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Ordinary and Extraordinary

and other essays
in phenomenology
and Christianity

CHISOKUDŌ

Contents

Preface

The texts assembled here belong to a body of work that would be difficult and probably misleading to present simply in chronological order. The latter possibility certainly come to mind when James Heisig encouraged me to assemble some of my work into a single volume. A more accurate presentation respects the fact that a good deal of my work has pursued multiple lines of investigation responding to a small handful of questions that occurred to me a long time ago. I write *a good deal of my work* because this collection does not include my engagement of Freudian psychoanalysis or, in more recent years, a sequence of essays and lectures on Christian mystics (Paul, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux...). I could not include them here without blowing up any chance at unity for the volume, and yet I am pleased to mention them in order to hint that what is included here has some bearing on matters at some distance. This is a collection of essays and talks that explore ethics and, increasingly, religion in relation to phenomenology. The latter is generally applied as an excellent method, but from time to time also tested for its capacity to do justice to ethical and religious things. As a matter of personal history, my entry into this sort of work came through an early, fecund dissatisfaction with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, and indeed I maintained a long debate with Levinas until not long before this small project got underway. Only a little of my work on Levinas is present in this collection. This is because I have already placed on record a general account of my understanding of his "ethical metaphysics," "phenomenology of separation," and

"religion of responsibility" in my book, *Levinas on the Primacy of the Ethical*, which appeared with Northwestern University Press in 2022. The single essay exclusively on Levinas that is included in this volume might be read as a point of departure toward the problems and themes that appear in all of the others. These include an effort to grasp *secularity* as an aspect or dimension of our being from which the social phenomenon of secularization emerges to overtake a religious dimension; an interest in the nature of *religious discourse* fully exposed to modern and contemporary challenges, *religious practice* as inseparable from religious discourse, and finally an approach to Christianity as a *way of life* framed in the theological virtues. All of this is undertaken especially in the wake of claims made by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and so my informed readers will not be surprised to find references to Levinas make increasing room for references to Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion and, crucially for me, Jean-Yves Lacoste. Nor will they be surprised by the important presence of theological work by Augustine, Aquinas, Bonhoeffer and others.

These texts belong to a larger number that anticipate a monograph that I hope to complete soon. I have published or read them in a wide array of places and contexts that do not belong to any single group, association, or network. In that sense, they are only fragments of a project conducted in considerable solitude. I nonetheless owe a great deal to my interlocutors on each occasion, my colleagues and students at Boston College, and my good friends in philosophy at other institutions. In particular, Madeline Brenchley and Stephen Gaunt came to my aid when it was time to get these various texts into readable condition. I am grateful above all to James Heisig for the honor of publishing a few lasting thoughts in the company of work by scholars who I have long admired and sometimes even emulated.

In memory of my father,
who asked a lot of questions

1
Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion

What has ethics to do with religion? Must one think that the former always implies some form of the latter? This is far from evident in the culture of the modern North Atlantic, which we are accustomed to tracing to Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. If we still need to identify a source for this mindset, then let us only remind ourselves of the rise of modern science, the dawn of considerable suspicion about culture and morality, and new awareness of the plurality of religious claims to truth and goodness. At the same time, without answering that first question, we might also wonder about our prospects for upholding a plausible conception of God in view of the astonishing cruelty visited on one another in recent times, until it becomes necessary to reconsider a faith that had for a long time held firm, if not without occasional ripples of serious doubt. Early along my way in philosophy, I read Levinas from the perspective of deep concern for what these questions seemed to indicate, and with fascination by his manner of addressing both of them at once. But I also read him—read his great, difficult books over and over—with consistent reservations about certain basic claims and the interpretations of great texts that sometimes accompanied them. Without ever quite having been a "Levinasian," I have always considered him among the greatest philosophers since Kant, and thus been convinced that taking his position as seriously as possible—allowing oneself no shortcuts or respite when interpreting and then arguing—might ground a rigorous investigation of ethics, religion, and the idea of God. The present essay represents an early expression of attempts to do this.

