suggestions that one should look for the genesis of Levinas's key technical terms in such non-philosophical arenas as, for instance, "divinely ordained ethical precepts," or religious parables patterned on "*credo, quia absurdum*" ["I believe it because it is absurd"] are tendentious at their roots, and tedious by virtue of their thematic repetition.[77] The polemic's initially jocular character, moreover, becomes distastefully and overwhelmingly shadowed by the misleading spin it puts on Levinas's important philosophical ambitions. Our critique of Wolin's claims will therefore expose both the misunderstanding of totality and infinity at work in his account, as well as the misleading reading of Levinas's "theological" origins concerning these notions. The exposition's conclusion will serve as a segue to other significant misreadings of totality, infinity, and the philosophical stakes of Levinas's work.

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[77] Wolin, "Levinas and Heidegger," 228, 229. Wolin frequently suggests, moreover, and with a slippery-slope logic, that Levinas's thought is always on the brink of some extreme position that risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. To give but two examples: he says that Levinas's thought is "but a short step from Foucault's dictum that 'reason is torture'" (236) and, that Levinas's (and Derrida's) critique of logocentrism "risks needlessly belittling" and "squandering" such valuable communicative potentials and capacities as rationality and language (238).

In his description of "totality," Wolin consistently states or implies *only* the "hostile" and "pernicious" connotations of the notion that we glimpsed above. Our contention the whole time has been, of course, that Levinasian totality and infinity are originally interpretations of two fundamental perspectives of reality. Wolin insists, however, that Levinas supplants totality (because it is somehow nefarious in essence) so as to replace it with infinity.[78] Wolin's mistaken strategy attempts to show that Levinas's critique of totality is itself "totalizing," as he puts it, as opposed to merely immanent and limiting. We soon clearly see that this is not the case, since Levinas's critique is immanent, and since it seeks to preserve both elements rather than divorce them.

The passage we are going to consider below is one of Wolin's more direct and engaging on "totality's" nature, and so it merits close attention. For the sake of context, it follows on the heels of a stilted effort at lampooning, and then lambasting aspects of Heidegger's thought (which, however, allegedly inform Levinas's pseudo-romantic critique of rationality). Wolin would have it, then, that "Heidegger's influence" led Levinas, "wittingly or unwittingly," to adopt a "totalizing" critique of Western thought and rationality.[79] Just as Heidegger allegedly champions misologous and quasi-romantic elements over "theoretical reason," so too would Wolin have us believe that:

> When Levinas, for his part, writes about the *excrescences* and *misdeeds* of totality, he employs a similar idiom. In his thought totality becomes a figure for the will to *domination*, which he *identifies* as the *animating* impetus of Western philosophy. Reason's raison d'être is the *subjugation* of beings. Rather than "letting beings be," it destroys their inherent multifariousness by perennially reducing them to sameness. Reason must be reconceptualized, Levinas argues, as *hostility* to difference…it functions as a universal solvent, employing its theoretical "gaze"…to reduce otherness to ipseity or identity. (236, my italics)

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[78] "Levinas and Heidegger," 244, 235, and elsewhere.

[79] Ibid, 235-6.

This passage betrays, as one sees with many polemically inexact critiques, a few kernels of accurate description around which are housed many erroneous and or misleading tangents. There is of course no doubt that Levinas is critical of *particular features* and implications of rationality—but so too are Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and many other important philosophers, one might add. It is a rather egregious fallacy of composition, however, to say that Levinas's view of a part is his view of the whole.

Instead, Levinas's strategy consists *precisely* in reifying an immanent and rational critique of such features by showing certain limitations and conditions in their structure. The strategy thereby resembles Husserl's critique of the alleged primacy of the natural attitude (which is analogous to totality, one should add) as well as Kant's critique of particular uses and abuses of reason; as Kant's critique followed from his metaphysics, moreover, so too does Levinas's.

Levinas explicitly states the chief philosophical ambition of *Totality and Infinity* in the preface, and the first sentence of the following passage shows his explicit rejection of a totalizing critique that would "replace" Western philosophy with something like the Judeo-Christian narrative that Wolin suggests.

> Without substituting eschatology for philosophy, without "demonstrating" eschatological "truths," we can proceed *from* the experience of totality *back to* a situation where totality breaks-up [*se brise*], a situation that *conditions* the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other. The *rigorously developed concept* of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity. This revelation of infinity does *not* lead to the acceptance of any dogmatic content whose *philosophical rationality* cannot be argued for in the name of the transcendental truth of the idea of infinity. (*T&I* 24, my italics)

If Levinas intended a total, as opposed to an immanent, critique, he would thereby try to "substitute" a completely different narrative for a rigorously philosophical

narrative. This is not the case, however, since the claim is that totality admits of certain limitations and conditions, namely the idea of infinity, whose articulation is thoroughly conceptual and rational to boot. The quotes he places ("truths" and "demonstrating") to emphasize the non-starter character of a would-be totalizing, as opposed to immanent, critique further clarify that such a total substitution is neither intended nor warranted.

The phenomenological key to his genuine strategy consists instead in seeking to find those interpersonal situations where a totalizing perspective breaks up. This means, in one important sense, that Levinas describes situations where the self recognizes a dependence on the Other for significant contributions to its economy that it cannot derive from a purely totalizing aspect, whose phenomenological articulation we considered above when we considered conversation, teaching, and erotic relations.[80] This strategy is Cartesian in inspiration, and distinctly Levinasian when we reckon with its unique interpersonally phenomenological character in which he describes the self as "overwhelmed"; that is, as a totalizing agent whose timing and lucid grasp are broken up by the Other's contribution, and recognized as such "within" the self's economy. Levinas's strategy thereby aims to show that a purely totalizing perspective is verily *incomplete*, and thus not villainously *obsolete*. To illustrate this point by our recurring analogy: just as it is grossly misleading to say that Husserl purely sought to "vilify" and thereby abandon the scientific attitude, or that Kant simply sought to "belittle" pure reason, so too is it misleading to claim that Levinas has similar designs with totality.

Wolin's language is loaded, then, to the extent that his insinuations about Levinasian totality appear to *rest on a pun*. When Levinas articulates totality's

[80] We see more precisely, in the next chapter, how Levinas *ontologically* articulates the conditioning referred to in the above citation.

ontological limitations, for instance, Wolin distortedly translates this as *purely* "belittling," or simply as an *exhaustive* reflection of totality's nature: *namely*, "excrescences and misdeeds."[81] When certain uses of reason are unmasked as leading to a solipsistic position (which, by the way, is hardly unique to Levinas), he translates this critique as Levinas's view of reason *tout court*. When Levinas claims, furthermore, that a totalizing perspective necessarily needs a complete grasp of its subject in advance, Wolin would perhaps have us believe that "totality becomes a figure for the will to domination."[82] In addition, then, to a fallacy of composition, we can see the case that Wolin's language is thoroughly disingenuous in its description of totality's complete nature.

Wolin does not offer many citations from Levinas's middle period, although he nevertheless criticizes that same period at great length. His only lengthy citation of *Totality and Infinity* is taken from two different paragraphs the order of which is rather oddly altered, and altered without mention, in his "Levinas and Heidegger." The anachronic alteration itself is disingenuous as well because it makes it seem like "totality" alone is the subject of what follows, whereas *in Levinas's actual text*, French or English, this is not necessarily the case. In Wolin's text, however, Levinas's text reads as follows:

> The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of Totality [sic.] that dominates Western philosophy…[This line is in fact the topic sentence of the second paragraph of Levinas's Preface, and "totality" is lowercase in the French and English versions. The following begins 13 lines *above* this last line in Levinas's actual text.] The ontological event that takes form in this black light is…a mobilization of absolutes by an objective order from which there is no escape…But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating

[81] Wolin, 236.
[82] Wolin, 236.

> persons as in interrupting their continuity [and] making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves. (236)

To be charitable to Wolin's recontextualization, "war" is Levinas's key thematic in both of the passages from which Wolin draws, and he may have thereby felt justified in recontextualizing the sentences as he did; although one should, however, make due mention of such alteration. Wolin's recontextualization is disingenuous on a *less* charitable interpretation, however, because it makes it seem like "black light," "no escape," and "violence," for instance, pertain simply to "Totality," and not rather to an aspect of being revealed in "war," which is merely *one* feature of "being" and "totality."[83] *If* Wolin were to have interpreted Levinas's claim as, say, "Levinas thinks that war, being, and totality have a certain relationship in so far as they overlap in certain respects…" then we might appreciate what Levinas means in this difficult passage. It seems hermeneutically disingenuous, however, that Wolin changes the word order, and (wittingly or unwillingly) capitalizes the key term, furthermore, so as to make it seem like "Totality" is simply defined by the bleak and discomfiting language that anachronistically 'follows'.[84]

Levinas's claims about totality, war, and Western philosophy are quite compatible with our interpretation of totality, though. When he says that "the concept of totality dominates Western philosophy," we should read this as part of his critique of the unique philosophical primacy accorded to totality, which, however, he tries to immanently

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[83] The "visage," in English, is Lingis's translation of *la face*—literally "countenance" "aspect," "side," or "face," as in 'the face of a building.' The human face is *le visage* or *la figure*.

[84] Whereas we see, on the following page, that Levinas refers to "the ontology of totality issued from war," which, again, implies that "war" is the true object of "black light,' "no escape," and such. As is well known, moreover, capitalizing a term can imply that its fundamental essence is at issue.

critique by showing that infinity *and* totality are ontologically necessary. The claim that war and totality are intimately related in certain respects, though, is more of a platitude than a revelation—who would seriously doubt that war requires a modicum of rational efficiency, for instance, or a lucid and fixed representation of the enemy's situation? Totality's function is clearly *not merely limited* to such aspects, however, as we saw above.

When we examined Levinas's interpersonal phenomenology we saw that totality and infinity are each importantly necessary functions that enable the full range of such significant activities as conversation, teaching, and erotic relations. In chapter 3, furthermore, we shall see that totality *and* infinity are necessary to complete the ontological structure of such essential functions as objectivity and language, to give but a few examples. Levinasian totality often shows up, then, as related to important and or ethical activities, and hence it does not exclusively appear in allegedly obsolete and or vile activities.

In its most basic formulation, Levinasian totality (and infinity, for that matter) is simply immune to being "vile" or "pernicious," since it relates to a complex and variable way of looking at the world. This way of looking at the world *can sometimes* be a means to "vile" activities, but it need not, and often is not. In this important sense, then, Wolin's critique rests on a fallacy of composition because it conflates the language of particular uses of a thing with that same thing's essence. To purely abandon totality, then, would be to abandon the rational and theoretical stability that "makes human society possible," as Levinas puts it (*T&I* 119). More concretely, to say that the Levinasian agent (or

Cartesian, for that matter) were somehow robbed of its ability to totalize would imply that he or she not be able to realize many distinctly human tasks.

To merely totalize does lead to a lack, however, and we have seen elements of this lack in both Descartes and Levinas. To merely be receptive to infinity would lead to a lack as well, and hence Levinas's great work is "Totality *and* Infinity." *Infinity*, if one wanted to look at it that way, moreover, could sometimes elucidate, or be a means to, activities that are "vile" or "pernicious." Levinas's interpersonal phenomenology describes accounts of both disrespect and homicide, for instance, which require the infinity aspect as well as the totality aspect to make sense of their structure.[85] Levinas signals the dual-aspect structure we elucidated above even in interpersonal structures like murder (as well as the more benign structures of conversation and such) as we see here:

> The Other who can sovereignly say *no* to me is exposed to the point of the sword or the revolver's bullet, and the whole unshakeable firmness of his "for itself" with that intransigent *no* he opposes is obliterated because the sword or bullet has touched the ventricles or auricles of his heart. In the contexture of the world he is a quasi-nothing. But he can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very *unforseeableness* of his reaction. (199)

Levinas's point is to describe two distinct and revealing perspectives in which we can view the situation. As such, the murder scenario is described, on the one hand, as one of lucid control and power that seeks to terminate and thereby silence the other considered as an object in space. The triggered bullet's "touching of the heart" is a sufficient means

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[85]"The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill" (*T&I* 198). "Disrespect presupposes the face" (262). The structure of torture, to name an extreme example, may very well be elucidated by the Other's infinity aspect, at least insofar as the torturer might sadistically delight in, and or be informed by, the surprising revelations of the Other's infinity, while clearly maintaining a totalizing aspect on the situation as well.

to achieve this end; the other thus becomes a "quasi-nothing" in this aspect—the murderer's lucid intention, furthermore, might expect no more and no less.

The scenario's description maintains, on the other hand, the Other's capacity to "sovereignly" say "no" (that is, from a "height" or *activity* not commensurate with the murderer's) as well as a capacity to "struggle"; not, however, by opposing equal or greater "force" (which would still pertain to the totality aspect), but rather by *surprising* the murderer and breaking up the murderer's circuit of intelligibility and control. As the Other is dying his final words suggest to the murderer, for instance, that he withheld information, which thereby thwarts the latter's practical design—"Damn! He was still valuable to me and I shouldn't have killed him!"—or so the murderer might thereby think.[86]

Levinas's intention in such descriptions is, of course, *not* to blame "totality" for its allegedly innate wickedness, but, instead, it originally aims to show that features of infinity *and* totality inform the structure in question—as we saw in conversation, teaching, and, in this case, even murder and heroic resistance. The Other's final words and expression need to be thematically suggestive from a totalizing viewpoint, furthermore, in order to have the effect on the murderer. Alternately, both the murderer and victim need a capacity to totalize, or there would be no thematic or objective world to be shared by them. As we have seen, this is analogous to totality's importance in conversation, teaching, and erotic relations. Without the infinity aspect, however, no

[86] Levinas qualifies this "struggle" as "ethical resistance," "the resistance of what has no resistance" (199). Here again, it is crucial to read two aspects into his verbiage, or else one risks dismissing such claims as "obscurantist" or simply nonsensical. It is in such a vein, furthermore, that Levinas suggest that the self, in one respect, "can no longer have power over the Other because he overflows every idea I can have of him" (87).

"unforseeableness" would arise, that is, there would be no surprise or shock, and hence no "teaching" or novel contribution to either party's perspective.[87] Infinity and totality are importantly related and conjoined, then, but Wolin's interpretation stubbornly seeks to divorce them while it simultaneously looks for their origin in arbitrary and misleading "pre-philosophical sources," as we soon explicitly see.

Levinasian "Totality" becomes, in Wolin's hands, a hydra whose heads need decisive severing. And what should deliver such a fatal stoke, with one "totalizing" swoop, no less? Wolin's answer is not surprising, for he would have us believe that "Infinity" represents Levinas's "totalizing rather than immanent" critique as a remedy against the "excrescences and misdeeds" of "totality."[88] Wolin's final analysis, of course, is that the disease is better than the cure, as it were, and therefore that Levinas is naively mistaken when he allegedly jettisons "theoretical reason" or totality.[89] We have seen a direct case for his mishandling of totality, and we now turn to a similar perspective on his mishandling of infinity.

Wolin's *initial* claim about the infinity aspect of Levinas's thought is arguably uncontroversial, for he writes that "the originary encounter with the face of the other… formally parallels the encounter with divine transcendence."[90] His qualification of this claim, however, soon leads us spiraling astray from Levinas's philosophical roots and intentions, and this for at least two important reasons. First, it neglects to account for the

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[87] The phenomenology could just as easily, if rather bleakly, be described from the victim's point of view, with the murderer's final word or expression as the "unforeseeable."

[88] "Levinas and Heidegger," 236.

[89] Wolin writes, for example, that the "modish postmodern inclination to deduce "totalitarianism" ideationally from the concept of "totality" is a Levinasian inheritance" (236). It is important to recognize that Wolin's reading of Levinas is specious both because it is inaccurate and because it lends itself to many false caricatures of Levinas's thought.

[90] Ibid., 228.

philosophical origin of such an "encounter" (i.e. the Cartesian element, as well as Levinas's rich phenomenological inheritance) while also neglecting Levinas's actual qualifications about how the "divine" gets transformed into the human, which, as we saw above, is a key Levinasian gesture that does not receive due attention. The only genetic justification offered by Wolin is theological, though, because he says infinity is merely "patterned after the Almighty's absolute alterity."[91]

Second, Wolin's insight is that the seeds of Levinas's alleged theological underpinning to infinity stem from two biblical sources: the "divinely ordained injunctions" of the "Ten Commandments," which "betray the trait of transcendence"; and, secondly, the Abraham dilemma or "parable," which "paradigmatically exemplifies the logic of transcendence."[92] This second "source" is said to reflect Levinas's philosophical transformation of "*credo, quia absurdum"* into the "logic of transcendence" [read "infinity."] [93] The first "source" of infinity, moreover, amounts to Levinas's philosophical translation of "theistically mandated, inviolable ethical precepts" as found in the Decalogue, which indicate that "they have a status that is superior to beings or entities."[94]

Wolin's interpretations of one of Levinas's "two most powerful pre-philosophical influences of his development" (with the other being "Russian literature") lend clear support to *his* reading of infinity and totality in general. This is because we see an interpretation of infinity's conception as anti-rational, theistically mandated, and

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[91] "Levinas and Heidegger," 228.

[92] "Levinas and Heidegger," 228-9. These two sources were "revealed" to Wolin, with no small amount of retrospective irony on our interpretation, "in conversation" with Levinas (228).

[93] Ibid., 229.

[94] Ibid., 228.

"superior" to the worldly concerns of totality and theoretical reason, whose alleged "misdeeds" we documented above, moreover. Many salient features of what Levinas means by "infinity" on this reading (the "Other's resistance to the same," "transcendence," "alterity," etc.), when coupled with totality's allegedly "pernicious" essence, lead Wolin to imply a causal connection between Levinas's "pre-philosophical" influences and the actual philosophical text of his middle period. Levinas would thereby appear to have been determined to supplant worldly totality while "totalizingly" replacing it in favor of divinely mandated infinity. "Thus the animating antithesis of his work: totality *versus* infinity."[95]

One could (perhaps naively) retort, for instance, that Levinas kept his "philosophical" writings separate from his "religious" writings, (for instance, Levinas went so far as to have separate publishers), and hence that Wolin's theological interpretation of infinity is misplaced. Should one not rather look for a reification of biblical themes exclusively in Levinas's "religious" writings? Did not Levinas emphasize, on many occasions in his middle period, that his philosophy is not theologically driven? Wolin briefly entertains the possibility of an affirmative response, but his dismissal of such a possibility is equally brief, and rather disingenuously glib to boot. Its language reveals, furthermore, another important flaw in his critique of Levinas.

> Levinas always made a point of strictly separating his *copious* religious musings from his *narrow* philosophical writings. As an heir to the phenomenological tradition, he knew his ethical doctrines must bring demonstrable evidence to bear on their subject matter. *For all that*, when one *steps back to survey his philosophical project at distance*, there can be no doubt that one of its central leitmotifs *concerns the attempt to play off* "Athens versus Jerusalem"—a contrast that, in his work, far redounds to Jerusalem's credit. (229, emphasis mine)

[95] Wolin, 230.