Following the definition established by Aristotle, ethics examines the relationship between our capacity to mark and repeat certain actions, which includes recognizing rules and giving them to oneself, and the passivity denoted in the fact that experiences and ideas impress themselves on us. The good life consists in managing this activity and passivity on the complex field of economic, social and political life. The primary occasion in which we feel this challenge is the encounter with someone in need, where a face alone is often enough to call forth a response visibly guided by prior education and experience. As many have noted, what seems to define this exceptional experience is the manner in which a call for help strikes the passerby before he can invoke the matrix which frames the response one elects to make. Passivity has gone ahead of activity, and cannot be reduced to it. The question of responsibility and thus the entire field of ethics is mobilized by the face of another human being. This basic observation reminds us that the appeal for help is not yet qualified by the dispositions of those who hear it, which in turn seems to invoke the thought that that appeal is pure. From this notion of a pure appeal, it is of course only a short—though perhaps not entirely evident—step to begin speaking of a responsibility which is radical, or originary. Responsibility as such would then designate the being of the individual singled out by a face or gaze which turns toward him from beyond all expectation.

The pure appeal and radical responsibility cannot be fitted within the limits of any concrete identity or situation. The ethics of this rela-

tion thus renounces the possibility of a finite object and, in tum, frees itself from all dependence on or mixture with other fields. But furthermore, having moved outside those other fields, it will then take the view that their accounts of human action, insofar as they are founded on basic definitions, have a contaminated definition of the appeal and a restricted definition of responsibility. Assuming the authority to pass judgment on all other disciplines, this ethics takes for itself the title "first philosophy." An ethics of the pure appeal wishes not to be mistaken for an ethics which is founded. If there is an appeal which strikes me before I could even interpret it, then the idea that all human acts share a single foundation is itself embedded in the same matrix which that appeal is to mobilize. A founded ethics, in short, would then lie completely on the side of the response, and to call upon a foundation would be to give it to oneself. Such an ethics would therefore confine human action to the economy of competing desires, which alleges that every encounter can be explained solely in terms of differing projects of individual existence. In contrast, an ethics of the pure appeal considers ethics to begin precisely when, or rather because, something has escaped that economy.

The philosophy of Levinas presents us with a theory of attachment to the other person prior to any contact, encounter, or liaison. According to Levinas, my neighbor is the "first one on the scene,"[1] looking at me and calling to me before any question of applying calculus or categories to determine his proximity. "He orders me from before being recognized." The very act of recognizing him is itself already a response to him. Recognition is already ordered by what it tries to capture in an

1. E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 109.

E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 87.

image; to form an image of one's neighbor is already to respond to him. If the neighbor is truly the first one on the scene, not even the work of negation is enough to get free of Levinas' strictures: for me to negate every image I form of the other person is still to define him starting from myself, and so to retain our relation within a logic of identity and an anthropology of self-assertion. For Levinas, the relation with my neighbor is a "relation of kinship outside all biology, 'against all logic.'" My neighbor is "precisely other."

In order to understand how we may relate to this extraordinary otherness without immediately betraying it, it is first necessary to examine the conditions by which it is said to reveal itself. Why? Not simply because this otherness exceeds the reach of every concept, but also because all concepts have already been put in the wake of its experience and thought. The claim that my neighbor is the "first one on the scene" directs thinking not only to the extreme degree to which his otherness transcends me, but also to an understanding of myself which says that everything I am and do takes place after the fact of a relation with the Other. Defining this fact, Levinas always speaks the language of ethics and religion.[2] Community with my neighbor begins "in my obligation to him." This obligation, however, is not conscious, or rather, consciousness always arrives after the fact of the obligation. One is always already obliged. One starts from a debt so deep and so ravenous that it swallows the act of recognizing it. The relation with my neighbor would thus be a matter first and above all of a debt which is infinite.

Levinas's choice of the word "obligation" is of a single piece with his idea that my neighbor is the "first one on the scene." If my neighbor was already there before I caught sight of him, then on one hand he has a prior claim on the world I have been living from, while on the other

2. It is of course questionable whether this is a fact at all, since, like Kant's equally strange "fact of reason," it must be considered prior to both the actions and the capacities of the mind which apprehends it.

hand I awaken to his proximity from the midst of a naive assumption that that world was simply there for me and me alone. The encounter with another person therefore involves not only a confrontation with a rival for the fruits of the earth but also a realization that my previous comportment had made no allowances for him. Levinas captures this drama with descriptions of a face which "traumatizes" me by removing every cause for self-assurance. The face of my neighbor expresses an otherness before and beyond the reach of every act starting from myself. In *Totality and Infinity*, this relation between a self-interested ego and a wholly ungraspable Other is described under the heading "Separation." Separation is the "ultimate structure."[3]

At first sight, all of this would seem to imply a negative evaluation of the self-interested, self-absorbed ego, or what Levinas abbreviates as "the same." The isolated individual lives blindly for himself, as if the rightful and uncontested master over everything in his path. Yet this same self-absorption is indispensable for the introduction of an appeal to transcend that dark existence. After all, if the subject does not tend toward radical closure with itself, it remains open to Others with whom it might then appear to have something in common. Under such conditions, one could hardly speak of the revelation of an otherness which is absolute. In other words, in order for absolute exteriority to reveal itself as absolute exteriority, there must first be extreme interiority. If I am indeed deeply immersed in a world I make entirely my own, an otherness which reveals itself from beyond that world might well be said to defy all qualifications. The event of the "trauma" requires and then shatters the pretense of "the same." By awakening me to a separation presupposed in every act beginning from myself, the face thrusts on me the fact that my prior self-absorption, but also any future solicitude, has the fundamental character of responding. This is where Levinas's sense of pre-original obligation touches the

3. E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 53. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 80.

more familiar moral sense of the word: the trauma which awakens me to the fact that I am always already responding leaves me no alternative but to somehow take up that fact more consciously, whether in the mode of care for the other person or in a more selfish retreat into my own concerns.

This word "trauma" is justified by the depth of the event it designates. The face which reports to me that my neighbor was there even before I came on the scene, and thus mutatis mutandis before I saw or heard him, does not merely weigh heavily on my conscience but puts the very workings of moral deliberation under pressure. To be traumatized by such a face is to be deprived of the time to evaluate what has befallen me and decide how to respond to it; it is to be singled out at a level deeper than that of the *Jemeinigkeit* formally present in every *Dasein*.[4] Responsibility is a calling, then, but one which does not speak the language of affection, as is found in *Sein und Zeit* (§40). Unlike anxiety, which has an emotional tonality in which *Dasein* can identify itself,[5] the trauma which Levinas describes is so blunt and fleeting as to defy identification of any kind (one even hesitates to affirm that it is). According to Heidegger, anxious *Dasein* has fallen out of the everyday world back to a more fundamental "solipsism" which that world helps him to forget. According to Levinas, the subject confronted by his neighbor has been torn from naive solitude to the ethical relation forgotten in. that solitude. Anxiety arises at the loss of an assured relation

4. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 162. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126.

5. Levinas has understood this from the beginning. In 1932 he proposed to translate the term in question, Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* (*befindet sich*: to find oneself), as "disposition affective." ("Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie," E. Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 68. This choice has since found close agreement in Martineau's use of "affection" in his French translation of *Sein und Zeit*. In English translation, Macquarrie and Robinson employ the unfortunate "state-of-mind," whereas Stambaugh suggests "attunement" for both *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*, or "mood." Heidegger himself uses the term *Befindlichkeit* for the first time in his 1924 conference on "The Concept of Time" (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1989), in order to translate Augustine's Latin term *affectio*.

with the world. The face of the Other deprives us even of an assured identification with ourselves.

The assertion of an ethical relation prior to every form of solitude, and the accompanying idea that all solitude is in some way self-centered—Levinas sometimes says "narcissistic"—leaves the precise status of anxiety in doubt. Is anxiety, with its exclusive reference to the one whom it befalls, only a heightened experience of the solitude we are now to recognize as false? Or, admitting that Levinas's concept of "separation" designates only one possible definition of finitude, does anxiety, as the experience of groundlessness, testify to another such definition, another experience of it, and finally another ontology and another ethics than the one Levinas centers on preoriginal obligation? Anxiety singularizes just as surely as does the face of my neighbor, but under different conditions and with different results. What place is there for the experience of anxiety in a philosophy which replaces the relation with Being by the relation with one's neighbor? Is the being who becomes anxious also a being who can be traumatized by a human face?