Here, again, we see a specious argumentative strategy that resembles other key passages in his polemic. The first sentence insinuates, by playing off the contextually vague adjectives "copious" and "narrow," that Levinas was more involved with "religious musings" than with philosophy. The second sentence rightly elucidates, however, an *important standard* by which one should judge a philosopher's work; yet, as soon as it is stated, we see a return to the pattern of specious argumentation: "For all that…at a distance…no doubt…central leitmotif…Jerusalem's credit." For "all what," one wonders, since there is little, if any, probing engagement in Wolin's essay with Levinas's phenomenology and argumentation? So, instead of appropriately stepping in to the realm of "demonstrable evidence," there is rather a "step back" that mercurially changes the issue from "demonstrable evidence" to "central leitmotifs." We see immediately thereafter a clever attempt to fuse "Totality versus Infinity" with "Athens versus Jerusalem," which, moreover, "far redounds to Jerusalem's credit."

An important feature of Wolin's argument, then, is that Levinas's "pre-philosophical" religious influences caused him to formulate a "totalizing" critique of philosophy that is faithfully reflected in such works as *Totality and Infinity*. A further and importantly related feature is that the very notions of "totality" and "infinity" are fundamentally informed by these same influences. One of the strategy's main shortcomings, however, is precisely the dearth of serious engagement with Levinas's *actual* philosophical and phenomenological arguments (and therefore "demonstrable evidence") that patently exist within the *same* Levinasian text that Wolin critiques. Had he considered *Totality and Infinity* beyond his own "narrow" pre-philosophical confines,

Wolin might not have written so "copiously" on Levinas's allegedly over-determining quasi-philosophical formation.

The real issue in critiquing *Totality and Infinity*, however, is not whether, or to what extent, Levinas kept his "philosophy" and "religion" separate, but what the bulk of *Totality and Infinity* has to say—be it philosophical, theological, or otherwise. To this extent, Wolin caustically criticizes this very work yet only obliquely engages it. For there is only one direct consideration of Levinas's *magnum opus* proper (aside from the above citation, which was drawn, rather awkwardly, from the Preface) and it concerns a critique of Levinas's "politics," which does not directly relate to totality and infinity.[96]

When we consult *Totality and Infinity*, however (including but also beyond its prophetically cryptic and dense Preface) we find a challengingly rewarding phenomenological account of the human situation. As we have seen above, the text itself is replete with interesting and provocative phenomenological claims. Moreover, the text's chief philosophical ambition—a critique of the *pure* primacy of totality, coupled with a reification of an infinity aspect that informs a totalizing perspective—can be extracted from numerous passages. We have seen elements of this ambition when we analyzed important, and distinctly Levinasian, interpersonal phenomenological accounts of conversation, teaching, and erotic relations.

Levinas's only real totalizing target, in Wolin's sense, is history considered as a scientific discipline (*T&I*, 22, 40, 55). Levinas's dispute with a historical perspective is not necessarily the discipline as such, but rather the "unforeseeable" that a historical

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[96] "Politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself" (*T&I 300*, Wolin 243). This quote seems like a truism, especially if one accentuates the "left to itself" aspect, but at any rate, this aspect of Wolin's critique of Levinas goes beyond the bounds of our present inquiry into totality and infinity.

perspective necessarily misses by way of the limited data and perspective available.[97] This, when coupled with a vain stance that confuses a necessarily limited historical scope with 'everything that happened,' is the true object of Levinas's critique.

The following two passages reflect Levinas's precise thoughts (in *Totality and Infinity*) on the relationship between totality and history. They evoke a rather poignant meditation on the connection between death, survival, and the irreparable loss that humanity incurs when we try to reckon with the dead from a purely totalizing (or perhaps any) perspective. On the one hand, he thinks that "only history" could "accomplish" a pernicious strain of pure totalization, but in fact, and as the second passage conveys, history, like any other interpersonal perspective, always misses importantly human features of reality from a purely totalizing perspective, and thus such a perspective is incomplete.

> Totalization is accomplished only in history—in the history of the historiographers, that is, among the survivors. It rests on the affirmation and the conviction that the chronological order of history of the historians outlines the plot of being in itself, analogous to nature. The time of universal history remains as the ontological ground in which particular existences are lost, are computed, and in which at least their essences are recapitulated. (55)

> But to say that the other can remain absolutely other, that he enters only into the relationship of conversation, is to say that *history* itself, an identification of the same, *cannot* claim to totalize the same and the other. The absolutely other, whose alterity is overcome in the philosophy of immanence on the allegedly common plane of history, maintains his transcendence in the midst of history. (40, emphasis mine)

Levinas's thoughts on the totalizing perspective of the "history of the historiographers," when coupled with his thoughts on the limitation of such a perspective, simply maintains his phenomenological and hermeneutic bivalence that our interpretation is elucidating. It

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[97] Hence his early, and lasting, preoccupation with the subject in "Unforeseen History" (1938).

does not, then, entail a conclusion that history should be outlawed or jettisoned in favor of some radical alternative. It states, rather, that a certain historical perspective is simply incomplete by virtue of the Other's undocumented contributions to various selves and epochs that never made the "historical" cut—whether because of ignorance, lack of access, or simply limited means and an arbitrary perspective on the part of the historiographers. It is important to note, furthermore, that Levinas's language on the relationship between history, totality, and infinity is the closest to fulfilling Wolin's general claim that "infinity" would replace "totality"; yet even in the starkest apparent condemnation of "totality" in Levinas's actual text, this is not the case.

When we carefully examine the rich language of *Totality and Infinity* we see, further, that Levinas originally understands totality and infinity as two distinct and essential phenomenological perspectives that we can adopt in our engagement with the world. Hence it is simply inaccurate to conclude, as Wolin does, that Levinas's philosophical intention is to somehow eradicate the totality aspect so as to "totalizingly" replace it with the infinity aspect. As we saw above, as well as just now in the most marginal of cases, Levinas's intention is to show how both totality and infinity inform our world.

To recapitulate, Wolin's polemic fails to be persuasive precisely because it mischaracterizes important aspects of Levinas's thought, and thereby makes false and or tendentious conclusions about that same thought. The reasoning used is often specious and fallacious, then, to the extent that it relies on a fallacy of composition. It uses loaded and disingenuous language, moreover, in an attempt to deflate one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. His polemic hyperbolically inflates certain aspects of

Levinas's intellectual pedigree to the philosophical deflation of important others. Lastly, the polemic remains glib in the sense that it actually employs minimal philosophical engagement with a philosophical text that it maximally attempts to criticize.

A Levinasian Remedy against other Harmful Supplements: Badiou

One important feature of Wolin's inaccurate critique of *Totality and Infinity* aims, as we saw, at "supplementing" Levinas's philosophical terms and sources with other notions whose origins largely stem from *outside* the text itself. These supplements prematurely kill-off, or simply ignore, resources *within* the text that resist such a critical and uncharitable reading—as such, the alleged necessity and importation of these supplements are tendentious at best, or they simply rest on an inaccurate reading of Levinas. In different terms, the arbitrary importation of such external supplements needlessly supplants a more salubriously accurate reading that should be extracted from the text. The counter claim, then, is that such "quasi-philosophical supplements" attempt an external critique of the work without sufficiently examining the textually internal argument, which, however, can be construed to resist these supplements.

Badiou's critique of Levinas, in his (2001) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, importantly relies on the importation of such a quasi-philosophical supplement. His critique, generally speaking, is at once subtle, curt, and potentially devastating to Levinas's *ethical* ambition of grounding certain pre-predicative moral claims upon the Other. The critique *superficially* resembles Wolin's, moreover, because it argues that Levinas's ethical claims ultimately need recourse to the dubious supplement of an "ineffable God," who could only be "accessed" in some kind of "infinite devotion" (read: quasi-mystical experience), rather than phenomenologically accessed through the Other's

ontological guarantee. We make the case that Levinas's phenomenological ambitions remain largely untouched by his critique, however, and in this vein our interpretation of the totality-infinity structure anticipates the next chapter's attempt to bolster the cogency of that which Levinas means by "ethics" and the "Other." For we shall see that Levinas does, indeed, have a more robust ontological argument for the "ethical primacy of the Other" than Badiou and others would acknowledge.

Before we get into the substance of Badiou's specific critique of Levinas, it is important to point out that some of his key assumptions about the human being actually map on to the infinity aspect of the Levinasian structure that we detailed above. We shall show, then, that Badiou and Levinas are far closer than the former would admit, and so part of our strategy will be to turn Badiou's weapons against himself, as it were; that is, against his own critique of Levinas. It must be asserted, though, that his *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil* is admittedly an excellent and provocative work in general; our intention, accordingly, is not to downplay its significance as a whole, but rather to merely point out that certain aspects of his Levinasian critique rest on the quasi-philosophical supplement strategy, as well as a lack of proper context concerning what Levinas means by totality and infinity.[98]

Leading up to his critique of Levinas, Badiou heavily criticizes the "contemporary ethical" idea that relegates the human being to the status of "*the being who is capable of*

[98] Badiou's curt critique of what he takes to be the bleak state of "contemporary ethical thought" could also provide the necessary intellectual space in which to rethink the Levinasian agent and her transformative capacities. So, although I am heavily critical of Badiou's misreading of Levinas, I also think that his work helps one to get to the root of a rethinking of "ethics" wherein my interpretation of the Levinasian agent could flourish. As we see below, Badiou's transcendent ethical agent is (unwittingly) much closer to Levinas's than he himself would acknowledge.

recognizing himself as a victim."[99] His critique, in a nutshell, unearths the "contemptible" and negative ground that such a description indicates about humanity. He aims to show, accordingly, that this description actually *extols* the predictably animal and calculably fragile aspect of humanity to the *detriment* of what he calls "the immortal singularity" of humanity.[100] This singularly "immortal" character of human being importantly conditions humanity's worth in Badiou's eyes, however, because it conditions the possibility to negate the status of, for example, mere animality and victimhood, as well as the possibility to *positively* "break radically with what is," that is, to singularly transcend the actual by virtue of "working towards the realization of unknown possibilities."[101]

Badiou illustrates an example of such worthy transcendence when he (rather boldly) juxtaposes the generally animalistic status of human torture victims with the marginal and exemplary human effort to *resist* the status of "victim" or "animal" in such situations. The latter capacity indicates, on his analysis, that the *humanity* of the person can be reified "through an enormous effort" of "almost incomprehensible resistance" that shows the person to be "*something other than a mortal being*."[102] Badiou goes on to qualify this "something other" as "an immortal," and he claims, furthermore, that, "in order to think any aspect of Man, we must *begin* from this principle."[103]

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[99] Badiou, 10 (emphasis in the original).

[100] Badiou's claim is clearly not that we 'live forever' or some such, but rather that a person can, e.g., "run counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him" (12). Presumably Badiou means, as we make more explicit, that the human being is capable of embodying a radically singular transcendence as against his or her "ordinarily" determining and limiting circumstances. Badiou is quite close to Descartes in his description of this distinctively human capacity, moreover, for he writes that the "starting point" of "being an immortal" "can be summarized, very simply, as the assertion that Man *thinks*, that Man is a tissue of truths" (12).

[101] Ibid., 14.

[102] Emphasis in the original.

[103] Ibid., 11-2. Emphasis mine.

Badiou thereby paints the human ethical condition through two distinct perspectives. One perspective—"the immortal"—conditions the worth and transcendent possibilities of the human as such, that is, it is "sustained by the *incalculable* and the un-possessed…by non-being [*non-étant*]."[104] The other perspective—e.g.,"the animal" or "the potential victim"—represents a kind of fixed generalization of the biologically human type, or, a normalizing, but ideally-to-be-transcended (or negated) aspect of humanity.[105] His claim clearly extends to a description of humanity as such, and so not merely to this or that particular case.

> And we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal—unpredictably, be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary. In each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes Man. Beyond this there is only a biological species, a 'biped without feathers,' whose charms are not obvious. (12)

The rather vague relationship between "subjectivation" and "immortal" is immediately qualified, moreover, with "the assertion that Man *thinks*, that Man is a tissue of truths" (12).

It is remarkable to note at this point that Badiou's description of the positive and worthy human agent *strongly* and *relevantly* resembles the infinity aspect of the Levinasian perspective we described above in our elucidation of the totality-infinity structure. We note, in abstract, the essential aspect of humanity that Badiou basically characterizes as: transcendent and resistant; incalculable and unpredictable; having the capacity to negate the normal and actual through resistance or surprise; "immortal" and marked by "non-being," and hence of a different register than a totalizing perspective

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[104] Ibid., 14. Emphasis mine

[105] The "ethical" framework that he critiques furthermore "equates man with a simple mortal animal…and—because of its abstract, statistical generality—it prevents us from thinking the singularity of situations" (16).

could account for; a singular and thinking "tissue of truths," and so a robust subject who is individuated through its unique thinking economy; lastly, a being who can precisely transcend the normal or actual by externalizing these singular truths. The elements of this aspect are opposed, moreover, to aspects that are "abstract," "statistically general," and rooted in an immanently predictable biological and theoretical understanding of humanity.

We also note that the phenomenological description we considered several pages ago neatly corresponds with Badiou's assumptions about the ethical worth of humanity; namely, Levinas's description of a case of murder and heroic resistance. For we saw, on the one hand, the prospect of reducing the other person to a contemptible "quasi-nothing" whose description remained at the purely biological level ("piercing of the ventricles," etc.). We importantly saw, on the other hand, the would-be victim's capacity to negate or transcend such a conception through his "struggle," that is, his distinctive ability to "surprise" and disrupt the purely immanent consideration of the same person as victim or body. Such a capacity for "struggle," which Levinas takes pains to distinguish from the biological order of things, moreover, importantly conditions an aspect of the ethical meaning of the situation.

In our analyses of conversation, teaching, and erotic relations we also detailed the Levinasian articulation of the infinity aspect, wherein the reification of a singularly human stance that resists or negates a pre-comprehended or theoretical grasp makes up an important feature of these descriptions. Levinas's interpersonal infinity is hence quite close to Badiou's "positive" and worthy characterization of the human as such.

To be precise, it is *not* our contention that Badiou "clandestinely" articulates a dual-aspect interpersonal phenomenology that would be homologous to Levinas's. It *is* our contention, however, that the worthy or positive aspect of humanity to which Badiou appeals relevantly resembles Levinas's infinity aspect. Hence, that which Levinas articulates as a foundational phenomenological and ethical structure of the human situation is relevantly coextensive with (at least many of) Badiou's assumptions about a positive account of human ethics.[106] Our further claim, then, is that Levinas's phenomenology would actually lend *support* to Badiou's situation of the human ethical type, and so in an important sense Levinas's phenomenology may stand or fall with Badiou's assumptions about humanity. We shall also see that one can readily extract an ontological framework from *Totality and Infinity* that serves to deflate Badiou's major criticism of Levinas, which now leads us to Badiou's actual critique.

Badiou argues that Levinas's phenomenology is *insufficient* to support the thesis that the Other necessarily informs and grounds the self in meaningful ways. Badiou claims, for instance, that the "phenomenological analyses of the face, of the caress, of love, cannot by themselves ground the anti-ontological (or anti-identitarian) thesis of the author of *Totality and Infinity*" (21).[107] One of Badiou's insights is that, for all one knows, even Levinas's Other "resembles [the self] too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true" (22).

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[106] A positive account, that is, as opposed to the negative account that Badiou (and Levinas) critique as too immanent, normalizing, calculable, purely victimizing, ignorant of transcendence, etc.

[107] It is *not* our contention, as next chapter's work makes explicit, that Levinas attempts to ground an "anti-ontological" thesis in *Totality and Infinity*. Hence we will simply be dealing with Badiou's (more accurate) claim about the "anti-identitarian" thesis.

Badiou further argues that without a *phenomenological* or *ontological* "principle of radical alterity" that "guarantees" that the other is not a feature of the self's "mimetic" construction, then Levinas ultimately needs recourse to some other necessary guarantee of "infinite" alterity, which Levinas sometimes calls the "Altogether Other." Badiou claims, moreover, that the only other candidate for a finite self's sanction of alterity, aside from the (now-eliminated) radical alterity of the real other person, is "God the ineffable." This recourse is, of course, stillborn because such a makeshift source of alterity, far from founding a philosophically original "ethics" in Levinas's sense of the term, actually leaves us with a "pious discourse without piety," that is, a pseudo-philosophical account that masks its fundamentally "religious character" (23). So, instead of guaranteeing access to the Other as an originary and fundamental experience, which would make Levinas's philosophy authentically committed to truth and experience, Levinas, in fact, leaves us arbitrarily substituting "God" into this alleged void.

To elaborate upon the claim that Levinas's phenomenology is insufficient to prove his "anti-identitarian" thesis, Badiou rather charitably states that such an objection is "fairly superficial" at first glance. This is because *even though* one could appeal, against the grain of Levinasian ethics, to cases of the self's interaction with other people that *purely mask* the self's "narcissism" or "aggressivity," we are nonetheless "a very long way from what Lévinas wants to tell us" (21). Badiou's insightful point is that if one is to *radically* critique Levinas's ethics, one should not merely point to possible interpersonal cases that attest to purely "selfish" situations, as opposed to those that attest to meaningful contributions from the other person as an independent reality. One should, rather, "make explicit the axioms of thought that *decide* an orientation" of whether "the

experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance, or of an essential non-identity, the traversal of which is the ethical experience itself" (21-2).

To this extent, Badiou's critique has a two-fold agenda. His more explicit task is to debunk the very ethicality of the ethical in *Totality and Infinity*, which most Levinasians take as essential to the guiding intention of the work itself, namely, an *ethical* defense of such claims as "ethics is first philosophy." Such a defense leads many Levinasians to claim, for example, that the Other (actually) has a pre-predicative moral claim upon the self, or perhaps the more sweeping idea that the everyday meaning of "ethics" as such needs a complete overhaul *because* of what Levinas articulates. In these senses, at least, Badiou's aim is to show that these aspects of Levinas's thought amounts to the failed attempt par excellence to ground "philosophy in religion."

Badiou's less explicit task, which is connected to the first, is to deflate the *ontological* relevance of Levinas's phenomenology. If Badiou can show that Levinas's claim to ontologically "guarantee" the Other's "infinite" distance in the *other person* is not as secure as Levinas thinks it to be, then he can try to account for what Levinas "really" needs to provide such a guarantee. Badiou does, of course, claim that "nothing in the simple phenomenon of the other contains such a guarantee" because "the finitude of the other's appearing certainly *can* be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus leads back to the logic of the same" (22). He follows up with the claim that since the other person allegedly cannot provide such a guarantee, then Levinas really needs to incorporate the quasi-mystical infinite "alterity" of God as such a sanction. Such a move, of course, relegates Levinas's Other to the status of a "religious" experience, and is hence not of the order of "demonstrable evidences."

As the next chapter's work makes more explicit, however, Levinas does have a philosophically ontological argument of the sort Badiou is looking for *within the text*. Its articulation shall encompass the majority of the next chapter, and only then shall we be in a position to respond to the full scope of Badiou's critique. Our response, by way of anticipation, will show two overlooked ontological considerations that Badiou does not consider (that is to say, two ontological considerations of the Other that are different in kind from the generic other person, and the Judeo-Christian God). Both considerations show that Badiou does not consider the dynamic interplay of totality and infinity in Levinas's phenomenology, that he does not see the full ontological scope of the Other, and, hence, they show that his critique does not sufficiently probe the actual resources of the text that he maximally criticizes.

Chapter 3:

Levinas's Conditions—"A field of research hardly glimpsed at…"

Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers. Everything we know and are is through men.
William James[108]

The Problem

Many Levinas commentators argue that *Totality and Infinity's* argumentative structure is deficient because it merely "argues by assertion," or because it merely relies upon "quasi-philosophical" argumentation. Other commentators add that it is a mistake to attribute a novel metaphysical and ontological dimension to Levinas's thought, because such an attribution allegedly does hermeneutic "violence" to the Levinasian agent's perspective.

The Projected Resolution

I argue that Levinas does employ a rigorous argumentative strategy in *Totality and Infinity*, and, further, that this same strategy commits him to a robust metaphysical and ontological framework. The argumentative strategy is best understood as elucidating several essential ontological and transcendental structures that show how "infinity conditions totality," which also reflects that which Levinas calls "transcendental conditions" in his later work. Levinas uses these conditions to exhibit an interhuman standard of intelligibility with which egological and theoretical activities are symbiotic, and they reflect a preobjective domain of experience that is not experienced as such, but that informs or organizes certain types of experience. We shall see that Levinas is a traditional metaphysician and ontologist in certain respects, as well as a novel one in others, as his reappropriation of, and departure from, Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and others suggests.

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[108] James, William. Letter to Thomas W. Ward, 1868. In *The Letters of William James*. Henry James (ed.). Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press (1920): 123.

The Importance of the Notion of "Infinity Conditioning Totality"

Levinas's "conditions" refer to the way that infinity "conditions" totality, which is arguably the most crucial and sustained philosophical idea in *Totality and Infinity.*[109] By his "conditions," I mean the conditioning interhuman structures of being that are posited or implied in his account of "totality" and "infinity." My chief ambition in this chapter is to make *Totality and Infinity's* general argumentative structure explicit, and this is important, first, because Levinas's arguments are usually implicitly expressed. Second, commentators such as Moran, Lyotard, and Wolin claim that there is essentially no philosophical argument in *Totality and Infinity*.

My second, but related, goal is to demonstrate how infinity serves to "condition" totality in the sense of a *limit* that both disrupts *and* informs totality's activity. I describe this informative and limiting "breaking up," as Levinas calls it, in terms of a process through which one should situate the conditioning rapport between totality and infinity. I thus develop a perspective wherein infinity and totality are essentially intertwined, and this perspective shows that infinity and totality are two sides of a metaphysical coin, as it were.[110]

Levinas generally neglects to *explicitly* indicate the argumentative structures that inform his work, however, and this neglect includes the way that infinity conditions totality, as well as the various senses of "the Other" that he uses when he describes

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[109] In the preface, Levinas describes one of the work's chief ambitions as the elucidation of the procedure from "the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity" (24-5). We shall examine the particulars of this claim in great detail below.

[110] My argument will require, as the previous chapter similarly argued, that we interpret totality and infinity as essentially complementary, and as working in tandem. Totality and infinity are therefore not opposed in an eliminative or preferential sense, and we critiqued these kinds of erroneous interpretations in the last chapter when we considered Wolin's and Hutchens' interpretations.

infinity's relationship with totality. He is utterly derisive, moreover, of the importance of making one's philosophical method transparent. This lack of explicit argumentation, especially when coupled with his contempt for methodological clarity, helps to explain why many commentators attribute a dearth of systematicity and coherence to his philosophy. I show, however, that there is a rigorous and sustained argumentative strategy in his *magnum opus*, and the exposition of the ways in which "infinity conditions totality" opens the door to a clear appreciation of this strategy. I therefore argue that to appreciate Levinas's argumentative rigor is to appreciate an accurately nuanced relationship between totality and infinity.

If one adopts the proper perspective and recontextualization of Levinas's work, one sees distinct ontological and phenomenological arguments that are otherwise not salient in *Totality and Infinity*. The phenomenological study conducted within the second chapter of my dissertation gives us a proper perspective, because it shows examples of the relationship between "infinity" and "totality" in interpersonal situations like conversation, teaching and learning, and erotic relations. It also provides us with distinguishing features of the rapport between totality and infinity, and these features are pivotal for a clear appreciation of the ways in which infinity conditions totality.

When I critique the interpretations of "totality" and "infinity" that one finds with commentators like Wolin and Hutchens, my point is to show that Levinas's two most crucial notions ought to be understood as working in a tandem way that completes the existential potential of situations like conversation, for example. Hence, they should not be understood as essentially opposed in an eliminative sense, because when one understands "totality" and "infinity" in this erroneous way it leads to errant and or

tendentious conclusions, as we saw explicitly with Wolin. I thus present concrete examples of how totality and infinity dynamically, and interdependently, relate in specific face-to-face situations whose existential scope is realized by a consideration of both the totality and infinity aspects.

In this chapter, our goal is to clarify the relationship between the way that infinity both limits and informs totality in interpersonal situations. We will also see the case for how totality and infinity relate in a general, broader context that explicates the relationship between them in such important contexts as: politics, history, economics, and education, to name some examples.

I shall outline the general argumentative structure that underlies the phenomenological study of the previous chapter in order to explicate the implicit arguments that inform how an "infinity conditions a totality." I shall also develop a different, but related sense of the "Other" that is phenomenologically distinct from the Other considered previously, wherein the Other was described from an interlocutory perspective. In addition to the self's relation to the Other as a "you," then, we see a related sense of the Other that refers to the third person perspective—that is, the Other as a "he," "she," or "they." The way that Levinas uses this sense of the "Other" informs his general strategy because it is often a premise in his phenomenological arguments that show how infinity can condition totality in a way that extends beyond interlocutory or "dialogical" relationships. By way of anticipatory indication, this sense of the Other refers to a genealogical notion of the Other that Levinas's uses to indicate a preobjective domain of experience that can meaningfully alter the self's perspective on a given datum or ontic consideration.

We will explicitly see the case for this different sense of the Other, as well as for the related notion of an "infinity conditioning a totality." It is important to tersely recapitulate the senses of "totality," "infinity," and "the Other" that we have considered hitherto, because these notions hang together with the general, broader interpretation in this chapter. They hang together because the previous chapter's analysis of "totality" and "infinity" represents particular cases of the general strategy that informs the whole of *Totality and Infinity*. These particular cases all refer to the experience of the way that a person's understanding can be changed or altered by a source or agency that one does not lucidly assume or anticipate. This other-regarding agency can be related to the person whom one faces (in the infinity aspect of the self's experience) or it can be the Other considered as a transcendental genealogical influence upon the self's perspective and understanding. In the latter case, Levinas uses a different sense of the Other than one's interlocutor, and hence it is important to clarify this different sense, which is our task in Chapter 3, The Preobjective Other Considered Genealogically, and as a Third Person.

There is an important connection, however, between the Other considered as one's interlocutor and the Other considered in a third person sense. In both cases, Levinas's arguments and descriptions are designed to show how the Other's infinity ontologically informs, or conditions, what he means be "totality." When we will have clarified the relationship between the various ways that the Other's infinity informs the self's possibilities as a totality, we will have thereby clarified his most robust, if implicitly stated, argumentative strategy.[111] Our chief goal is to further elucidate a rapport between

[111] Briefly stated, the Other enables the self to see the world as informed and contested by others, and thus the world no longer simply appears as a precomprehended structure of *egological* intelligibility; which also means, in a broader sense of the Other, that the Other enables the self to see the world in normatively

totality and infinity that deepens their ontological interrelation. In order to elucidate the rapport between the two key notions, it is useful to recapitulate some of the analyses of the last chapter that pertain to the dynamic interplay between totality and infinity.

I have presented an interpretation wherein infinity represents a surprising, fluid, and repellent *limit* to what one's cognitive powers cannot fully comprehend, and totality ensures a conceptual, stable, and assertive *grasp* with which one organizes, and hence stably appropriates, the world. When these two aspects are seen as essentially intertwined in a feedback loop of sorts, they thereby signal the most robust argumentative structure within Levinas's central work.

This dynamic totality-infinity structure informed our analysis of Levinas's interpersonal phenomenology in chapter 2, whose chief task is to show that totality and infinity should be understood as essentially symbiotic. We have accordingly seen that it is simply misguided to claim, as Richard Wolin claims, for instance, that totality and infinity are caustically opposed in the eliminative sense of "Totality *versus* Infinity."[112] The full scope of Levinas's conditioning interhuman structures of being could not be rigorously expressed, however, because these conditions presuppose a broader sense of the Other, as well as a broader idea of the ways that infinity conditions totality. These broader notions relate to a genealogical understanding of the Other as a conditioning fundament of Levinas's ontology of the self and its capacities.[113]

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evaluative ways that derive from others. In this last way, the self's perspective opens up to evaluative and moral considerations that were not hitherto salient to the same self's worldview. This latter understanding of the Other is explored in Chapter 3, The Preobjective Other Considered Genealogically, and as a Third Person.

[112] Richard Wolin. "Levinas and Heidegger," 230.

[113] Levinas's genealogical understanding of the Other is thus formally analogous to the opening citation from William James, because it represents Levinas's articulation of an ontological debt to other people

So far, we have advanced a tandem and coequal understanding of "totality" and "infinity" in face-to-face situations such as conversation, teaching and learning, and erotic relations. In each case, the description shows two distinct perspectives or stances that a person can adopt when s/he phenomenologically considers another person in "real time," as it were, or simply in actual, two person relations. The other person in this sense can be appreciated in the totality aspect, on the one hand, and in the infinity aspect, on the other.

In the totality aspect, the self or agent lucidly grasps the other person in such a way that the agent precomprehends, and assimilates, the other person as an extension of the agent's intelligible nature. In different terms, the self in this phenomenological aspect asserts a rigid perspective on the other person that assimilates him or her to a fixed representation. In the infinity aspect, by contrast, the other person exhibits an agency against the backdrop of which the self finds itself responsively dislocated, disrupted, or simply receptive to a source of human "alterity" with which it cannot clearly identify.[114] That is, the self is *altered* or "significantly overwhelmed," as Levinas puts it, by the "Other's infinity" or "alterity" precisely in proportion to the meaningful shock it receives in such interpersonal activities as conversation, teaching, and erotic relations, for example.

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upon which the self relies, at least in part, for one's ability to learn, reflect, see the world, and, eventually, understand that the world is composed of intersubjective and normative standards. In Levinas's case, the genealogy appeals to one's cultural and intellectual predecessors who can be appealed to as a condition of the self's current capacities, which include standards of right and wrong, and evaluations like "good" and "bad."

[114] Hilary Putnam aptly describes this presence of the Other as the "encounter with a fissure, with a being who breaks my categories" ("Levinas and Judaism," 42). Putnam does not read a bivalence into the description, however, which leads him to assert that the Other's "reality proves its own existence by the very fact that its presence in my mind turns out to be a phenomenological impossibility" (42). That is, rather then reading two equally important, but simultaneously incompatible, descriptions into the appreciation of the Other, he reads the Other as *purely* incommensurable with the self's experience.

My interpretation of the totality-infinity structure thus reflects a balance of, or feedback loop between, the self's moments of representational clarity and assertion, on the one hand, and the self's moments of unforeseen receptivity to a personal agency who can meaningfully shock and inform the self, on the other hand. I have argued that these two phenomenological aspects are not simultaneously compatible from the agent perspective, but they are, however, equally necessary to complete the existential structure of the interpersonal situation in question; hence, rather than compete with each other in an eliminative sense, the two aspects instead balance and complete each other. Additionally, I make the deeper claim that either of these aspects can transpire at any given time within the interpersonal situation in question, and that the aspect that counts as relevant depends (in large part) upon the agent's phenomenological attunement to either the totality, or infinity, aspect.

So, the Levinasian totality aspect requires a fixed conception of reality that precomprehends its objects, and in doing so it determines which features are to count as salient ahead of time. Objects (and people considered objectively) considered in this aspect seem to "offer no resistance" to the self's perspective on them.[115] Following our Gestalt switch interpretation of the totality-infinity structure, however, the same person can also be attuned to a different aspect that relates to the same situation in question. This aspect is attuned to the margins of interpersonal experience that resist our grasp, or that are seen in their elusive aspect. A person (in the infinity aspect) is "on his heels," as it were, when he is meaningfully shocked, informed, or simply altered by his interlocutor, partner, or teacher. In other words, the infinity aspect evinces the appreciation of an

[115] This, as we saw in the last chapter, is clearly not a value-laden or moral "resistance," but rather a phenomenological resistance that is precisely attuned to the aspect in question.

activity that is of a different register than the self's lucid, totalizing circuit of control and stability, which is why Levinas takes pains to emphasize the "surprising," "overwhelming," or simply *novel* character of the Other's contribution to the self in this regard.

The second chapter has thus argued that the totality and infinity aspects are interrelated within the subject's experience, and that their tandem activity fulfills the existential potential of situations like erotic relations, conversation, and teaching. I refer to this structure as "ambivalent" (or "bivalent," in an importantly qualified sense of interdependence and not utter exclusivity) then, precisely because the agent can adopt both perspectives on the interpersonal situation in question, and because both aspects of totality and infinity are needed to complete the full description of the interpersonal situation in question. In other words, the totality-infinity structure literally entails two relevant ways to interpret the same situation within the same agent's experience; this is the reason for my use of the terms "ambivalent" or "symbiotic," and this is also the reason why the "Gestalt switch" analogy is useful.

Hence, the ambivalent application of the totality-infinity structure completes the description in question, and we saw evidence for this interpretation when we analyzed Levinas's descriptions of conversation, teaching, love, and even murder (see Chapter 2, Conversation, Teaching and Learning, and Eros and the Caress). Someone who would experience only the totality aspect in an interpersonal situation, or only the infinity aspect, would *miss out on* the deeper potential of the situation, whereas a consideration of both aspects helps to imbue the interpersonal description with a fuller, more authentic

range of significance that faithfully reflects a robust notion of, say, conversation, teaching, and even homicide and heroic resistance.[116]

Our consideration of the Levinasian structure of conversation, as an example, reveals a bivalent interpretation of how the Other's "face" can be a transcendent activity, on the one hand, which "undoes the form it presents at each instant" and thereby leaves the self passive to an unpredictable activity that he cannot lucidly manipulate or precomprehend (*T&I* 66). The Other's face, on the other hand, can simply be the static representation of the other person's visage and words that the self clearly sees. In this aspect, the "other can indeed present himself as a theme," that is, the other person can be appreciated as simply a reflection of the agent's thematic comprehension (195).

An accurate perspective of the interplay between totality and infinity dispels the apparently paradoxical character of many of Levinas's claims about the agent's perspective, moreover. When he asserts that "the essential of language" is "the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face," we should read this "coincidence" as a feature of his phenomenology, wherein one can appreciate a revelatory, independent activity at work, from one perspective, as well as a clearly seen "revealed" state of affairs,

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[116] In different terms than those used in Chapter 2, "Totality" and "Infinity": Passing the Torch from Descartes to Levinas, Conversation, and Teaching and Learning, we can illustrate the tandem and bivalent importance of totality and infinity with the following example. In the structure of conversation, for instance, someone who adopts a purely totalizing perspective would miss important contributions of meaning from his or her interlocutor. A purely totalizing perspective in this case would really turn the "conversation" into the self's monologue, as it were. In other words, this perspective would amount to an autistic or a narcissistic assessment of the "conversation"; one's interlocutor would not really be heard and appreciated as an independent reality who is capable of surprising and teaching the self, and, instead, the self would simply assimilate what it "wants to hear." Someone who only adopted the infinity aspect during a conversation would, conversely, be conceptually blind to the important moments of necessary recapitulation, lucid critique, and clear assessment of what is being said. If one could adopt a pure infinity aspect on a conversation, it would perhaps amount to being an interlocutory "sponge," as it were, since the lack of self-assertion and assimilation would leave the self purely passive and hence unable to assertively *contribute* to the conversation.

from another perspective. The former attunement to the other person reflects the infinity aspect because the self is receptive to an activity that orchestrates the meaning of the situation wherein the self finds itself responsive and disrupted. The latter attunement reflects, however, the way that the self also needs a clear and static representation of the other person in order to maintain a conversation. It thus reflects the totality aspect insofar as it needs a modicum of assertive thematization and representational stability.

We can see further support for this dual reading in the following passage, which suggests a sense in which the Other is both utterly resistant to the self's comprehension, as well as importantly related to the self's own intelligible (and totalizing) nature.

> The relation with the face, with the other absolutely other which I can not contain, the other in this sense *infinite*, is nonetheless *my* Idea, a commerce. (197, emphasis mine)

Levinas's thoughts on the ontological structure of language can appear to be either inconsistent or paradoxical, however, but what he means (on my interpretation) is that there are two ways to read the situation, and that an appreciation of *both* the totality and infinity aspect is essential to describe the interlocutory relation.

> Language is a relation between *separated terms*. To the one the other can indeed present himself as a theme. The word that bears on the Other as a theme seems to *contain* the Other. *But already* it is said to the Other who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind the said…Speech cuts across vision. (195, emphasis mine)

Levinas arguably uses the lower case "other" in the second sentence because he refers to the other person in the totality aspect, that is, he refers to the other person as a projected "theme" that the self assertively casts upon the other, which *seems* "to contain the Other." In this aspect, the self views the other person as a static and comprehended entity *tout court*. But then (and ontologically "already") the perspective of totality breaks

up, and the Other "upsurges inevitably behind" that which is said and thematized; that is, the self experiences the aftershocks of an independent human activity that he can no longer "contain." In this aspect, the self recognizes that the Other has "quit" the self's circuit of clear appraisal and lucid organization of the Other, and in doing so he realizes that he does not fully see the other person—the self, instead, appreciates a surplus or fund of meaning that he did not anticipate, but with which he must now reckon.

So, in the totality aspect, the self has clear thematic "vision" of the other person and her utterances, yet in the infinity aspect, the Other's "speech cuts across" this clear vision, which serves to carve out a distance that is not merely spatial, but that is also a "distance" that indicates an activity that is of a different register than the self's.[117] Levinas's general, ontological claim that "language is a relation between separated terms" ought to be read with our bivalent consideration, wherein one of the terms evinces the totality aspect, and the other the infinity aspect. When we read his claims in this dual way, it helps to clarify the demarche of totality and infinity that Levinas employs in interpersonal situations.

> In discourse the divergence that *inevitably* opens between the Other as my *theme* and the Other as my interlocutor, *emancipated* from the theme that *seemed* a moment to hold him, forthwith *contests* the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor. (195, emphasis mine)

Such passages reflect the give-and-take between the totality aspect consideration that thematically "holds" or precomprehends the other person, and the infinity aspect consideration that "contests" such a tentative hold by disrupting or limiting the totality

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[117] "The presence of the Other, or expression…is heard as language, and thereby is effectuated exteriorly" (T&I 297). The thought here, on my interpretation, is that the other person is clearly *seen* in the totality aspect, which imposes a static and assertive grasp on the other person. But the Other is "heard" in the infinity aspect, which connotes a semantic "distance" from, and receptivity to, an agency that is not purely commensurable to the self's intelligibility.

aspect. It is crucial, however, that we see infinity's disruptive limitation as *informative*, and not merely "disruptive" as such.[118] Levinas's point in such passages is that the meaning of the situation is contested or disrupted in such a way that fosters a different perspective, or, that conditions the self's ability to truly *learn* something new. His point is not, as Wolin would have it, that "infinity" is to be championed so as to jettison "totality." Rather, Levinas's description is designed to show a meaningful limitation to the self's totalizing activity that reciprocally modifies the totality aspect itself. When one's asserted theme is "contested" by the Other, one has also thereby learned something new, which in turn serves to modify or "condition" the self's future possibilities of experience. The self's default theory of the world, in different terms, is importantly altered by a surplus that one did not assume, but with which one must now tarry.