These questions touch directly on a fundamental claim in all of Levinas's original work: human being is characterized by a pursuit of self-satisfaction, self-interest, and power, which, however, continually betrays a more original lack of the foundation necessary to achieve them. According to Levinas, we tend naturally toward the assumption that who we are depends on what we make of ourselves, even though each successive act along that way continually depends on and so cannot master the freedom from which it has been committed. Sartre will have been right to define human striving as "useless passion," but wrong to have concluded his analysis there. For those of us pretending to live entirely from our own means, there is only exhaustion lying ahead, and not of the limited sort resolved simply by ceasing labor. Here it is a matter of losing the capacity to act in any way whatsoever, including the choice to tum from labor to repose. However, this is also not yet death, in which one passes from being to no longer being. To

become exhausted in one's very existence is to arrive at its minimal condition; one is reduced to the "irremissibility of pure existing,"[6] to the profound insomnia in which my gaze is no longer trained wearily on the blank night but, less than even this, becomes one with it, anonymous.[7] Levinas calls this condition "horror," in which one is stripped bare before the elemental "there is." With this, Heideggerian anxiety is displaced from the heart of phenomenological anthropology, but under the following three conditions: first, Being is not experienced as absence of ground, as Heidegger asserts, but as overwhelming plenitude; second, it therefore does not withdraw or recede from us but approaches and threatens us; and third, this threat does not involve the possibility of severing us from Being—does not signal "the possibility of our impossibility"[8]—but, to the contrary, confronts us with the impossibility of living solely from the premise that everything is to be approached in terms of individual possibility. The same intimacy with Being that permits us to be as beings also holds us at the brink of submergence back into Being without beings.

Here as everywhere, Levinas never ceases to appeal to the ontological difference between Being and beings, even while contesting Heidegger's account of its implications for Dasein. As Levinas conceives it, the existential significance of the ontological difference lies not in the idea that one is ultimately alone, but rather in the fact that that alleged solitude cannot found an adequate definition of human life. While it would indeed be possible to discern in the phenomenon of anxiety the basic conditions for an ethics of self-responsibility, that ethics could rival Levinas's ethics of pre-original obligation only at the

6. E. Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1979), 26. E. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 47.

7. E. Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1947), 111. E. Levinas, Existence and Existents, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 66.

8. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §53; Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, 92n5. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 70n43.

price of committing its practitioners to a solitary existence marked for tragedy. If anxiety singularizes *Dasein* simply by throwing it back on its primordial relation to Being, which defies our urge for grounds and justification, then the account of human life contained in *Sein und Zeit* never breaches the field of ontology, where horror lurks. And this horror, one sees immediately, coincides with an absence of otherness, or "exteriority." Accordingly, the debate with Heidegger has been decisive in the emergence of ethics as first philosophy not only for giving Levinas the means to think being as act and human being as effort, but also for providing a perspective from which to criticize all of. Western thought—through and through "egology"—for having promoted the sameness of the Same over the otherness of the Other.[9] It is Levinas's acceptance and understanding of Heidegger's formulation of the ontological difference that justifies his insistence on approaching our relation to being as a primarily existential concern. It is his premise that that formulation is the crowning expression of Western thought[10] that justifies his move from dissatisfaction with Heidegger to a conclusion that first philosophy is not ontology of *any kind*, but ethics. After Heidegger and against Heidegger—against the entire tradition whose source is ancient Greece—Levinas considers our very being to be a matter of responsibility to the other person.

This existential reduction of ontology and, in turn, ethicization of existence is established only gradually, over the course of the twenty five years between Levinas's early break with Heidegger, in "De l'Evasion," and the appearance of *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas's overt concern with the face of the other person and his conviction that Western philosophy cannot think it properly support

9. E.g., Levinas, *En découvrant*, 169. E. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 51

10. This of course presumes a great deal, but debating the point would require a lengthy discussion with Heidegger, or at least the Heidegger invoked here, before turning to Levinas. I therefore put the matter aside, noting only that Levinas himself recognizes occasional exceptions to this defining feature of Western thought.

a tendency to only summarize the path and the position claiming to supplant ontology with ethics. In *Otherwise Than Being*, which shifts focus back to the question of the subject, Levinas's remarks on being are, if anything, still more condensed, but also extremely straightforward. "Being," in the only sense that will interest Levinas, is to stand for the spontaneous self-interest captured in Spinoza's expression *conatus essendi*.[11] Levinas translates this into the language of subjectivity: being is an innate tendency to identify first with oneself, which, however, and as experience teaches, must be ceaselessly renewed (one is never done with being oneself). In *Otherwise Than Being*, the word "being" always refers to a dynamic by which each of us "recurs" as a self.[12] It is therefore in, or perhaps beneath, this word "recurrence" that one must seek the possibility of experiencing the face of the neighbor as a call to radical responsibility.