A similar bivalent perspective emerges when we view Levinas's thoughts on "teaching," since they evince a tandem and conditioning relationship between infinity and totality. The phenomenological analysis of teaching shows the dynamic blend of lucid appropriation of content learned, on the one hand, and the novel, and initially disruptive, contribution from the Other's activity, on the other hand. Teaching thus involves a totalizing "thematization of phenomena" on the self's part, and, conjointly, it "is a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from myself" (*T&I* 99, 295). This latter aspect, which is distinct from the totality aspect, reveals a human activity that the self does not assume, as well as an activity that can

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[118] This is why Levinas emphasizes the difference between the way that the "elemental" alters the self, and the way that a person alters the self. In the former case, experiencing an earthquake, say, would indeed alter one's experience in unanticipated ways. But this sort of alteration has no clear semantic significance to it—the "agency" behind such activity "cannot speak," as Levinas puts it. When the self is altered by a person, however, the self "can be taught," that is, the self can appreciate the Other's novel language, criticism, or insight.

meaningfully "impart" the teaching to the self from a source that the self cannot clearly see; but this is also a source that the self can appreciate.[119]

The Levinasian structure of teaching requires, then, both aspects in order to complete the structure. That is, in this case, as well as in conversation and erotic relations, aspects of totality and infinity are both essential in the description of the structure in question, even though one cannot simultaneously "have" both perspectives. The deeper claim, moreover, is that *either* aspect is possible (at any given time) within the agent's experience, and, further, that the aspect that one adopts depends upon one's particular attunement.[120] Therefore, it is possible to see the same situation from two distinct perspectives that are simultaneously incompatible, in the analogous way that one can see both a "duck" and a "rabbit" in the Gestalt case.[121]

Levinasian totality and infinity ought to be interpreted in this way, both because this interpretation is faithful to his descriptions, and because it dispels the seemingly paradoxical language in which he couches the relationship between the totality and infinity aspect. He often characterizes the agent's experiential relationship of these two aspects as happening "at the same time," or as the "door" to them being "at the same time closed and open," to name some examples (*T&I* 149, 148). He also claims (just as paradoxically) that the relation between the same and the Other is "both present and still to come" (*T&I* 225). What he really means, however, is consistent with my bivalent,

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[119] "Teaching is not reducible to *maieutics*, it comes from the exterior and brings more than I can contain" (51).

[120] That is, one *can be* overwhelmed or surprised by the Other at any point in one's experience, and one can alternately adopt what Levinas takes to be the default totalizing attitude at any point in one's experience.

[121] Of course, the claim is not that one literally sees the Other, but that one "sees" that one does not see, or that one recognizes an agency that is incommensurable with the self's. In the totality aspect, however, one clearly sees the other person, albeit as a static and thematic entity.

Gestalt interpretation. In one kind of attunement, the phenomena reveal themselves in the "totality" aspect, and in another kind of attunement, the "infinity" aspect governs the structure. At any given moment, however, the one or the other can be salient.

It is important that we preserve a tandem and symbiotic relationship between totality and infinity, because this symbiosis is relevantly similar to the very idea of an "infinity conditioning a totality." This symbiosis reveals how totality and infinity work together in specific, two-person situations, and it gives an initial indication of how totality and infinity limit, and hence inform each other. I will pattern the general sense of totality and infinity on this model, and this pattern is not arbitrary because it faithfully reflects the dynamic between self and the Other that one finds in Levinas's oeuvre. This pattern also reflects his Cartesian heritage and subsequent reappropriation, since it begins with the self "as a totality," as *both* Descartes and Levinas put it, who then "discovers" the transcendental traces of the Other's "infinity."

One is in a better position to appreciate what Levinas means by the Other's infinity "conditioning" a totality when one reflects on the dynamic phenomenology of conversation, for instance. If we understand the self's perspective from the point of view of totality, and the Other's disruptive presence as a catalyst for the infinity aspect, then we provisionally see how the infinity aspect of the relation informs the totality aspect. That is, we "can proceed from the experience of totality" and then return:

> Back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity. (*T&I* 24-5)

I will clarify this pivotal passage in several ways throughout this chapter, but for now it is useful to give a general, preliminary indication of the way that the phenomenology of conversation informs this passage. The following illustration of potential conversations between two people reflects a sketch of the general phenomenology wherein infinity conditions totality, and it is a helpful glimpse of this "rigorously developed concept" that Levinas does *not*, however, rigorously develop in a *straightforward* way.

So, let us begin with the "experience of totality" with one of the interlocutors ("Jane"). We note that the salient features of Jane's perspective include a lucid and stable conception of what she is saying, and how she views the situation. In this aspect, Jane "knows" what the conversation is about; that is, she lucidly asserts her point of view and she explicitly or implicitly has a clear grasp of her interlocutor's ("Jim's") position. *But* suddenly Jim challenges her assertion, and his disruptive words force her to tarry with a different perspective wherein she is now reeling, or "caught off guard" as one says. She might now thereby think to herself that, "I never thought of it that way…"

Or, let us suppose that Jim laughs sardonically at the end of a story that Jane just recounted (whose conclusion *she* believes to be depressingly morbid, however). She might thereby ask herself: "But *how* can *he* laugh like that? I thought I knew him well enough for him to sympathize with me about the story." As with the above case, Jane's hitherto clear circuit of lucid and stable representation is now disrupted or altered—that is, her experience from a totalizing perspective has been "broken up" by the Other's "gleam of exteriority," which is tantamount to saying that something that Jane did not assume has enabled her to change her perspective on the same situation. Jane's view as a

totality has been conditioned by the Other in such a way that her perspective switches to that of an appreciation of the Other's "infinity."

Her perspective on the same situation (as a totality) has been transformed by Jim's disruptive "presence" (that is, by that which Levinas calls "the Other's infinity") but this presence is not something that she can totalizingly grasp—for she is overwhelmed (if but momentarily) and "sees," rather, that she does not see everything so clearly. She is initially passive in this aspect, and this passivity is attuned to an activity that she can heed, but cannot master. In the totality aspect, however, "Jim" *qua* Jane's clear anticipation and assessment offers no "resistance," as Levinas puts it. That is, Jane's totalizing view of Jim was static and predictable, and in this aspect she expected more of the same, although this same perspective gets "broken up" to reveal something that informs or "conditions" it.[122]

While she is "altered" by Jim's "alterity," as it were, Jane must reckon with this alteration that she did not assume, and this different perspective informs her in significant ways.[123] As Levinas puts it, "the face is a notion of meaning prior to my initiative, and independent of my power" (51). This change in perspective was neither chosen nor anticipated by Jane, yet the change contributes to the informative elements that maintain the conversation as a real two person relation—that is, as a relation between two beings who are similar in certain respects, yet relevantly dissimilar in others.[124]

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[122] Hence Levinas's seemingly strange verbiage about such situations: the "welcome of the Other expresses a simultaneity of activity and passivity" (*T&I* 89).

[123] Levinas's further claim, as we soon see, is that once "Jane" notices this disruption and the fact that she did not assume it, she then has "the idea" of infinity: "which means: to be taught" (*T&I* 51).

[124] When we consider their relationship as an authentic conversation between two people, we see ways that Jane depends on Jim as a catalyst for this change in her perspective. If one sees Jim as a catalyst for the change from the totality to the infinity aspect, then one appreciates a way that the Other's "infinity

The situation's alteration also attests to the Gestalt switch, and bivalent, features that we are considering within the totality-infinity structure, because it shows two simultaneously incompatible perspectives that inform and complete the description of the conversation. The tandem and bivalent interplay of infinity and totality is arguably what Levinas means, moreover, when he makes the initially paradoxical claim that "to be in a relation while absolving oneself from this relation is to *speak*" (*T&I* 215). Yet, from the proper perspective, this claim is simply a modification of Levinas's bivalent phenomenology of the structure of infinity and totality.

In one aspect, the self is attuned to the totalizing features of the interlocutory "relation" that assertively organize the self's perspective. In the infinity aspect, however, the self is attuned to the margins of the same situation that it did not anticipate, and these surprises stem from the Other's critical presence (whose "presence" is not simply spatial, but rather evinces a disruptive agency that is distinct from the self's lucid circuit of agency and control). The self in this aspect has literally been released, or "absolved," as Levinas puts it, from *merely* one perspective or relation, and s/he can thus partake in both of the "relations" that his language implies. It is also important to indicate that these punctuations of lucidity and surprise *can* transpire at *any given moment* within a conversation, for instance, and these punctuations can take place within many other interpersonal structures, such as teaching and learning.

Levinas suggests the tandem character of a person's bivalent capacity for lucid agency in concert with meaningful disruption in passages like the following. He also

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conditions totality" by "proceeding from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality *breaks up*…to the gleam of exteriority in the Other's face."

implicitly suggests therein that the Other is a condition for both the maintenance of an authentic conversation, as well as the self's capacity to learn.[125] The way that the Other's infinity conditions totality is thus importantly related to the structure of teaching and learning.

> To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at **each** instant he **overflows** the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. (51, my boldface)

It is crucial to note that the Other's disruptive presence should be seen as a constructive and informative limit to the general structure of conversation and teaching, for example. When one sees it in this way, the Other's novel contribution is *neither essentially* a "disruption" in the sense of a threat, nor is it merely an acerbic dissolution of the self's activity; it is, instead, and most basically, a conditioning aspect that enables an important change in a person's phenomenological perspective.[126] Levinas's point, in a nutshell, is that these unanticipated limits and disruptions contribute to the self's "being taught" by the Other. In a related sense, the Other's novel contribution to the conversation, and the self's assertive grasp on the same conversation, can be essentially intertwined in a feedback loop that enables and perpetuates the two aspects of the

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[125] "Speech, better than a simple sign, is essentially magisterial. It first of all teaches this teaching itself, by virtue of which alone it can teach (and not, like maieutics, *awaken* in me) things and ideas. Ideas instruct me coming from the master who *presents* them to me: who puts them in question" (T&I 69).

[126] This change can be identified within a conversation, for instance, but from a more general perspective this informative change reflects the cultivation or acquisition of intersubjective norms and evaluative standards that the Other enables. Whether it is one's interlocutory position, or the more general notion of acquiring social norms and preferences, the self finds its perspective altered by the Others' infinity. On a more general plane that considers the Other's role in normative reason, I should say that I am indebted to a fine lecture given by Steven Crowell, whose talk largely confirmed and encouraged my interpretation, and in a few cases helped me to revaluate the normative implications of the Other's transformation of the self's perspective. This came from a Keynote Lecture given on 5/29/10 at the University of New Mexico, in the "Philosophy in the Desert" symposium organized by Professor Iain Thomson.

conversation in a way that deepens the possibility of learning from each other.[127] This feature of being-intertwined is all the more apparent when we stress Jim's reciprocal capacity to be overwhelmed by Jane's "infinity," as it were.

If one assumes that in order for the situation to truly count as a conversation, and not rather a two-fold and simultaneous monologue, nor as a mere emission of sounds from both of the interlocutors, then one needs to see the Other as a meaningful limit to the self's representation of the situation. We may also assume that the other person reciprocally needs the self for this same kind of informative semantic limit. Levinas's descriptions focus exclusively on the *self* as the person who is overwhelmed, however, but this is because (as we also see with Descartes and his Other) there is an asymmetry built in to the phenomenology of the description. Since one cannot ever truly begin from the Other's perspective in terms of identification, strictly speaking, Levinas always begins to "describe how alterity is possible…only starting from *me*," that is, from the first-person perspective of the experience (*T&I* 40).[128]

In order for a conversation to count as an *authentic* instance of language, in Levinas's terms, there needs to be a conditioning rapport between self and Other that shows how it is both the case that they clearly relate to each other, but also, and seemingly paradoxically, that they are somehow at an "infinite" distance from each other—that is, that the two terms of the relation exhibit different agencies, on my

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[127] From a more distant perspective, the totality aspect or drive lucidly asserts itself, and the infinity component limits, disrupts, or checks totality when it presents a perspective that the former can neither fully anticipate nor assimilate. This *process*, in a word, faithfully reflects the dynamic totality-infinity structure of relationships like conversation, teaching, and erotic relations.

[128] This asymmetry can lead one to read Levinas as giving a preference to infinity's role in the description, but this preference is arguably a result of the need to begin from the self's point of view, and it is not a moral preference in the last analysis, as our tandem and coequal reading of Levinas indicates.

interpretation. This bivalent rapport reflects the alternating moments of what I call the "totality-infinity" structure, then, because it shows, first, the importance of the totality aspect that an agent adopts on the other person, which serves to establish a clear and stable assessment of the situation. The totality-infinity structure also shows, however, the way that the Other's "infinity" can meaningfully disrupt the self's totalizing perspective, and it thus indicates a "separated," "exterior," or simply an alternate agency with which the self must reckon, but that the self cannot totalizingly and assertively grasp.

> Language can be spoken only if the interlocutor is the commencement of his discourse, if, consequently, he remains beyond the system, if he is not *on the same plane* as myself. (*T&I* 101)

Levinas's "only if" standard for authentic language accordingly implies that there is a sense wherein the other person necessarily "remains beyond" the self's system of totalizing intelligibility and self-identification. In this aspect, the agent's experience is attuned to the unanticipated contortions and disruptions of the other person's activity that indicate that the source (or "commencement") of the "discourse" is not purely commensurable with the self's own nature. As we have seen, however, the self also needs (and initially begins with) lucid moments of totalizing or thematic assertion in order to maintain the relation as a relation with exactly *this* person whom one faces. One needs to "have an Idea" of the other person, and one needs to sometimes "present the other as a theme," but these totalizing features need to be seen as working in tandem with the aspect wherein the Other "breaks with the theme that seemed to hold him a for a moment" (*T&I* 51, 195). When these aspects are seen as working in a tandem feedback loop, they thereby complete the conditions for authentic Levinasian conversation and "language."

Levinas's ontological conditions for authentic language presuppose a sense of the other person that is refractory to the self's totalizing grasp, and hence the above consideration is a relevant sense of the way that the Other's infinity "conditions" totality. His descriptions and analyses of conversation begin with the "experience of totality" that reflects the self's initially assertive, totalizing grasp on the other person, and from there the analysis goes to a "situation where totality breaks up…a situation that conditions the totality."[129] The Other's infinity as a condition reflects a limiting, and initially disruptive agency that the self cannot master, but that the self can at best only appreciate at a remove. As we have maintained the whole time, however, this limiting disruption is importantly meaningful, both because it informs the self in unanticipated ways, and because it serves to establish and maintain the potency of interpersonal relations like conversation, teaching and learning, and erotic relations.

Our deeper goal in this chapter is to further clarify a sense of the Other's infinity "'conditioning" a totality that includes, but extends beyond, the face-to-face phenomenology that we considered. By extension, when we will have elucidated this general argumentative structure, we will see a more solid counter-example to claims that Levinas merely "argues by assertion", or that Levinas "has no philosophy."[130] Perhaps more importantly, we will also see an accurately nuanced, and robust, illustration of the rapport between totality and infinity that Levinas does not rigorously explicate.

I will use three methodological insights in order to further elucidate his general argumentative structure, which extends to a broader sense of infinity and totality, as well

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[129] T&I 24-5.

[130] We see concrete illustrations of such claims below when we consider the critiques of Moran, Badiou, and Wolin.

as to all of his uses of the personal "Other." First, I consider Levinas's sparse comments about his own philosophical method in order to justify my interpretation of the central ambition of *Totality and Infinity*, which is, namely, my interpretation of the way that infinity conditions totality. Second, I draw upon the particular interpersonal cases that we analyzed above, and in the previous chapter, in order to extract the significant features of totality and infinity that are relevant to the ways that "infinity conditions totality." This analysis yields a two-person (or interlocutory) sense of what he means by totality being conditioned by infinity, and this interlocutory sense informs his third-person sense of the "Other," because it shows a related way that one can be informed or conditioned by the Other.[131] In this last way, the conditioning takes the form of the self's acquisition of intersubjective norms—it opens the self's eyes, as it were, to a world that is contested by, and imbued with, normative meanings that do not derive from the self's economy.

Third, I analyze numerous textual passages that point to this different, more general sense of the way that infinity conditions totality, which encompasses a broader sense of "totality," as well as a broader sense of the "Other." The broader sense of "the Other" (and hence the Other's "infinity") pertains to the other person as a he, she, or they, and thus the perspective is not simply from the point of the self and his or her partner, interlocutor, or teacher whom one faces. The non-interlocutory sense of the Other also refers to what Levinas calls "transcendental conditions," the nature of which we develop in Chapter 3, The Preobjective Other Considered Genealogically, and as a Third Person.

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[131] By "a two-person sense" I simply mean Levinas's description of the interrelation between exactly two people. We saw this sense in numerous examples when we considered examples of conversation, erotic relations, and teaching and learning. By a "third-person" sense I understand Levinas's descriptions of the self's relationship to a "they" or "them," or to a person referred to beyond an immediate interlocutory capacity, as in, for instance, "I spoke of them earlier," or, "Her work taught me many things." In brief, this sense of the Other encompasses the third-person singular, and plural, grammatical categories.

By a "broader" sense of totality, I simply refer to Levinas's uses of totality that extend beyond interlocutory relations to such ontic regions as "science," "politics," "the school," and "objectivity," to name some prominent examples.

The development of these three considerations will clarify the chief, but implicitly stated, argumentative strategy of Levinas's great work. Certain scholars (like Moran) claim, however, that there is no systematic argument to be found in this work. Others claim that if there is an argument, it allegedly "masks its fundamentally religious character," as Badiou and Wolin claim, albeit for different reasons. Their respective conclusions commit them, however, to an interpretation of the Other that is "patterned on the Divine" (Wolin), or in need of "God, who does not exist" (Badiou). These interpretations neglect a more accurate reading of Levinas that shows that the Other is thoroughly human and interpersonal, and that a proper sense of the Other presupposes an accurately nuanced sense of totality and infinity.

Lastly, commentators like Putnam claim that it is a non-starter to attribute a novel metaphysical and ontological dimension to Levinas's thought, because this dimension would "do violence to the Levinasian agent perspective."[132] I shall show that Putnam is mistaken in this claim, however, precisely to the extent that the novel ontological and phenomenological dimension within Levinas's thought is the pivotal sieve through which one should extract a systematic and thorough exposition of his work.

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[132] Putnam's concern is that attributing a metaphysical realism to Levinas's thought amounts to making "the agent point of view disappear" ("Levinas and Judaism," 43). My ontological and metaphysical interpretation of Levinas precisely asserts, however, a robust "agent point of view" that is indispensable to understanding his argumentation. This assertion is also consistent with Levinas's appropriation of Descartes, whose metaphysical "agent point of view" is equally indispensable.

My interpretation of Levinas's methodological strategy reveals that there is a distinct and rigorous argument, that it is thoroughly philosophical, and that its novel metaphysical and ontological structure clarifies his work.

The Problem: *Totality and Infinity* Allegedly Has No Philosophical Argument

The clarification of Levinas's arguments and descriptions that establish the ways that infinity conditions totality are important for at least two reasons. First, certain commentators have expressed frustration, or even stark disapproval, with the perceived lack of argumentation in such works as *Totality and Infinity.* Dermot Moran, for example, in his *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000), clearly evinces such a frustration:

> [Levinas's] style is to make assertions, followed by further assertions, *without* any attempt to justify them, other than through some kind of appeal to deeply human, perhaps even mystical, intuitions, or alternatively, to phenomenological insight, though such notions are *never* systematically explicated by him. (321-2, emphasis mine)

Moran's critique ramifies in three directions that do not augur well for the inclusion of Levinas into the philosophical pantheon. First, Levinas "merely" argues by repetitive assertion, and we can read that to mean that Levinas really does not argue at all. Second, if there is an argument, then at least one crucial premise relates to a "deeply human" or "mystical" intuition, and so the "argument" relies on a presumably dubious, quasi-philosophical source. Third, one can perhaps justify Levinas's assertions phenomenologically, but since he never explains these notions systematically, this approach turns out to be a non-starter.

For our purposes, the first and third prongs of Moran's critique are the most interesting, because our counter-claim is to show that there is a rigorous argumentative

strategy in Levinas's work, and that this strategy is intertwined with Levinas's phenomenology.[133]

The perceived lack of argumentation and systematic phenomenological exposition hence leads Moran to seemingly dismiss Levinas's *philosophical* worth.

> [Levinas] simply presents his analysis as if it were the way it must be for everyone, not a position, to paraphrase Levinas himself, open to the views of others. We are, in Levinas's own terms, sucked into the sphere of the same. (352)

Totality and Infinity's argumentative strategy uses, however, an often implicit logic of presupposition. In abstract, it commits Levinas to the notion that A is a prerequisite condition for B, or that P is not possible without Q. We have seen one distinct form of this general strategy when we considered Levinas's claim that "language can be spoken *only if* the interlocutor…remains beyond the system, if he is not on the same plane as myself" (101, my emphasis). In terms of the strategy's general content, moreover, Levinas often makes claims of the following register that extend to many ontic regions, and so not simply discourse: "the Other is the condition for theoretical truth and error" (*T&I* 51). "A surplus of humility, responsibility, and sacrifice are the conditions for political equality" (64). "The world becomes our theme, and hence our object, from a primordial teaching, which is required by scientific work" (92). These kinds of claims are ubiquitous in *Totality and Infinity*, and at first glance, they can seem like *non-sequiturs*, or as Moran puts it, forms of "argument by assertion."

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[133] It is also worth noting that Moran, generally speaking, is a very gifted interpreter of the phenomenological tradition. I find his work on Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty to be highly edifying. I interpret his underestimation of Levinas's argumentative and philosophical worth as due to the fact that Levinas's arguments are generally implicit, and because Levinas bears a certain contempt for clarity of exposition, as we soon see.

Our analysis below will serve to philosophically bolster Levinas's claims by indicating the general argumentative strategy that implicitly informs them, and this will require attributing an ontological dimension to Levinas that many would outright reject. His general strategy consists, simply put, in implicitly indicating the various ways in which infinity ontologically conditions totality; or, and what amounts to the same thing, the ways in which the Other informs the self as a totality.

The second reason (for why it is important to elaborate Levinas's implicit argument) is that even some of Levinas's staunchest *supporters* claim that it is a non-starter to look for phenomenological and or metaphysical argumentation in his work. Hilary Putnam, for instance, in his "Levinas and Judaism," explicitly rejects the notion that Levinas is trying to articulate a (novel) metaphysical or transcendental-phenomenological account of human reality. He claims that "it is important to keep in mind that Levinas does not intend to replace traditional metaphysics and epistemology with a different, non-traditional, metaphysics and epistemology,"[134] and that instead, Levinas allegedly insists upon "the impossibility of a metaphysical grounding for ethics."[135] We shall put forward the contrasting view, however, that Levinas *precisely* articulates a metaphysical and or ontological grounding for what he calls "ethics," and, further, that this grounding leads Levinas to carry forward, and hence sometimes to radically alter, traditional metaphysical views.

Putnam also holds the view that Levinas tries to demonstrate the "underivability" of the "fundamental obligation" to respect the Other, thereby "showing a problem with

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[134] Putnam, Hilary, "Levinas and Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds., Cambridge UP, (2002), 43.
[135] Ibid., 36.

metaphysics, not ethics."[136] He further asserts that a rival metaphysical account will "do just as much violence to the agent point of view" as, say, the "violence" he takes "Husserlian phenomenology" to do to that point of view.[137] The previous chapter's work indicated, though, that it is possible to rebuild novel metaphysical and phenomenological notions of Levinasian subjectivity that leave a robust and ethical agent in place.

I argue, *pace* commentators like Moran, Putnam, Badiou, and Wolin, that one both can, and should, extract systematic arguments from Levinas's middle period that indicate a phenomenological, ontological, and metaphysical structure at work in this same period. The "can" is argued for below; the "should," moreover, stems in part from the need to understand Levinas as a distinct heir to several important philosophical precursors, rather than as a maverick or patricide within that tradition. Levinas's metaphysics, and ontological phenomenology *are* however novel in certain respects, and this novelty signals his legacy's brilliance. He should be read as carrying forward that tradition, and through this interpretation we shall lend more support for the inclusion of Levinas into the philosophical pantheon.

The Projected Solution: The Elucidation of Levinas's Conditions

Levinas characterizes the background of what I term his "conditions" through three related themes, all of which indicate their (generally dormant) possibilities for philosophical reflection. These three themes are intended as anticipatory indications, and Chapter 3, De Boer: Levinas's Other Is Ontologically Foundational will explicitly ramify these general patterns. First, they have been "forgotten" by philosophers in general (*T&I*

[136] Ibid., 42-3.
[137] Ibid., 43.

28). Second, they have an *implicit* structure, both from the agent perspective as well as from a theoretical perspective (*T&I* 138-9). Lastly, they have a *hidden* or elusive structure that is resistant to totalizing perspectives (*T&I* 99, 79), whose character we saw last chapter, and to which we return below. This chapter's strategy consists, then, in re-membering the implicit, forgotten, and hidden pieces of Levinas's conditions so as to make them explicit.

These conditions also need to be situated against the backdrop of what Levinas means by "ethics," both because the claim that "ethics is first philosophy" implies his conditions, and what he means by "ethics," most basically, is the "relation between men" that involves "signification, teaching, and justice" (*T&I* 79)—which is to say, a transcendental interhuman relation that enables the self to adopt intersubjective normative standards. When Levinas describes "ethics" as "a field of research hardly glimpsed at," he is arguably referring to the dearth of sustained elucidation regarding his conditions for human being and intelligibility (79).

There is only one explicit elaboration of the way that infinity conditions totality, and it is embedded in the prophetically dense preface to *Totality and Infinity*. We examined this same passage in the last chapter for different reasons—namely, as a counter-example to some claims in Wolin's polemic—but for our present purposes we will scrutinize the particulars of the claim, and not simply the general theme. I also presented this same passage earlier as a lens through which to illustrate the phenomenology of conversation that underlies the structure of infinity conditioning totality. We are now in a clearer position to explicate the distinguishing features of his

sparse comments on the relationship between infinity "conditioning" totality in a general way.

> We can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality *breaks up*, a situation that *conditions* the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity. (24-5, my italics)[138]

His remarks arguably house the entire philosophical intention of *Totality and Infinity*, and for two important reasons. First, it is the only passage wherein one actually finds "totality" and "infinity"—the work's namesake, after all—*conjointly* discussed. Second, it evinces a logical connection between "the totality" and that which *conditions* or enables it; namely, the Other's "exteriority or transcendence," whose philosophical exposition (that is, when considered as a "rigorously developed concept") is simply what Levinas means by the Other's "infinity," as well as the general "idea of infinity" that is "produced" in "the oppositional character" of interpersonal relations (*T&I* 196).

Levinas gives little formal indication as to how, exactly, infinity will condition totality (here or elsewhere), and his glosses on "the gleam of exteriority" and "the face of the Other" offer no robust indications in themselves. For this reason, it is important to clarify what he means by "infinity conditioning totality," and this is exactly what the elucidation of his conditions does.

To the extent that he does specify a formal methodology, we see only a denial of dogmatism, on the one hand, and a guarded appeal to a "transcendental" strategy, on the other.

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[138] Since we examined the first part of this passage last chapter, and commented on its significance, which indicates what Levinas is *not* trying to do in *Totality and Infinity*, I have omitted it above. The omitted portion reads as follows: "Without substituting eschatology for philosophy, without philosophically 'demonstrating' eschatological 'truths,' we can proceed…"

> This revelation of infinity does not lead to the acceptance of any dogmatic content, whose philosophical rationality cannot be argued for in the name of the transcendental truth of the idea of infinity. For the way we are describing to work back and remain on this side of objective certitude resembles what has come to be called the transcendental method (in which the technical procedures of transcendental idealism need not necessarily be comprised). (*T&I* 25)

One might be tempted to think that the translation is a barrier to understanding this passage, for it is among the denser passages in the already critically saturated *Totality and Infinity*. Alphonso Lingis's translation is quite good, however, both in this case and in general. My translation, which preserves the syntax and idiom as much as possible, only lends a few different shades of nuance to the content, especially in the last sentence:

> This revelation of infinity does not lead to the acceptance of any dogmatic content, and one would be wrong to uphold infinity's philosophical rationality in the name of the transcendental truth of the idea of infinity. For the way to reascend and to remain on *this side* of objective certitude that we have just described *draws near to* what one has agreed to call the transcendental method, without needing to understand this notion all the way up to the technical procedures of transcendental idealism. (my translation, my italics)

My version highlights how Levinas's method "draws near to" (*se rapproche de*) the transcendental method, that is, it approaches, or approximates, the transcendental method, as opposed to having a mere resemblance with it. This is important, because in what follows we shall advance the thesis that Levinas rebuilds his own transcendental strategy, which largely stems from his appropriation of intentional analysis. And although it indeed approximates certain kinds of canonical transcendental idealism, it also reflects significant dissimilarities as well.

In terms that approximate a transcendental method, Levinas's strategy seeks to elucidate a more basic or prior function that conditions or subtends theoretical activity, which amounts to the Other's "infinity" conditioning "totality." This part of his strategy

mirrors Kant's attempt to formally indicate "categories" that inform or condition cognition in general, for instance. His strategy also mirrors Heidegger's, or Merleau-Ponty's, search for a preobjective world that conditions the theoretical world.[139] More specifically, Levinas intends to show that the preobjective Other enables a normative shift in the self's rational perspective. In terms that are dissimilar, however, Levinas radically alters traditional transcendental paradigms when he argues that this more basic function (or source) is both thoroughly human, as well as originally "other than" the self.[140]

The final clause in my translation thus indicates that Levinas's "transcendental method" does *not* completely *mimic* "the technical procedures of transcendental idealism" in its quest to remain "on this side of objective certainty," that is, within the realm of demonstrable phenomenological evidence. It indicates, rather, that something else is intended.

The way that Levinas rebuilds or founds his own "transcendental strategy" draws upon past works, but at the same time it founds such "transcendence" on the ontological structure of the interhuman Other. So even though Descartes, Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger, most notably, are always in the background of Levinas's transcendental and existential strategy, his foundational difference lies in his claim that interhuman

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[139] With Heidegger, this preobjective world amounts to the indication of a "clearing" that enables beings to show up as particular beings, and with Merleau-Ponty the preobjective "world" turns out to be what he calls the "lived body," which conditions perception.

[140] As we explicitly see below, I interpret Levinas as claiming that the Other enables the self to alter its perspective from totality to infinity, and to thereby change the self's conception of totality within an indefinite process.

relations—that is, what he means by "ethics" most basically—subtend or condition theoretical activities.[141]

Levinas scholars are often justified, however, to express frustration with the lack of apparent Levinasian method, if only because Levinas is either cryptic about his own in *Totality and Infinity* and elsewhere, or because he is utterly dismissive of the importance of philosophical method in general. In 1975, for instance, while he was engaged in an honorary "Question and Answer" debate at the University of Leyden, Levinas wryly disparages the worth of making one's method translucent:

> I do not believe that there is transparency possible in method. Nor that philosophy might be possible as transparency. Those who have worked on methodology all their lives have written many books that replace the more interesting books that they could have written. So much the worse for the philosophy that would walk in sunlight without shadows.[142]

His rather extreme stance on the worth of "transparency" in method shall not, however, lead us to the converse problem, and thus it is important that we interpret Levinas with a modicum of consistency and clarity of exposition.[143] As Simon Critchley notes, moreover, "while the opacity of Levinas's prose troubles many readers, it cannot be

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[141] As Kant thought that the categories of the understanding "filtered" human experience, so too does Levinas articulate a similar view, with the exception that the Other in a general sense serves as an important "category." As Levinas puts the point, (without, however, specifying what is entailed): "the role that Kant attributed to sensible experience in the domain of understanding belongs in metaphysics to interhuman relations" (*T&I* 79). Levinas's middle period represents the elucidation of a *phenomenologico-ontological* account of such a gesture, and its novelty is best seen when we consider the primacy of the personal or "interhuman" in his philosophy. This primacy is opposed to the theistic, idealistic—or, in a word, impersonal—which we find in such thinkers as Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and even Kant. The following passage also reflects Levinas's reappropriation of Kant, wherein we see the sketch of Levinas's "categories."
"Separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the *categories* of the idea of infinity or metaphysics" (62, emphasis mine).

[142] Levinas, "Questions and Answers." *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Bettina Bergo, (trans.). Stanford: Stanford UP (1998), 89.

[143] Levinas's apparent deflation of the importance of method may well contribute to his obscure prose and lack of explicit indication, as well as the tortuous paths through which he wends the main arguments of *Totality and Infinity*.

said that his work is without method. Levinas always described himself as a phenomenologist and as being faithful to the spirit of Husserl."[144]

In the same debate noted above, Levinas clarifies his relationship to "the spirit of Husserl" to which Critchley refers, as well as to a "transcendental method" in his work. His clarification is in response to a provocative set of questions posed by Theodore de Boer, who prefaces the following question as one of "method."

> How can one express in discourse the metaphysical relation to the Other? In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, you refer to Husserl's transcendental method. You assert that you have followed the intentional analysis that goes back to the origin prior to every origin, to the most radical foundation of theory and practice. (86)

Levinas's response begins with an acknowledgment that "fundamental questions" are at issue, and it is clearly attuned to the various stakes of the question. It is also one of the few passages in print wherein Levinas gives a concise summary of *his* take on phenomenology's proper worth and labor.

> What is said in the preface of *Totality and Infinity* remains *true*, all the same, *to the end for me* with respect to method. It is not the word "transcendental" that I would retain, but the notion of intentional analysis. The dominant trait, which even determines all those who no longer call themselves phenomenologists today, is that, in proceeding back from what is thought to the fullness of the thought itself, one discovers—without there being any deductive, dialectical, or other implication therein—dimensions of meaning, each time new. (87, my emphasis)

His mention of "what is thought to the fullness of the thought itself" (which is arguably the dominant trait of Levinas's bivalent phenomenology) reflects his Cartesian heritage and subsequent reappropriation, and this is important for two reasons. First, Levinas's ontological account of totality and infinity is essentially patterned on the initially paradoxical Cartesian "more within the less" that we explored in previous chapters. Its basic formulation essentially commits Levinas to understanding the "more"

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[144] *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 6.

as "infinity," which is contained in the "less," as it were, or "totality." Second, the bivalent structure therein mirrors the ontological structure of infinity conditioning totality. This chapter's work accordingly elucidates his ontological structures (conditions) that are at work "behind" or beyond the interpersonal phenomena.[145] These structures implicitly condition the phenomena by enabling a bivalent stance that one can adopt on the same situation in question, and this bivalence opens up possibilities to the self's perspective that were previously inaccessible.

The following citation stems directly from the previous one, and we can readily see the seeds for this dual reading of Levinas's strategy.

> It is the fact that if, in starting from a theme or idea, I move toward the "ways" by which one accedes to it, then *the way by which one accedes to it is essential to the meaning* of the theme itself: this way reveals to us the whole landscape of horizons that have been *forgotten* and together with which what shows itself *no longer has the meaning it had when one considered it from a stance directly turned toward it.* (87, emphasis mine)

At work here is the methodological reification of a polyvalent phenomenological attitude, with the highest emphasis placed on the different ways "to accede to," or approach, phenomena. So, from a thematic view of the phenomenon in question (that is, "directly turned toward it") we can grasp certain features of its "horizon." This is nothing less than a gloss on traditional phenomenology, after all, and to this extent Levinas arguably has Husserl's "spirit" in mind. From another consideration, however, we see an approach that emphasizes an *indirect* "way" that teases out the "forgotten" and semantically altered variations on the same theme. Levinas's distinct contribution here is

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[145] These structures "infuse" or inform a given totality with a background world of significance, and thereby put "more" into the "less," as it were. We shall consider more concrete examples of this structure when we examine his thoughts on politics, equality, freedom, objectivity, and representation in Chapter 3, . The Preobjective Other Considered Genealogically, and as a Third Person

his effort to make the Other "appear" as an enabling constituent of the self's shift from an egological creature to a civilized person who can reckon with intersubjective norms. This latter approach hooks up with our infinity aspect, and it even purports, rather paradoxically, to denude the noumenal.

> Phenomenology is not about elevating phenomena into things in themselves; it is about bringing the *things in themselves* to the horizon of their appearing, that of their phenomenality; phenomenology means to make appear the appearing itself behind the quiddity that appears, even if this appearing does not encrust its modalities in the meaning that it delivers to the gaze. (87)

It is worth juxtaposing the formal parallel between Levinas's remarks about the face-to-face encounters we have described with the above thoughts about "things in themselves" that lie "behind the quiddity that appears," even if this manner of "appearing" is not thematically straightforward (that is, not delivered "to the gaze"). We have seen phenomenological accounts of the Other person who, in the infinity aspect, can reveal himself "behind" the phenomenal quiddity—namely, as an activity or purposive agency that informs, surprises, or simply disrupts the self in interpersonal ways. The same person can also be straightforwardly judged, doubted, and seen in a way whose "modalities" are "encrusted" in a clearly "delivered meaning," that is, s/he can be seen from a totalizing point of view. Above, though, we see Levinas's *methodological* account of phenomenality in general, and this general sense lends support to my interpretation of totality and infinity because it reinforces the dynamic, bivalent, and interrelated features of their relationship in a general way.

When we compare the following passage from *Totality and Infinity* with the above remarks about "bringing things in themselves to the horizon" of their phenomenality, we see relevant similarities with his general account of phenomena.