The originality of Levinas's conception of the subject lies here, as he refuses to conclude merely that the restlessness of being denotes an unconquerable lack of self-possession which each of must therefore accept as his own,[13] and tries instead to connect that restlessness to a positive intervention from outside. This move is not evident without a commitment to the radical priority of the other person: true, the fact that my identity recurs from moment to moment rather than enduring through time does indicate an openness in me which every act of self-identification would only seem to close, but that openness can be specifically ethical only if there is ·no space and no passage of time between it—between me—and my neighbor. The priority of my neighbor would thus entail an extreme contact, a friction of souls

11. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 100. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 79.

12. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 132. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 104.

13. For this position, cf. J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), 198.

anterior even to the spatial contact of body upon body. The Other who comes between me and myself frustrates the *conatus essendi* from within; it makes of me a "reverse *conatus*,"[14] so that my entire effort to be must be understood as a response to my neighbor's intervention from "the hither side" (*l'en-deça*) of being.[15] It is this anterior, "anarchic" openness to my neighbor that renders me susceptible to his call to radical responsibility. And it is to that an-archic level that the face, as traumatic appeal, penetrates.

Levinas's ethics, it thus appears, is centered on an appeal or, if one prefers, a trauma, which occurs in two times. Holding to the metaphor of voice and command, one might say that the concrete appeal ascribed to the face of the neighbor presupposes a more originary appeal by which my ears may be considered already open (let us not say attuned) to hearing him. Emphasizing the violence with which this strikes me, one might also say that the traumatic appeal reaches what Levinas considers truly ethical depth only on the condition of a prior violence which has inflicted on me an originary "wound" to my narcissism.[16] It is important to bear in mind that this "first time" of the trauma is a transcendental condition, not a physical event: "The one affected by the other is an anarchic trauma, or an inspiration of the one by the other, and not a causality striking mechanically."[17] The Other possesses—or, as Levinas prefers, "obsesses"—the Same from before being and time. Its pretenses notwithstanding, the sameness of the Same has never been insular or complete. The ethics of the trauma is to be an ethics of awakening.

This being the case, it convenes for us here to interrogate not the trauma as such (i.e., as an event), but rather the response one is to make to it. If the face of my neighbor opens me to a relation anterior to my

14. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 89. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 70.

15. Cf. "restlessness for the other" in Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 182. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 143.

16. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 106. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 84.

17. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 158. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 123.

relation with myself, and thus to a responsibility to him before and beyond everything I can orient to myself, how then am I to live by that insight? What will comprise a good response, a response that is at one and the same time for the other person and true to my (ethical) self? Levinas has already sketched the insight in a manner which leaves no doubt about the difficulty of the assignment: everything I am and do has already been anticipated by my neighbor, to whom everything is therefore first and foremost a response. I.am not what I am, says Iago from the depth of his fealty to Othello. I am one-for-the-Other, says Levinas at the heart of *Otherwise Than Being*—infinitely so, and without possibility of either abdication or replacement.

It goes without saying that the only act completely adequate to this insight would be completely selfless. I am to strive for devotion to my neighbor in which my own concerns command attention and receive their dignity only through an overarching concern for his own. However, it also goes without saying that this is almost certainly impossible. Or rather, since Levinas has already identified being with individual action and defined individual action as narcissistic, it is almost certainly unthinkable. The possibility of a fully responsible act would seem excluded by a standing and, as we have seen, crucial conviction that human nature is simply incapable of it, or at best tormented by a scruple at odds with a more persistent selfish tendency.[18] If responsibility is to be taken up, if salvation is to come and the Good to be served, this will have to occur by an agency or at an initiative outside everything that falls under the definition of being as conatus essendi. Morality as a discipline which presupposes and governs an unruly freedom is thus a part of the problem Levinas sets out to overcome, as he makes clear in the initial pages of *Totality and Infinity*.[19] Indeed, according to Levinas's own argument, the act in question will

18. This mistrust of the possibility of agreement between human nature and what the Christian tradition has called grace displays what might be hazarded as a Protestant sympathy in Levinas's thinking.

19. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, ix-xi. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21–3.

have to be so far from control by the individual will that it becomes difficult to see what sense it makes to refer to it as "good" at all, except by contrast with the darkness previously assigned to being. Goodness will occur in a sort of Hash or sparkle disrupting a pervasive gloom, and then vanishing again. One thinks, at Levinas's own suggestion, of the monologue by Ikonnikov, in Vassili Grossmann's *Vie et destin*, where one finds, in the midst of hundreds of pages of black pessimism, the following remarkable account: Well into World War II, in a small Russian village already starved by the long winter and longer German occupation, a number of women were taken prisoner in retaliation for the death of two German soldiers. The women spent the night tortured by the fear that morning would bring their own deaths. Instead, it brought unexpected reprieve. As the women were freed, they were also asked to care for one of their German captors, now. wounded. A horrendous scene ensued, as the sentiment of fear became lust for vengeance. Then something both beautiful and terrible happened. One among the women ran toward her former captor with the thought of strangling him. As she drew near, the man asked to drink. Suddenly and inexplicably, the woman's murderous rage fell away, and she gave the suffering stranger what little she had to offer.[20] Ikonnikov comments that neither the woman nor any who witnessed the scene could explain her actions, and concludes for himself that they were, properly speaking, "absurd," going wholly beyond what either the situation or duty called for. He also characterizes them by a "small goodness" (*une petite bonté*) which alone gives cause to hope that human destiny might lie elsewhere than cruelty and annihilation. Levinas takes up this expression, and speaks of the eternal gratuity of what escapes every system and ideology.

One can hardly deny that such events do occur. However, it is dif-

20. V. Grossmann, *Vie et destin* (Paris: L'Age d'homme, 1980), 383–4. Cf. E. Levinas, "La proximité de l'autre," reprinted in *Altérité et transcendence* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1995), 116–18.

ficult to know quite how to understand them. Noting first that this is indeed, as Levinas seems bound to expect, a matter of single, perhaps isolated acts, and not the person and his character, one might propose the difficult ethical category of supererogation, in which the following conditions are present: first, the act is neither forbidden nor obligatory; second, it is morally good in both its intended consequences and its intrinsic value; third, it is done voluntarily, and for the sake of another person; and fourth, its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve either criticism or punishment.[21] This last point would, of course, have to be nuanced if supererogation is to be said of the "small goodness" in which Levinas sees a responsibility otherwise than being. Levinas has argued that the face of the neighbor awakens me to a responsibility which anticipates and defines everything I do. In other words, I am always already responding to another person who, however, precisely by remaining Other, nonetheless always asks for more. "The more I answer, the more I am responsible," we are told.[22] In this sense, it is indeed wrong to omit an act of care for the other person, or even to limit the amount of care one gives. And yet, as beings, we also seem bound to commit precisely this offense. According to Levinas, we are subject to a command which can be violated only by falling short of what it asks, but this falling short is inherent to our being. From the perspective of supererogation, one will solve this riddle only with the strange concession that good acts which cannot be explained by character, duty, or circumstance are somehow inhuman.

Taking this word "inhuman" in the most positive sense, perhaps "small goodnesses" are then best understood as evidence of grace. Here it would be necessary to distinguish between grace as a supplement of human nature designating the source of what Thomas Aquinas called "infused virtues" (faith, hope, and charity)[23] from Levinas's clear aim

21. My definition of supererogation adapts that of D. Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 115.

22. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 119. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 93.

23. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II q. 65 art. 2.

beyond any irreducible entanglement with nature. As the expression indicates, infused virtues are indwelling; they are inscribed in the soul. Levinas points to the source of goodness in an openness anterior even to this; "grace" would then stand not for something in me, even if put there from the outside, but rather for the primordial fact that my interiority is wholly *for the Other*. If "grace" is to appear in the lexicon of ethics as first philosophy, the word will have to refer simply to an event expressing the an-archic fact of "election" to unique responsibility for the neighbor, to a radical responsibility given eternally in advance.[24] This, in tum, means that the trauma calls me (violently) back to a proper identity determined before and outside of being, so that the effort to take up the responsibility depicted there can also be understood as an effort to remain true to my self. However, this trueness to self can no longer be understood as a process of developing latent human qualities or fulfilling socially determined roles, but is instead a matter of unflinching adherence to the dictates of one's unique and irreducible identity. Levinas's ethics of the Other is unexpectedly close to Heidegger in this much: it is, at least in part, an ethics of authenticity and not, at least in the classical sense of the term, sincerity.[25]

This is both precious little to live by and, one might add, impossibly much. The face of my neighbor reveals to me that I am one-for-the-Other, exposed to the Other before enclosed in myself. My susceptibility to my neighbor's call to radical responsibility brings to light an extreme passivity beneath all activity or power. This passivity, and it alone, defines me as unique. Open to the Other before closed into

24. Cf. J.-L. Chrétien, "La dette et l'éléction," in *Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. C. Chalier and M. Abensour (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), 262–73.