> To disclose, on the basis of a subjective horizon, is already to miss the noumenon. The interlocutor alone is the term of pure experience, where the Other enters into relation while remaining *kath auto,* where he expresses himself without our having to disclose him from a "point of view," in a borrowed light. (67)

One's initial reaction to the first sentence might be, and for a very good reason: "How does one *not* miss the noumenon?" This is because by canonical definition, the noumenal "is" at best a theoretical approximation, an ideal limit, or a transcendental postulate whose ontological status requires agnosticism, at best, or perhaps even outright skepticism. What Levinas means, however, is that two distinct perspectives can contribute to one's experience of a given datum. In the totality aspect, one adopts the default phenomenological attitude that precomprehends, or discloses, its object in advance (in this case, the interlocutor), which establishes a fixed "point of view" and casts a "borrowed light" or intentional ray upon the object. In the infinity aspect, though, one can be disrupted, passive, or simply receptive to an agency that (temporarily) disrupts one's self-identification; that is, the Other *can be* appreciated as the source of the self's occurrent disruptive experience, and Levinas describes this source with the term "Other," "infinity," (and, less frequently, *kath auto* or "noumenon").[146]

To recapitulate some of the previous chapter's labors, we have seen the case for how another person can phenomenologically overflow, inform, or disrupt the self in an interlocutory or "face-to-face" situation. In order to dispel the apparently paradoxical character of Levinas's claims about such situations, we need to read the bivalent "totality-

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[146] In what follows, however, we should see that the "Other" also stands for an *ontological* fundament of being, and this in addition to the interlocutory sense that the totality-infinity structure supported in the last chapter. The Other in this sense is more of an interhuman category, but Levinas's signature gesture consists in indicating that it originally refers to other *people as "she" or a "they,"* for instance. In fact, this sense of "Other" relevantly resembles William James's prefatory citation above: it is a genealogical and transcendental account of *human* influence, indebtedness, and the prerequisite conditions for intelligibility.

infinity" structure into such descriptions. This reading indicates (in the infinity aspect) that Levinas is referring to a transcendental source or activity that the self is receptive toward, and in other senses (the totality aspect) this reading indicates that he is referring to the self's lucid and spontaneous organization of the other person. It is crucial, moreover, that we see that these aspects are essentially complementary—that is, a consideration of both aspects completes the existential structure that Levinas implicitly indicates.

We are now in a position to amplify the notion of infinity's conditioning role in Levinas's thought in general. This will include a brief segue to Theodore de Bore's interpretation of Levinas's "transcendental strategy," because de Boer sketches a good framework through which to juxtapose the historical similarities, as well as the salient points of departure, of Levinas's transcendental strategy. I shall then clarify the ways that Levinasian infinity (as an interhuman, genealogical, and ontological structure) anchors the self as a "totality" in such ontic regions as "science," "politics," and "economics," all of which reflect his use of the Other as a "s/he" or "they." The point is to thereby show a distinct and prolific argumentative structure in *Totality and Infinity* that is at once implicitly indicated, clearly related to previous philosophical models, and yet philosophically novel in important respects.

De Boer: Levinas's Other Is Ontologically Foundational

Theodore de Boer's *The Rationality of Transcendence* makes important observations about the general tendencies in *Totality and Infinity*.[147] This is because he

[147] This is also because de Boer deftly blends, and properly nuances, that which is unique to Levinas with that which is entirely borrowed (or even violently appropriated) from his historical predecessors. By contrast, many Levinas commentators (*pro* and *contra*) seek to show the extent to which Levinas's thought

reads Levinas as searching for overlooked "transcendental foundations" of the self and the same, and this search clearly commits Levinas to a robust ontology and/or metaphysics. De Boer also importantly qualifies Levinas's metaphysical and ontological views within an historical continuum, which encompasses Descartes, Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. In what follows we see a case for how Levinas "samples," or repeats with a difference, the general metaphysical and ontological strategies of his philosophical predecessors. This "sampling" shows that Levinas is a highly skilled interpreter of the tradition, and, furthermore, that he carries forward the tradition by shedding the skin of the pupil, as it were, in order to authentically repay his masters with a highly original, and important, difference—the essential and formative importance of the interhuman Other.

In his "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," de Boer devotes several pages that show "how the Other is a transcendental foundation of the Same" and the self. *Pace* Putnam's claim that Levinas does not intend to "replace traditional metaphysics and epistemology with non-traditional" models, de Boer rightly argues for a nuanced counter-example to such a claim. This is because Levinas's "metaphysics" (the infinity aspect of the Other in a general, interhuman sense, on my interpretation) is actually symbiotic with "ontology," which he situates in the domain of "totality" and "the same."[148] This

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is purely *unique* or *maverick*, and this is often to the detriment of a more complete understanding of Levinas's precursors and *Bildung*. Richard Cohen, for instance, insists that Levinas is "*the* most worthy" philosopher of the 20th century, precisely because of the "ethicality" of his work. Hilary Putnam claims, citing Isaiah Berlin's distinction between "hedgehogs" and "foxes," that Levinas "knows one big thing," as opposed to those thinkers who know "many small things" (58).

[148] In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas often qualifies the "idea of the infinite" and the "search for exteriority" as "metaphysics," and so de Boer's terminology is not arbitrary. As we saw in the last chapter, the "Same" is a relevant function of "totality" for Levinas.

importantly means that he sees that these two structures are necessarily interwoven, as against those who interpret a caustic antagonism between the two.[149]

The very idea of a "transcendental foundation" is *prima facie* nebulous, and an elucidation of de Boer's transcendental interpretation of Levinas is therefore important. Like myself, he sees certain affinities with Kant and Levinas, especially to the extent that Levinas is articulating an account of that which precedes or informs any particular experience.[150] When we couple his insights into Levinas's use of "non-objectifying consciousness," or simply that which underlies or conditions consciousness and objective representations, we see an important aspect of how totality can be conditioned by "infinity" in the guise of the "Other's face," or simply the Other considered in the infinity aspect.

A clearer perspective of the difference between Levinas's method and his predecessors' emerges when we consider de Boer's remarks about *Totality and Infinity's* subtitle, "An Essay on Exteriority." He notes that Levinas's choice of words reflects his "concern with thinking an exteriority that is not an object, a theme, a noema, [or] a result of meaning-giving by a subject."[151] Positively, he claims that Levinas intends, instead, "an aspiration to the radical exteriority… of metaphysics."[152] This understanding of "metaphysics" informs Levinas's transcendental strategy that claims to surpass previous philosophical attempts—in short, it is the Other considered as a transcendental and

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[149] He writes that Levinas's "metaphysics is not a separate realm above ontology. The relation-to-the-Other ["metaphysics"] is the spirit or breath of ontology, the inspiration vital to criticism" (23).

[150] In addition, and unlike the vast majority of Levinas scholars (who downplay, often merely *pro forma*, the affinities between Levinas and Heidegger) de Boer is right when he points out relevant connections between Levinas' Other and Heidegger's Being, as we see below.

[151] De Boer. "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," 8.

[152] Ibid., 8.

ontological foundation that reflects the primacy of such a "radical exteriority," or "metaphysics."[153]

Citing remarks that were inserted into the 1967 edition of Levinas's *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger*, de Boer adds that Levinas "seeks inspiration from Husserl's work even while distancing himself from it."[154]

> [Levinas] holds that if certain Husserlian concepts are radicalized, the idealistic character of his thought can be overcome and opened up toward metaphysics…If we explore the [representational] horizon via intentional analysis, i.e. by penetrating the implications of the object of representation, we discover that it is embedded in non-objectifying consciousness. Levinas writes that the strictly cognitive relation has "transcendental conditions." These conditions lie underneath and beyond representation, in corporeal and cultural existence. (25)

This notion of "penetrating the implications" of standard intentional representation is key, since it indicates a search for what conditions or enables representation.[155] With Levinas, that which is "discovered" reveals structures that lie beneath, as it were, "the strictly cognitive relation"; the discovery reveals structures that are either corporeal (that is, of the kind that Merleau-Ponty makes especially explicit) or structures that reflect "the Other's infinity," which Levinas tries to make explicit.[156]

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[153] De Boer does not give concrete illustrations of the positive phenomenological component that indicates Levinas's difference with his predecessors, however, and this is another reason for why the phenomenological elucidation of infinity and totality is important. Instead, he gives a very Husserlian reading of Levinas's descriptions of the Other's foundational role, and this reading neglects to accentuate Levinas's originality.

[154] These same remarks have been reprinted in "Signature," the final section of *Difficult Freedom*.

[155] This kind of search is importantly a canonical theme in Western philosophy; Kant, after all, attempted just this when he sought to formally indicate the categories of the understanding as "organizing" functions of intuitive data. Husserl sought, moreover, to radically found the transcendental ego as an underlying source of organizing intelligibility. Heidegger can be read, furthermore, as trying to "complete" Kant's categories by way of indicating existential-ontological horizons of meaning that organize or enable ontic experience.

[156] These latter two structures, in different terms, enable or (help to) make possible the normal, default manner of seeing and communicating things. In fact, the "field of research hardly glimpsed at" to which Levinas refers in *Totality and Infinity* is, on my interpretation, precisely a reference to the "transcendental conditions" inherent in "cultural existence": these are the conditions for human civilization that ground and support the species of "objectifying consciousness" that renders the world totalizeable. They organize and

Levinas's structures indicate a preobjective domain that conditions the self's experience through the Other's infinity. I thus argue that Levinas's distinctive contribution to this traditional phenomenological strategy consists in his search for the ways that the Other alters or changes the self's "cognitive relations" in interpersonal situations, and, further, that the most appropriate way to appreciate this strategy relies on an accurately nuanced understanding of totality and infinity.[157]

It is also highly important to note the methodological parallels between Heidegger and Levinas, although the literature is often reluctant to point them out. Like myself, de Boer takes note of this important connection, and he notes that Levinas will try to dig deeper into the pre-theoretical world that Heidegger opened up (which is precisely when Levinas shows the foundational importance of the Other as such considered as an essentially human structure). De Boer importantly adds that, "on Levinas's interpretation, Heidegger's significance is…in his exploration of the *preobjective* areas of human experience and in the implicit understanding of being" (22). This gloss on the philosophical similarities between the two seminal thinkers helps both to set my interpretative stage for Levinas's historically borrowed "transcendental" strategy, as well as to see the ways in which Levinas significantly departs from his historical predecessors—namely, through an exposition of the primacy of the *human* Other *via* my interpretation of the totality-infinity structure.

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formally indicate the very ability to make the world thematically common and stable. They also provide the implicit social or "civilized" world in which we operate as civilized creatures, and they thereby serve to provide the self with normative standards. Put differently, these structures are Levinas's conditions, which the next section supports with numerous textual passages from *Totality and Infinity*.

[157] We should add that this change can be identified within a conversation, for instance, but from a more general perspective the informative change can reflect the cultivation or acquisition of intersubjective norms and evaluative standards that the Other enables.

> There is a formal similarity in that both thinkers take their point of departure in a dimension which, while not itself experienced, is the foundation of experience. Formally, the face of the Other has a function identical to Heidegger's notion of Being: it is the first signification, *primum intelligible*, the light or clearing in which beings appear but which does not appear as such and hence can be approached but indirectly. (28-9)

De Boer's mention of "the face of the Other" as a formal analogue to Heidegger's Being is crucial because it indicates a requisite horizon of intelligibility, or "clearing," out of which objects (and people) *show up as* this or that particular object. In this sense, the Other considered transcendentally resembles Kant's categories, Heidegger's existential analyses of Being, and Merleau-Ponty's lived body. When he claims that Levinas goes further than his predecessors, he means that Levinas carries the torch in this search for the "pre-objective," so as to light up the *interhuman* Other's role in such a "clearing."[158]

Our task in the following sections, accordingly, is to clarify the connection between the "preobjective" Other and its relationship to the way that infinity conditions totality. By way of anticipation, the preobjective domain that informs Levinas's understanding of intentional analysis is simply what he means by an "infinity conditioning totality." It is important that we continue to stress the tandem and coequal importance of totality and infinity in Levinas's thought at ontological and metaphysical

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[158] De Boer also importantly highlights an *ethical* dimension embedded within this "calling into question" of the self and or the Same. This is because, first, the Other clearly can rupture a potentially narcissistic and or egotistical conception of the world. In more practical terms, the Other can also serve to correct errant and or idiosyncratic observation. Such a breach into the "interiority of the same," as Levinas puts it, is a catalyst for self-criticism, learning, and the establishment of communal standards. The standards pertain to objectivity in the above case, but we can readily see that the Other's role in general is an important fundament to any negotiation of ontic considerations whatsoever: academic and political institutions, social policy, and, in a word, normativity. In this "meta-normative" sense, then, the Other's general role in the determination of the self's socio-political possibilities clearly has ethical ramifications. The general thought, in different terms, is that a fund or surplus of humanly mediated signification underlies the appreciation of a particular subject's consideration of a particular object. This sort of genealogical inheritance, or signification, happens most basically through language and "rendering the world common."

purviews, because this will serve to dispel some otherwise odd implications in his notion of an "infinity founding a totality." This will then serve as a good segue into a refutation of Badiou's Levinasian critique (Chapter 3, Badiou Reconsidered), for we shall see a complex and compelling case for hastily overlooked, but relevantly crucial, alternatives to the dilemma Badiou proposes.

The Preobjective Other Considered Genealogically, and as a Third Person

There is an important semantic linkage between the "preobjective world," "non-objectifying consciousness" and the very idea of the Other (or "infinity") as a condition for theoretical, thematic, and socio-political structures. This condition (that is, the Other's infinity considered ontologically) of the totality aspect is simply the "more basic" quality of such preobjective or "non-objectifying" forms of consciousness and representation.

Levinas tersely states the importance of a preobjective attunement or "non-objectifying consciousness" in his remarks that he inserted into the 1967 edition of *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger*.

> To hold out one's hands, to turn one's head, to speak a language, to be the 'sedimentation' of a history—all this *transcendentally* conditions contemplation and the contemplated. (292)

First, there is a fairly obvious reference to Merleau-Ponty's "lived body" as that which undergirds cognition or perception, and thus that which conditions it in relevant respects.[159] Second, when Levinas notes the foundational and genealogical importance of language and the vestiges of one's civilization (that is, one's historical "sedimentation"),

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[159] Levinas arguably gets a fair amount of inspiration for what I call his conditions from Merleau-Ponty. In *Totality and Infinity* he often cites Merleau-Ponty approvingly, as in the following passage in which he applauds Merleau-Ponty's debunking of the very idea of disincarnate thought and speech. "Merleau-Ponty, among others, and better than others, showed that disincarnate thought thinking speech before speaking it, thought constituting the world of speech…was a myth" (205-6).

he is referring to what he calls "cultural existence" six years after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. This cultural existence is simply synonymous with his analysis of a preobjective, interhuman world that purports to be more basic than the self's actual cognitive, perceptual, and socio-political capacities. The Other's "cultural existence" is more basic in the sense that it is an enabling or conditioning structure that allows the self to experience the world as intersubjectively normative, codified, and preestablished by others. In other words, that which Levinas calls "cultural existence," or "the Other" in a preobjective sense, "makes reason possible" for the self, and it allows the self to enter into an interhuman arena wherein it must reckon with preexisting standards of right and wrong, good and bad, ugly and beautiful, apt or inept, among other standards (*T&I* 119).

Levinas's description of a preobjective world shows a different, but related sense of the way that the Other's infinity conditions the self's totalizing capacities. In face-to-face situations like conversation or teaching, respectively, the self's perspective of totality becomes informed by an independent agency that alters this same perspective in ways that the self does not clearly see, and in ways that reflect a dependence upon the Other's agency. This alteration ontologically conditions the self precisely in proportion to the unanticipated change that it effectuates "within" the self's perspective. Once altered, the self is now able to see things in a different manner—he or she has a transformed perspective and understanding, and Levinas's phenomenology indicates that the "face," the Other's "infinity," or simply "the gleam of exteriority" is the catalyst for this change in perspective.

In the first section of this chapter, we interpreted the Other in face-to-face situations as one instance of a "preobjective" source of the self's totalizing capacities. The

Others' infinity in such situations indicates an independently existing source of, or catalyst for, the self's altered understanding and perspective.

Levinas's understanding of the genealogical, third person Other reflects significant points of similarity with the interlocutory Other, because in both cases the self's totalizing capacities are ontologically informed by the Other's infinity. In interlocutory cases of the Other, this preobjective domain is reflected in the Other whom one faces. In the cases we are about to consider, however, the Other's "gleam of exteriority" is reflected in a genealogical consideration of the cultural, ancestral, and formative Other as a source of the self's totalizing capacities. As with the interlocutory case, the self does not experience the Other as such, but Levinas's strategy is to show that the Other is a preobjective fundament to the self's *civilized* capacities—that is, its ability to reason, evaluate, and act according to norms. In the genealogical sense, the Other is referred to as a past "they" who are appealed to as a conditioning source of the self's civilized being.

We see preliminary evidence for this interpretation of the Other's infinity as a preexisting, preobjective *genealogical* source (as opposed to an interlocutory source) by drawing on a passage in *Totality and Infinity* that follows a reference to Merleau-Ponty's debunking of the idea of "disincarnate consciousness."

> Already thought consists in foraging in the system of signs, in the particular tongue of a people or civilization, and receiving signification from this very operation. It ventures forth at random, inasmuch as it does not start with an antecedent representation, or with those significations, or with phrases to be articulated. (206)

The "already" here is crucial because it suggests a prior (conditioning) fund or source of intelligibility, and it also attributes a humanly genealogical dimension to this

activity. In different Levinasian terms, this is a feature of what he means by "the idea of infinity," which, like Descartes' idea of God, both preexists (genealogically) and conditions (via consciousness, language, and conceptualization) the self in its endeavor to totalize reality.[160] This "foraging" indicates, moreover, a preexisting horizon or "clearing," as Heidegger might say, that informs objective representation and thought—that is, it indicates a thought that comes from either an individual or an existing theoretical framework that derives from other people—from a "them" or a "they." On my interpretation, it is highly important that the accent be placed on the notion of "people" and "civilization," for this perspective is precisely where Levinas stands out from his teachers and contemporaries, and it signals the "field of research hardly glimpsed at" to which Levinas refers. This budding "field" is also stated as "one of the present objectives of *Totality and Infinity*," and it is regrettably a field of Levinas study that has hardly received any attention, let alone resolution.[161]

Levinas's implicit point in such passages is to show that the Other represents a way that other people inform or alter our understanding. This is, of course, relevantly similar to the way that the Other whom one faces changes one's understanding, but it is remarkable to note that Levinas refers to the Other in a third person sense, that is, as a human fund of civilization out of which the self draws in order for "thought" to happen as

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[160] As Levinas also claims about the "idea of infinity," "I cannot account for it by myself," and "it moves consciousness" (*T&I* 267; 27).

[161] "It is our relations with men, which describe a field of research hardly glimpsed at…The establishing of the primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man—signification, teaching, and justice—a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest…is one of the objectives of the present work" (*T&I 79*).

it does.[162] In the above citation, Levinas indicates "a system of signs" and the particular language that one has inherited as candidates for "the gleam of exteriority" that is not clearly seen as such, but that informs the self and his or her totalizing possibilities.

The Other here is not directly referring a particular person encountered in conversation, for instance, yet the Other refers to an interhuman or "civilized" background of intelligibility that informs the self. That is, this is the Other considered as a "they," and it refers to the self's genealogical, normative inheritance, which is one of the ways that Levinas understands a preobjective domain of the self's experience.

The Other's infinity, in the third person, genealogical sense, is a foundation for such "totalizing" activities as thematization, objectivity, and empirical science. We will now scrutinize the general principles that inform this sense of infinity conditioning totality by referencing them to a strong and relevantly diverse sample of his use of "the Other," or "the idea of infinity" *qua* the Other, as a conditioning structure of a totalizing activity.

First, we will consider the general patterns that inform these types of assertions, which densely populate the landscape of *Totality and Infinity*. Second, we shall transition to more complex cases—"politics," "equality," and "economics"—so as to identify the nuances inherent in Levinas's rather sweeping use of the genealogical interhuman "Other," which extends, for instance, to the "teacher," the "master," and even "the school."

What I communicate is therefore already a function of others. (210)

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[162] In these kinds of cases, the "gleam of exteriority" that is appealed to in the infinity aspect is thus not restricted to interlocutory situations; instead, it refers to a genealogical chain of people who have created certain cultural conditions that enable one to speak, think, and *ethically* act in certain ways, even if the exact correlation between this Other and oneself be "random."

The Other is the first rational teaching, the condition for all knowing. (203)

Representation comes from the first teaching of the teacher. (100)

The Other's word is the condition for theoretical truth and error. (51)

The school, without which no thought is explicit, conditions science. (99)

One can readily see that such claims all point toward a prior or more basic condition for the theoretical, thematic, or—in a word—*totalizing* activity in question. Whether in the sense of "already," "first," or "condition," the general thought is that a preexisting structure of human intelligibility informs the totalizing activity in question—whether it be the activity of "science," codified communication, "knowing," or simply standards of "truth and error." This structure is essentially a function of "others," the Other," the "teacher," and the "school," which are (some of) Levinas's multifaceted terms for the transcendent and ontological sense of the Other's "infinity."[163]

In one sense, the Other refers to those other people who taught one how to think in a certain way, and or to the person that taught him or her, for example, and to this Other's other, etc. The Other considered in this genealogical way reflects, furthermore, the "gleam of exteriority" that Levinas equates with infinity's activity, which is to say that these terms indicate an independent interhuman organizing category or condition that he thinks has been forgotten, overlooked, or that simply lies dormant in the history of philosophy.

His thoughts on such interhuman conditions help to inform his deeper, ontological claim about an infinity founding a totality. We saw earlier, when we considered Levinas's

[163] He also uses "the stranger," "the widow," "the orphan," "the master," and the "feminine," to name some other examples.

vague remarks about his own philosophical method, that "the idea of infinity" is simply the "rigorously developed concept" of the "gleam of exteriority or transcendence in the Other's face" (*T&I* 24). When we consider these remarks beyond the face-to-face realm, he *also* means that the "gleam of exteriority" extends to the idea of the Other's infinity in the senses just mentioned—as the transcendent trace, or simply the "face," of "the teacher" as such, or "the school" or Other as such.

Consider, for example, that the "idea of infinity" is "the introduction of the new into a thought," and "I cannot account for it by myself" (*T&I* 219, 267). It both "moves consciousness" and evinces "the overflowing of finite thought by its content" (*T&I* 27, 197). In addition to the general Cartesian inspiration that informs these claims, then, we can also see an appeal to a prior or preobjective interhuman category that is motivating the objective theoretical and normative practices mentioned: "truth and error"; "representation"; and "communication." When he notes, further, that the verbal sense of "infinity" is "to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I," I interpret this as perfectly in line with his thoughts on "the school," or simply the Other, as the preexisting source of this donation (*T&I* 51).

Beyond the face-to-face significance of this structure, he is more generally indicating a genealogical and ontological human standard of intelligibility that "gives" abilities to the self that would otherwise be beyond its capacity. These abilities refer to the more concrete "reception" of learning from the Other, in the self's distant past, who is designated as a "she" or "they." This reception would include learning to speak in intersubjective, and not merely private, terms; the ability to learn to conceptualize, and, further, to see the world in terms of preestablished normative criteria of right and wrong,

good and bad, legal and illegal, as some examples of the Other's catalyst in the self's hitherto egological perspective.

When he claims, furthermore, that "the school makes thought explicit" and "conditions science," I interpret this (in very different terms than the aforementioned) as his indication of an evolving transmission of cultural genes, so to speak, that provide for our present civilized wherewithal to *actually do science in the ways that it is presently done* (*T&I* 99). One way to explain this point includes the following relevant preconditions for the manner in which science is presently conducted: the series of empirical trial and error that people endured and documented; the ongoing (and always disputed!) definition and re-definition of what science "is" and does, as well as the possible objects and regions that count as "scientific"; the tremendous and documented (but also *undocumented*) struggle of individuals who persisted, and persist, against dogma and custom in order to perform and embody the emerging scientific ideal; and a host of other potential "genealogical" candidates could easily be added.

The thought is that an interhuman genealogy informs the possibilities and situation of "science," in this case, but his general description extends more basically to any theoretical and cognitive endeavor whatsoever. The further claim is that, *in addition to* a totalizing historical and material purview that importantly informs such a perspective, there are also culturally genealogical factors that enable totalizing activities of any register. Tersely stated, these "genealogical" conditions all reflect an interhuman and civilized background out of which things show up *as* this or that specific thing, and this background is not *experienced* as an object or a denotative state of affairs, but, rather, it enables the world to show up in these intersubjective, normative, and codified ways.

To illustrate this initially strange position by an analogy, when a branch of evolutionary theory asserts that it was necessary for "our ancestors" to have done (or not done) a certain activity *in order that we be as we actually are, and be capable of what we actually do,* I interpret Levinas as making a similar point. Levinas's "data," of course, are of a different caliber than those of archeologists and anthropological hermeneutists who speculate about what caused certain changes in the genetic continuum, but the general thought is that certain prior human activities enable or condition the actual human situation. Levinas's "data" precisely concern the social, political, and theoretical fund of civilization that "transcendentally" and genealogically "conditions" the self and totalizing activities.

To go further in this vein, just as one rarely, or never, *really* thinks of *oneself* as the inheritance of certain necessary permutations of primates and "lesser" animals, so too does one rarely, or never, think of *oneself* as determined by the inheritance of a complex and (in some regards) more primitive *cultural* evolution. That these conditions are forgotten or overlooked, however, does not mean that they are insignificant.

We can also see at least one more formal similarity between the evolutionary theorist's strategy and Levinas's, namely that in both cases the data are always incomplete and in need of being filled in from a perspective that cannot have a clear, thematic assessment of all of the relevant data. That is, just as the theorist cannot 'go back in time' and actually see the particular adaptation or environmental change that conditioned the mutation in question, so too does Levinas's cultural "data" find itself limited in this regard. In Levinas's case, the analogous point is that it is presumably impossible for the self to point to the exact moment in the past when it was "breached by the Other" so as to

become open to an intersubjective world. But in each case, Levinas's or the evolutionary theorists, the thought is that meaningful speculation can be done about what led to the present by regressing on the past data available, and "filling in the gaps." For Levinas, this filling-in takes the form of the interhuman Other, as we see in the examples below, and his "adaptations," as it were, require such inherited structures as language, responsibility, generosity, sacrifice, learning, norms, and *Bildung*.

When we compare the following passage of Levinas's analysis of his conditions for human freedom, we see a case for the "evolutionary" genealogical interpretation just ventured, as well as for the "forgotten" or "hidden" character of the conditions themselves that we noted above.

> Freedom is not realized outside of social and political institutions, which open to it the access to fresh air necessary for its expansion, its respiration, and even, perhaps, its spontaneous generation. Apolitical freedom is to *be explained as an illusion* due to the fact that its partisans belong *to an advanced stage of political evolution*. An existence that is free, and not just a velleity for freedom, *presupposes* a certain *organization* of nature and society. (241, my emphasis)

The presupposed "organization of nature and society" is simply an instance of his conditions for how the perspective of infinity disrupts and informs the perspective of totality. An important feature of his claim is that a preexisting "organization of society" and human nature is necessary for true "political freedom." It is presumably *only* after others have struggled, for generations upon generations, that a stable standard of "political evolution" emerges. These others *cannot* be described, however, as a denotative fact that specifies *every* discrete person who contributed to this "advanced stage," but they can be referred to in Levinas's third person sense of the Other. This Other is a transcendent and genealogical "they" or "them" that is appealed to as a condition of the

modern "advanced stage of political evolution." The Other in this sense indicates, or attests to, a prior interhuman structure that represents the surplus of past human endeavor that also informs the self and the same as a "totality."

A further claim is that because one is at the relative end of such a process, one can "illusorily" believe that the fruit needed no tree, so to speak. That is, one can overlook the human struggle and sacrifice necessary to achieve the fruit of lasting political stability, and hence one can think that the self's default situation is "how things must be."[164] In an important way, then, the self's perspective can be "broken up" by the "gleam of exteriority" when the self comes to see itself as the heir to an advanced and ongoing "political evolution" that requires the Other. So, if one began with a perspective that sees only the result of the struggle, for instance—"hey, I am a free political agent, and this is the natural state of affairs!"—then one's perspective can be disrupted and meaningfully altered by a consideration that attests to the genealogical interhuman conditions that have enabled this same freedom to see the world in terms of political norms and ontic freedoms. One might thereby think, "I am free, but this same freedom presupposes vigilant political struggle and effort, and it is hence precarious."

In analogous fashion, Levinas's use of totality *and* infinity is generally designed to point out an underlying, but overlooked, condition of theoretical activity—in this case, "political theory" and ontic political freedom. This passage illustrates, accordingly, an appeal to the requisite "cultural existence" that we cited above, which is an instance of a

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[164] It is in some such sense, no doubt, that parents tell their children that "this (money, privilege, entitlement) doesn't just fall from the sky, you know!" The point to such a reprimand is to indicate the struggles and difficulties that were necessary to obtain the good in question, and the "child" in this case simply sees the good as "natural" or available, and does not see the struggle that it takes to obtain it., and hence to use it and value it responsibly.

condition for "true political freedom," in this case, as well as Levinas's implicit account of why such an "evolution" gets overlooked.[165] In different terms, we could call the "advanced stage of political evolution" the result of past human action that now informs the self as a totality, and we could call the appeal to the conditions that lead to this totality the "infinity" of the work of countless, and often nameless, past others—even if the individual "illusorily" believes otherwise.

Levinas employs a similar strategy when he discusses the "conditions for equality," and after we have clarified some of his technical terms, we then see the case for the culturally evolutionary situation of his conditions, as well as a more precise formulation of how they work.

> Politics tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, toward equality; it ensures happiness. And political law concludes and sanctions the struggle for recognition. Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition. It is the *surplus* possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the *conditions* for equality. (64, my italics)

He uses the initially misleading term "religion" to transition to his conclusion about transcendental conditions, but he importantly defines "religion" as "a relation with

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[165] There is an interesting similarity in the way that the infinity aspect of the other *person* is not lucidly graspable by the agent or individual, and the way that the infinity aspect of his conditions resists such a perspective. This is because the totality aspect of his conditions would fall into branches of history, science, political theory, and such—these are fields that have been "more than" glimpsed at, or that are robust and thriving, simply put, and Levinas knows quite well that others (e.g. experts in such fields) are in a better position to do *this* kind of research. If we draw on the previous example to illustrate the distinction between this totalizing perspective and the "infinity" perspective that Levinas articulates, we can see that there are certainly numerous textbooks and experts that/who indicate several presumably necessary conditions for the modern political state in, say, The United States of America. One could easily cite the "influences" of the French Revolution, American Independence from Britain, and "Manifest Destiny" as relevant factors in shaping who we tend to be, and how we tend to think, *as* American political agents. One could even cite every single documented and relevant fact that purports to explain how we are today because of who "we" were, in a totalizing sense. The Levinasian "infinity" thought, however, is that this kind of totalizing perspective necessarily misses something important. Namely, it misses the *undocumented and unforeseen* individuals who did not, or could not, make the historical cut, so to speak. In a sense, just as we ethically celebrate the "unknown soldier or martyr" with monuments, the infinity aspect of his conditions ethically celebrates the "unknown Other."

another that does not constitute a totality" (*T&I* 80), that is, as a relation between the self or same, and a transcendent source that "preserves both terms" without synthesizing them; or, as an infinity conditioning, without actually being, a totality. "Desire," furthermore, and as we saw last chapter when we analyzed erotic relations in Levinasian phenomenology, is importantly one of his technical terms for "the search for radical exteriority," which is what he means by "metaphysics or transcendence" (*T&I 82).*

So, first, Levinas formally indicates an instance of an "objective" or totalizing institutional practice, in this case "politics," and he then proceeds to indicate that which imbues it with a significance of a different register. Here it is the residual "surplus" of *people* who actually (and perhaps even "gloriously") conscientiously revolted in presumably "responsible, humble, and sacrificial" ways. On my interpretation, Levinas is *not only* referring to some actual ontic individuals Joe, Jane, and Jack who contributed to a particular political cause, but he is *also* referring to a general human structure of "responsible sacrifice" that is a condition for either the maintenance, or establishment, of real political recognition. In the former case, one could consider that, for instance: "Joe, Jack, and Jane are the particular historical individuals who furthered Irish-American political rights in 1892."

In the infinity aspect, however, the general human structure that is appealed to, *without appeal to this or that particular person*, suggests that the general Other *qua* sacrifice is a condition for the political as such. In this aspect, importantly, one *cannot* completely know the full enumeration of the particular human others who "responsibly sacrificed"—how could one ever be certain of exactly "who did what" leading up to the present? The Levinasian thought is that such human sacrifice was necessary, however,

and that it informs the political totality.[166] In a way, then, the infinity aspect of his conditions is an analogue to our ethical memorials "dedicated," initially in a strange way, to the "unknown soldier" or "unknown martyr." This is because it points to a source or activity that is not explicitly thematized, but is nonetheless appealed to as a cause or significant factor to the situation in question.[167] This appeal is importantly patterned on the way the self's totalizing perspective gets broken up by the Other, which leaves the self with a different perspective on the situation in question. In the "sacrifice" case, this amounts to seeing the need for a monument to the "unknown," although this perspective is incompatible with the totality aspect that maintains that there is no unknown; there is only the denotative documentation of history considered as a totality.

We can also see the case for Levinas's conditions at work in the essence of what he calls "economics" and "objectivity," since he argues that the Other is a primordial fundament of "the original dispossession of the ego" that "*conditions* the subsequent generalization of things by money" (*T&I* 75-6, my italics). Levinas ambivalently claims, concerning the character of objectivity in general, that it is "*not simply* the object of an impassive contemplation," which would merely be a totalizing point of view, but rather it is *also* a function of "the presence of the Other" (*T&I* 75, my italics).

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[166] In this case too, it is easy to see how such a "surplus" or residue of past civilized action gets overlooked, forgotten, or simply spun as irrelevant in its formative role in conditioning the present. How many people *actually* struggled, sacrificed, and perhaps even died ("in vain" or not) in order to attain reasonable stability (in any given totalizing and ontic arena) for their predecessors? There is clearly no extant way to answer the question in a straightforwardly quantitative way, and, in a further Levinasian vein, it is not clear that a numerical answer would satisfy the human sense of justice and ethics that such a question deserves.

[167] Levinas further indicates the "illusory" character of freedom as being purely an individual matter when he writes (clearly while taking a shot at Sartre, as well as perhaps drawing on his own prisoner camp experiences): "Even he who has accepted death is not free. The insecurity of the morrow, hunger and thirst scoff at freedom. And, to be sure, in the midst of torture understanding the reasons for torture reestablishes the famous inward freedom, in spite of the betrayal and degradation portended. But these reasons themselves appear only to the beneficiaries of *historical evolution* and *institutions*. In order to oppose inward freedom to the absurd and its violence it is *necessary* to have *received* an *education*" (241).

His *initial* characterization of the ego, however, is one of "enjoyment", that is, of the ego in its pre-ethical or immature stage wherein it spontaneously sees the world as a set of possible "inalienable" things that can satisfy its creature comforts, to paraphrase Levinas. The objects in the ego's world at this stage are merely other, because they are purely assimilable to the self's own circuit of desires and conceptions—the self in this stage is akin to a baby who only knows the words "mine" and "more," as it were. Levinas notes that at some point in the ego's development it encounters "the Other's presence," which "is equivalent to the calling into question of [one's] joyous spontaneity of the world" (*T&I* 76). The self thus confronted by the Other begins not only to robustly "learn language" and hence to classify things objectively, but *also* to "share the world" in what Levinas calls "generosity," or "a point of view independent of the egoist position" (*T&I* 75-6). The self, after it is "breached by the Other," begins to reckon with an intersubjective world replete with norms and general standards that alter one's previously egological perspective.

This connection between the Other's role in objectivity, language, and economics is crucial, both because it conforms to his general argumentative strategy, and it helps to clarify his thoughts on the Other's role in the world's general stability considered as a totality. So, once the self has been "breached" by the Other's presence, it begins to have the tools to communicate, to conceptualize, and eventually to see the world in a general, as opposed to a purely self-referential, sense. [168]This catalyzed transition lays the

[168] As chapter 1 illustrated, this maturation of the self formally parallels the development of Descartes' ego cogito, in that the ego initially begins with a limited and (potentially) auto-poetical sense of perception and cognition—as if it "were a totality," in Descartes' language— but then it eventually "discovers" the supreme Other, "in whom all the treasures of wisdom and science lie." This Other is also discovered as being the condition for a reliable and objective world, and the self is dependent upon this Other in these ways. So

foundation for the ability to reckon with things as having a universally designated name, value, or price, for instance, which is proportionally "equivalent" to other things, goods, and services.

To bolster this interpretation, after we consider his remarks on language, we will transition to his thoughts on the connection between conceptualization, objectivity, and economics.

> To recognize the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed things, but *at the same time* to establish, by gift, community and universality. Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other. To speak is to make the world common. Language…lays the foundations for a possession in common. (76, my italics)

So, once the genealogical and personal Other has set the stage for this common world, through the introduction of language, the self also learns "conceptualization" from the Other, which "is the first generalization and the *condition* for objectivity" (*T&I* 76, my italics). That is, once the self has actually learned from the Other, or been given by the Other, the tools to conceptualize, it is now able to "share" the common world, and to "give" or contribute its own unique perspective to, and through, the common world to which it now has access.[169] So, the very abilities to speak, reason, and reckon with a general world are all mediated or conditioned by others, and these conditions open up existential possibilities to the self that would otherwise lie fallow.[170] In this way, the

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even if the ego cogito is first chronologically, it eventually finds out that it needed the Other's "guarantee" and "innate ideas" in order to do what it does. Levinas arguably replaces these "innate ideas" with his cultural conditions, and God's "guarantee" with the (human) Other's guarantee.

[169] "Consciousness of a world is already consciousness *through* that world" (*T&I* 153).

[170] In very different terms, it is no accident that a child raised without *any* adult supervision and education whatsoever be deficient in all aspects of "rationality," language, and abstract social considerations.

preexisting intersubjective world can enable or condition the self or same's theoretical capacities.

The budding Levinasian self can also overcome its default understanding of reality as simply an extension of its needs—for it no longer purely sees the world as the trove of "inalienable property" that merely serves its autopoetical and narcissistic wants.

> Objectivity coincides with the abolition of inalienable property—which *presupposes* the epiphany of the other…The generality of the Object is correlative with the generosity of the subject going to the Other, beyond the egoist and solitary enjoyment, and hence making the community of the goods of this world break forth from the exclusive property of enjoyment. (76, my italics)

His first point is that objectivity requires a social attunement to things that is catalyzed by the Other's infinity (which we considered, above, with an assessment of Levinasian language and conceptualization) and this entails that the self has "generously" left its autistic orbit, so to speak (that is, it maturely left its "egoist and solitary enjoyment").[171] At this point in the genetic description, there is a correlation between the self's plunge into the social world and its ability to see things as general, common, and shareable. The "community of goods" breaks forth, in Levinas's language, and this effects a change in the self's phenomenology—the world *now* appears *as* a common, stable, and intersubjective world that is susceptible to an objective and economic purview.[172]

Similarly, when Levinas writes "what I communicate is therefore already a function of others," there is essentially the same argumentative strategy at work as in the "freedom," "political equality," and "economics" examples. If we begin with the "what I

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[171] Reciprocally, the self now has to speak in common terms to articulate what he or she wants and desires.