25. For this distinction, see L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). *Otherwise than Being* does ascribe a sincerity to everything we say to our neighbor, but denies that it is an "attribute" of that saying, Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 183. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 143–4. One is always already sincere—always already open and giving—even while forgetting or resisting that very fact. Conversely, accepting the implications of this sincerity must take the form of accepting a responsibility that defines one's very selfhood.

myself, I am this responsibility, here and now, more than and before I am anything else. There can be no identification, no community, no *sensus communis*, which does not presuppose this openness and, as Levinas never tires of observing, also covers it up.

This singularization, and this alone, would at last be unassailable. Coming to me from wholly outside, and breaking me open to the wholly outside, the face of the other person is the one event which can anchor me in a way that does not require justification by my own effort to be. Because the Other is closer to me than I am to myself, his face does not remove the ground from beneath me without at the same time putting me in contact with something infinitely more concrete, and immeasurably more certain (one could read Levinas's entire itinerary as a tortured search for this extreme certainty). Because the other person is therefore more than I could ever measure, his face also does not relieve me of everything most dear to me without at the same time bathing me in superabundance. The call to a responsibility anterior to being and possession is also the call to an identity which would finally be out of reach of either anxiety or melancholy (afflictions we are henceforth to consider as imposed by ontology). "Paradoxically," says Levinas, "it is *qua alienus*—foreigner and other (étranger et autre)—that one is not alienated."[26]

All of this, however, might seem only to expose what is in fact the most elemental form of self-interest: the pleasure one experiences in simply living, in simply continuing to be oneself.[27] After all, to tell me

26. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 76. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 59.

27. I have in mind Spinoza's sense of *hilaritas*, in which all parts of mind and body are affected positively, resulting in a continuation of harmonious functioning which is in itself, without anything added, pleasurable. Cf. Ethics III, Prop. XI, note; and IV, Prop. XLII, proof. This reference to Spinoza is intended only as an anthropological benchmark for the analyses which follow. *Hilaritas* itself is not perverse, at least not in the familiar sense of the term, but rather one candidate for the ontological possibility of perversion.

that the act which guided by my own will and determined by my own capacities to that degree falsifies the responsibility of being one-for-the-Other is to deprive me of the only tools available to me should I wish to come fully to my neighbor's aid. What will motivate the act that suspends individual initiative and intention? Here it is a matter of an ego which has lost possession of itself entirely, so that there can be no question of an end projected over and beyond the other person in its path. The same face which disarms the approaching narcissist seems also to awaken in him a more uncontrolled charge which it is difficult to connect with the language of investment or possession befitting ordinary pleasure. All of this is ruled out by a face which looks at me from beyond what Freud has led us to think of as the economy of tension and discharge. If, then, life goes on nonetheless, and indeed henceforth under the aegis of the Other, Levinas's account of this encounter obliges us to envision a somewhat different investment and a somewhat different pleasure than can be accommodated by an economic analysis. I would take pleasure in the one thing, ethical alterity, which cannot be the object of pleasure. I would, in short, *enjoy my responsibility*. What prevents the one-for-the-Other from this decline into perversion? What saves ethics as first philosophy from ending in this most violent and irresistible of possessions?

Far from having overlooked these questions, Levinas can be said to have pursued them through a number of successive levels. To begin with, it follows from the idea that the human face is hyper-concrete that there can be no confusion between the responsibility it commands and any pleasure we might experience in taking it up. At this level, Levinas might respond along the lines of Kant's Second *Critique*, and distinguish between the pleasure which sometimes coincides with good action and good action itself. Obedience to the law, Kant argued, follows a different logic than the self-interest to which, moreover, it is both prior and superior. This, however, has not yet addressed the possibility that there is a particular kind of pleasure awakened only by the command to responsibility. Perhaps there are cases where one