[172] It is interesting from a Levinasian point of view that, in all ages of civilization, the ancestral "founders" put their stamp or image on money. On a canonical reading, this simply reflects a certain narcissism, megalomania, or "rule of the same," but on our bivalent interpretation, it could *also* reflect the reminder, or remainder, of the Other in the foundation of the conditions for civilization.

communicate" clause, we can see that this stands for a thematic, objective activity that would fall into the class of a "totality." That is, that which one communicates falls into objective propositions, phonemes, signs, and such that are all used to express and codify the self and the world. The reciprocal Levinasian thought is that the Other's infinity *qua* civilized linguistic inheritance serves as an underlying ontological condition for communication within this totality—that is, the genealogical Other provides the self with linguistic "tools" that become "ready-to-hand," to employ a Heideggerian vernacular.

If we return to our example a few pages above, which concerns "thought *already* foraging in a system of signs," which is condition for the self's actual ontic deployment of thought, we see relevant similarities with the "what one communicates" case. This is because the "already" in both cases indicates a cultural fund or surplus out of which the self draws in order to communicate, and this surplus refers to the past others who have given the self, by way of a civilized dowry of sorts, the conditions to communicate. In different terms, it is not purely random, or inessential, but rather meaningfully conditioned, that *this* turn of phrase, or *that* language, or (and more importantly) *these* standards of communicatory salience and normativity be used in any particular form of "what one communicates."

It is also important to recall that when Levinas appeals to a totality and the infinity aspect that conditions it, his point is not to "belittle" the totality aspect in question, or even to eradicate it, as Wolin suggests, but precisely to show that its philosophical exposition requires a more nuanced and balanced consideration than

previously acknowledge.[173] As we see with his thoughts on political equality and freedom, Levinas's language clearly does not suggest that such practices are somehow pernicious *in themselves*.[174] His description, rather, is meant to show that these important institutions "presuppose a certain [interhuman] organization" or need certain "conditions," without which they can be ill conceived and forsaken as regards the interest of preserving and establishing justice, freedom, and political equality. In brief, his thought is that such objective institutions require an ontological consideration of the Other as a genealogical and third person structure that mirrors, and sometimes hangs together with, the interlocutory Other's function. That is, in some cases one's experience of totality gets informed by the Other's infinity in interlocutory situations, and in Other cases one's experience gets informed by the Other genealogically.

Levinas sometimes refers to this general sense of the foundational, genealogical Other as "the third party," and he arguably uses this term to make a distinction between the particular Other with whom one speaks, and the Other in the genealogical ontological sense we have been considering.[175] He writes that the "presence of the face, the infinity of the other is…a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us)" (*T&I* 213). When he describes this sense of the Other's "face," however, as the "whole of humanity which looks at us," it can seem like a hyperbolic claim, or a non

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[173] "Ultimately, Levinas's devaluation of practical reason—which he confines to the woodshed of ontology—is self defeating. It dismisses out of hand prospects of progressive social change. The binary opposition between "totality" and "infinity" that governs his work makes it nearly impossible to conceptualize meaningful intersubjectivity. As soon as one leaves the terrain of ethics as defined by the face of the Other, one succumbs to the inescapable sway of "totality": the "every man for himself" ethos of self-preservation run amok (Wolin, "Levinas and Heidegger," 241).

[174] See Wolin, "Levinas and Heidegger," 240-2.

[175] Levinas is (regrettably, in my opinion) inconsistent with his use of many key technical terms, and "the Other" and the "third" are no exceptions. He sometimes uses "other" (as in the fully assimilable other, like "nourishment") when one would think he means "Other."

sequitur. But when we couple such a claim with my interpretation of his conditions as a transcendental and genealogical human structure that underlies objective or theoretical practices, the claim simply fits in with the general argumentative strategy of the text. That is, the "whole of humanity looking at us" is one of his ways of describing the preexisting fund of civilization, teaching, and human effort that has enabled us to be what we are, at least to a large degree. In brief, he is referring to the interhuman relations that subtend or condition our theoretical, thematic, and objective practices.

Accordingly, when he writes that "representation comes from the first teaching of the teacher" (*T&I* 100) it is simply a part of his general argument, on my interpretation. If we substitute "representation" with his thoughts on language, politics, or freedom, and "first teaching" with a preexisting interhuman background of meaning, then the claim is just a more basic modification of his general logic. Namely, in addition to the particular and documented historical, material, and contextual conditions that enable someone to "represent" objects *as* organized in a certain way, Levinas is furthermore trying to carve out a field of philosophical research that also incorporates background *cultural* "conditions" into the organization of reality. The "civilized" or "interhuman" conditions that he illustrates refer to what he will call, in later works, the "traces" of the human effort that leads to the background structure of intelligibility out of which things appear as they do.

His claim, on my interpretation, is that that which a particular individual *can* "represent" to himself is mediated by "the first teaching of the teacher," which is simply his gloss for an individual's cultural predecessors *qua* the background of intelligibility out of which theoretical activities and possibilities take their shape. In this sense his remark

about how "infinity moves consciousness" is more clear, because he means that the Other's role in the formation of the self and consciousness shapes or "moves" the self 's conscious possibilities. It is also consistent with such thoughts as the basic character of "the overflowing of objective thought by a *forgotten* experience from which they live" (*T&I* 28, my emphasis).

These conditions refer, moreover, to a "beyond" the totality aspect of the field or activity in question, and so they hook up with his thoughts on "infinity" and the Other's "face." That is, just as in the infinity aspect the other *person* can be appreciated as a source or activity beyond the self's lucid precomprehension and calculation, we can also view his conditions as interhuman organizing activities, or inherited genealogical functions, that inform the self and its possibilities as a totality.

To recapitulate, the basic structure of the ways that infinity conditions totality is arguably *the* guiding methodological thread of *Totality and Infinity*. For the sake of economy of prose, our present analysis has confined itself to a limited (although relevantly diverse) sample of the various ways that an interhuman "infinity" founds or conditions a totality. *Pace* commentators, *pro* and *contra* Levinas, who claim that he "merely argues by assertion," like Moran, or that Levinas "delights in paradox and contradiction," like Hutchens, or that he is simply misologous, as we saw with Wolin, it is my general contention that Levinas attempts to found a new field of phenomenological and ontological research, and that it has a distinct, if oddly stated, argumentative pattern. This pattern, when interpreted against the background of Levinas's philosophical precursors, actually serves to dispel the apparent paradoxes, contradictions, and non-sequiturs that allegedly inform his philosophical ambitions.

We can readily see the same kind of argumentative thrust at work in the above examples when we consider his claims, for instance, that "thought can become explicit only among two" (*T&I* 100), and that "from the master comes the possibility of truth" (101), or, even in claims such as "attention is attention to something because it is attention to someone" (95). In each case, Levinas is indicating a more basic interhuman structure (that is, "two" people, teaching, and simply "someone") that relevantly conditions the "totalizing" or theoretical activity in question. Whether it be through the self's need to have learned language from the Other, or to have been taught how to reason, conceptualize, and theorize by the Other, or to have been given the socio-political wherewithal to see the world in sophisticated and ethical ways, the point is that the self "owes" a part of its selfhood to the Other at least in the general ways described. Levinas also extends this inheritance (or his conditions considered in a third person sense) beyond the self, to theories, institutions, and "objective" structures, which reflect "the same": but the basic point is similar—such institutions "owe" their character to the Other. Hence, he often makes such initially implausible, non sequitur, or simply platitudinous claims as, "I cannot disentangle myself in society from the Other" (*T&I* 47). But when we interpret such claims as a modification of the general paradigm of the way that the Other's infinity conditions the self's perspective of totality, then the claim is simply part and parcel of Levinas's argumentative demarche.

The other, but related, prong of his demarche is exhibited in our consideration of the interlocutory Other, whose ability to surprise, critique, and inform the self evinces another way that the Other's infinity conditions the self's perspective of totality.

Badiou Reconsidered

As we return to Badiou's critique of Levinas, it is first important to briefly survey the basic patterns of the work done so far. This is because the chapter's work has indicated an ontological and transcendental sense of the Other that includes the particular other person whom one faces, and it additionally indicates ontological structures of (interhuman) intelligibility and transcendence that condition, or help to enable, certain theoretical and objective activities. We saw these structures at work in our analyses above, which described a "totalizing" activity as mediated and catalyzed by a prior, interhuman ontological structure. Such structures were described as linguistic, cognitive, or socio-political and economic, and they all presuppose a human, or simply civilized, element.

After his *magnum opus*, Levinas (often vaguely) refers to these structures as "cultural existence," "transcendental conditions," or "pre-objective consciousness," but they find a more concrete reference when we amplify these thoughts with a retroactive examination of *Totality and Infinity*. We have called these structures Levinas's conditions, and they arguably flesh out the guiding thread of *Totality and Infinity's* method—the "rigorously develop concept" of how an "infinity" can found a "totality" in a *general* and *ontological way*. In different terms, this chapter has detailed an account of a phenomenological and ontological sense of the Other that Badiou (and many others) precisely overlook.

To recapitulate, Badiou argues that Levinas's phenomenology is *insufficient* to support the thesis that the Other necessarily informs and grounds the self in meaningful ways. Badiou claims, for instance, that the "phenomenological analyses of the face, of the

caress, of love, cannot by themselves ground the anti-ontological (or anti-identity) thesis of the author of *Totality and Infinity*" (21).[176] One of Badiou's potential insights is that, for all one knows, even Levinas's other "resembles [the self] too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true" (22).

Badiou further argues that without an *ontological* "principle of radical alterity" that "guarantees" that the other is not a feature of the self's "mimetic" construction, then Levinas ultimately needs recourse to *some other* guarantee of "infinite" alterity. Badiou claims, moreover, that the only other candidate for a finite self's sanction of radical alterity, aside from the (now-eliminated) radical alterity of the real other person, is "God the ineffable." This recourse is, of course, stillborn because such a makeshift source of alterity, far from founding a philosophically original "ethics" in Levinas's sense of the term, actually leaves us with a "pious discourse without piety," that is, a pseudo-philosophical account that masks its fundamentally "religious character" (23). So, instead of guaranteeing access to the Other as an originary and fundamental experience, which would make Levinas's philosophy authentically committed to truth and experience, Levinas (so the argument goes) leaves us arbitrarily substituting "God" into this alleged void.

Badiou essentially patterns his critique as a constructive dilemma, then. Either Levinas can "guarantee" the ontological difference between self and Other with the philosophical resources of *Totality and Infinity*, or Levinas "really" needs a quasi-philosophical appeal to God—the "altogether Other"—so as to "justify" his philosophy.

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[176] It is *not* our contention, again, that Levinas attempts to ground an "anti-ontological" thesis in *Totality and Infinity*. Hence we will simply be dealing with Badiou's (more accurate) claim about the "anti-identity" thesis.

In order to eliminate the former option Badiou writes that one needs to first:

> make explicit the axioms of thought that *decide* an orientation [of whether] the experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance, or of an essential non-identity, the traversal of which is the ethical experience itself. (21-2)

If Badiou can show that Levinas's claim to ontologically "guarantee" the Other's "infinite" distance in the *other person* is not as secure as Levinas thinks it to be, then he can try to account for that which Levinas "really" needs to provide such a guarantee—that is, he can account for that which "decides" Levinas's orientation. Badiou argues that "nothing in the simple phenomenon of the other contains such a guarantee" because "the finitude of the other's appearing certainly *can* be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus leads back to the logic of the same" (22). He follows up with the claim that since the other person allegedly cannot provide such a guarantee, then Levinas really would need to incorporate the quasi-mystical infinite "alterity" of God as such a sanction. Such a move, of course, relegates Levinas's Other to the status of a "religious" experience, and is hence not of the order of "demonstrable evidences." If the latter road is taken, then Levinas "has no philosophy," but he rather has a crypto-theology instead. This latter horn, then, is what really "decides" the axioms of Levinas's thought on Badiou's analysis.

Badiou essentially overlooks other horns in the dilemma, however, and thus his dilemma is hasty. The third and fourth horns, which are different *in kind* from either "proving" that the generic other person "exists," or "proving" a robust notion of God for that matter, is precisely what we have been articulating during the entire dissertation. My interpretation of Levinas reveals an ontological and transcendental consideration of the

Other that is both non-theological as well as within the fold of phenomenological and ontological "evidence." This overlooked alternative importantly focuses on the Levinasian *self's* experience and the possibility of this same experience being altered by sources that one does not anticipate or choose. When pitched at this level, Levinas is clearly not concerned with "proving" that others, or other minds, exist (and so Badiou's charge is something of a philosophical cheap-shot, moreover, since Levinas's phenomenology is not pitched at the level of a "refutation of idealism," or the so-called "problem" of other minds.)

The "axioms that decide the orientation" of Levinas's phenomenology, on one of my interpretations, originally refer to two distinct and simultaneously incompatible perspectives that unfold within an agent's experience—the self's experience as a "totality," on the one hand, and the self's experience in the infinity aspect, on the other hand. My further claim is that these distinct perspectives limit and hence inform each other, and when they are seen in two distinct, but mutually informative senses, one gains an accurate perspective of Levinas's phenomenology that dispels the seemingly paradoxical and inconsistent nature of his claims about discourse, teaching, and erotic relations, for instance.

As we have seen in both this chapter and the previous chapter, the totality-infinity structure reveals an interhuman and ontological sense of the Other that does not rely on a "mimetic" construction of the world in order to "guarantee" an ontological difference between self and Other. It relies, rather, on a nuanced interpretation of totality and infinity that shows aspects of the self's experience that are consistent with a source that

the self does not assume, from one perspective, and a source with which the self clearly relates, from a different perspective.

My interpretation of the genealogical consideration of the Other's infinity represents another overlooked horn in Badiou's dilemma, because this sense of the Other "decides the axioms of Levinas's thought" in a way that neither relies upon the "self's mimetic construction" nor "upon "God the ineffable." Our analyses of the genealogical Other is articulated precisely as a structure in being that does not need the *self's* guarantee of a difference from an other person ontically encountered, but rather shows how the self is ontologically and genealogically *conditioned* by the Other's formative difference in general (that is, in the ontological structures of language, conceptualization, and the socio-economic arena that enable intersubjective and normative possibilities within the self, to name some prominent examples that we considered).

When Badiou paints Levinas's options for the Other's difference into the corners of either "God," or "absolute difference" from an auto-mimetic viewpoint, he thereby seems committed to the notion that Levinas's Other refers to some "extra-human" entity that floats in ethereal space, or that *completely* differs from the self in some kind of extra-human sense. In the starkest possible contrast, however, we must stress that the Other simply represents the phenomenological ways that alter or change our understanding and perspective, and this is why Levinas takes pains to situate the Other's activity in terms of the self's alteration, formation, and future possibilities. As he emphatically puts the point, "alterity is possible only starting from *me*" (*T&I* 40). [177]

[177] So far I have been critical of Badiou's neglect of Levinas's ontology of the Other, but as I detailed in the previous chapter, there is (oddly) a strong and relevant connection between the ethical agent that Badiou describes and the Levinasian agent that we have described. The further thought, which is thoroughly

Up until now I have been critical of Badiou's work insofar as it hastily paints a dilemma that ignores important considerations of Levinas's thoughts on the ontology of the Other. Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* is, admittedly, an excellent and provocative work in general, and a further thought is that unbeknownst to Badiou, his positive description of the robust ethical agent therein bears striking, and deep, similarities to the Levinasian agent described in chapters 1 and, especially, 2. We have more explicitly seen the case for how Badiou's and Levinas's agents are respectively similar in the previous chapter (pp. 116-8).

For the sake of future scholarship, it would be highly interesting to see work that fuses Badiou's notion of ethics, and the robust "immortal" ethical agent that he describes, with (something like) Levinas's account of ethics and totality and infinity that I have sought to describe in this dissertation. For one reason, both Badiou and Levinas, although they are apparently strange bedfellows, are committed to the notion that contemporary "ethical" debate is in need of a robust consideration of the transcendent possibilities to which the human situation bears witness. Badiou's work may well provide the "space" in which such transcendent possibilities can be enacted, because his (admittedly curt) dismissal of the "negative" and "contemptible" situation of modern ethical debate nonetheless provokes a true rethinking and reflection of the ground of today's ethical situation. Like Levinas's, his work aims to rethink the *radix* of the human agent so as to crystallize a *positive* account of this agent's activity and situation. Badiou's *Ethics* does

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constructive, is that it could turn out that Levinas's phenomenological ontology complements and informs Badiou's "ethics." This is because both agents bear numerous formal similarities in their transcendent possibilities, and the general background out of which Badiou situates his agency seems to hook up with our bivalent totality-infinity structure (at least in consideration of the agent point of view).

not seem, however, to provide a robust indication of the kind of agent that would inhabit his transcendent world. Yet if it is accurate (and I think that it *is* accurate) that the Levinasian agent described in this dissertation relevantly resembles the agent whom Badiou sketches, then the Levinasian agent that we have elucidated could very well provide the content for such a sketch, assuming that the necessary modifications would be enacted.

Conclusion

The third chapter, which draws upon the first two, has sought to clarify the chief, if implicitly stated, argumentative strategy of *Totality and Infinity*, which reflects the various ways that "infinity conditions totality." In one sense, Levinas understands the conditioning rapport between the two in terms of an interpersonal notion of infinity conditioning totality that unfolds in interlocutory or dialogical situations. In another sense, he understands this rapport as the self's connection to a preexisting, genealogical relationship to the past Other that unfolds in a relationship to a "them" or "they." In each case, though, infinity represents an informative limit that informs or alters the self's perspective as a totality, and this informative alteration or modification enables the self to adopt a different perspective that reflects an intersubjective and normative inheritance.

The explicit articulation of this argumentative structure, which generally lies implicit within Levinas's work, serves to show that there is a prolific argumentative strategy that is phenomenologically developed within Levinas's great work. This same structure also shows that, *pace* Putnam's claim that Levinas should not be read as articulating a novel ontological and metaphysical grounding for what he means by "ethics," Levinas does, in fact, articulate a novel ground for "the ethical…the relation

between man to man" (*T&I* 79). Even though Levinas does not engage "ethics" at the level of prescriptive norms, analysis of consequences, or patent virtues, he nonetheless articulates the self's ontological debt to the Other for the ability to reckon with the world in intersubjective and normative lights. When we keep Levinas's ontological account of the Other in mind, we may now reread our introductory citation from William James with a more clear indication of its implications and relevance to Levinas's articulation of the Other.

The dissertation in general has sought to shed light on aspects of Levinas's thought that either seem paradoxical, do not receive due attention, or, in some cases, that are arguably misread by many commentators. In order to attempt to clarify (a very few, admittedly) matters I have, in at least some cases, ventured forth significantly novel interpretations of familiar Levinasian themes and problems. If I have been hermeneutically violent at times in my interpretations of Levinas's thought, one will perhaps excuse me on the grounds that that same thought can remain in the shadows unnecessarily, and it may sometimes need a forceful hand to dispel the miasma of paradox that supporters and critics sometimes laud, and sometimes vilify.

At any rate, it is my most sincere hope that this dissertation has been edifying to those reading it, and that it provides good food for thought.

Yours,

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* "*T&O*" is my abbreviation for *Time and the Other*, and "*T&I*" for *Totality and Infinity*

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