takes possession of what must not he possessed precisely because it must not be possessed (and not merely because it stands in the way of something else). In *Pompes funèbres*, the sheer helplessness of Genet's friends and lovers awakens in him a monstrous hunger to betray them to the police, whereupon his own great suffering at their fate proves to him that he does love them deeply. As Genet himself well knew, the passion in this cycle of betrayal and self-affirmation presupposes and draws on his dependence on those whom he betrays, which is also to say that its destructive force consumes not only his friends and lovers but also Genet himself. For Genet, love of neighbor is expressed in use of neighbor and thus destruction of neighbor, which at bottom is also destruction of self. The face of the neighbor disarms everything standing in the way of a drive which aims finally at self-annihilation. The helplessness of the other person escorts Genet into a universe where pleasure inclines toward death, and where the charity of one-for-the-Other is immersed in the brutal surge of forces which love only themselves. What will Levinas make of these confessions? If being is defined by a self-interestedness which passes spontaneously over the responsibility Genet seems helpless not to abuse, then perversion of any kind must belong to the intransigence of our narcissism. Genet, Levinas might conclude, struggles with his narcissism from within his narcissism, perhaps even under the form of insisting on it. The exteriority of the other person is indeed seen and recognized—Genet leaves little doubt about it—but is then submitted to the selfish urges of a confused and immature will.

This conclusion highlights two important observations. On the one hand, Levinas has no trouble with the notion that the same point at which he detects the institution of radical responsibility can also adjourn to profound evil. On the other hand, both that responsibility and its extreme perversion seem to confront us at the height of self-awareness, when a neighbor's face singles us out as one-for-the Other. Your face can awaken me to a responsibility beyond any meaning I may give to it, or it can awaken in me a morbid desire which consumes

every investment I may make in this world, including in our relation. What distinguishes these two paths? Whereas perversion is an already operative form of referring everything to oneself, what Levinas sometimes calls the "metaphysical desire" for the Good[28] points infinitely beyond being and possession.

At the same time, Levinas does not deny that this requires the individual under appeal to deliberately assent to what the Other asks. The importance of this foot still planted in being must not be underestimated: the good life is a matter of human effort, not the arbitrary actions of a deity. By the same stroke, however, that goodness is always already contaminated by being, and thus always already in need of a renewal of human effort. The psychological correlate of a command never fully satisfied is a conscience never fully at rest, and its ontological correlate is a world never fully redeemed. With a single gesture, Levinas's ethics turns away from both a supernatural God and all utopianism.[29] Regarding each new moment, nothing is assured except that there is always more to do. The face of my neighbor breaks my hold on the world, calling me back to a root leading beneath and outside of it, so that our proximity is the site not only of responsibility to and for my neighbor, but also to and for the entire world—near and far, now and always. In my neighbor's gaze, the entire world calls out for help. In his face, it is not just this one other person who obsesses me, but all the other Others, too. This is more than an empirical complication: in the human face, I am commanded by all the Others at once.[30]

Thus, although, as Levinas does not fail to state, the idea of a responsibility leading beyond being does threaten to deprive of us the bearings necessary to discern good from evil,[31] his proposed remedy to that. difficulty can be found already in place, where the I-Other

28. E.g., Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 3–5. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33–5.

29. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 232. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 184.

30. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 204. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 160.

31. E. Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 115. Levinas, Collected Papers, 166.

relation of that responsibility is interwoven with a social and cultural dimension which we can expect to focus and guide the former. To be sure, my relation with my neighbor "gives meaning to my relations with all the others,"[32] but the presence of those other Others, calling out to me with equal vigor, distracts me from an unqualified response to my neighbor, *and vice versa*: "The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and third party."[33] The call to responsibility is already a call to justice, to care for many Others at once. The competing appeals of my neighbor and the other Others literally give me pause: I must stop and reflect, think. And with this, the veritable birth of consciousness, my devotion to the absolute otherness revealing itself in my neighbor's face is already framed in language and phenomenality. True, that face will have exposed the innate pretentiousness of all words and appearances, but the fact that not one but many Others claim my responsibility forces me to use them nonetheless. Ethics cannot be first philosophy without also committing itself to inspiring a just and effective society. This means accepting that certain tools are indispensable for feeding and clothing the masses, while watching carefully for the way this leads inevitably back into patronization and then abuse. Revolution will be necessary from time to time. The ethics of the other person claims to also be the politics of that revolution.[34]

If, then, it is to be the practical demands of a responsibility to many Others at once which will save us from confusion and mishap, the apparent price will be permanent tension and ambiguity. Adjusted to account for multiple responsibilities, Levinas's ethics settles the good life on an unresolvable obsession. One cannot decide for the neighbor without deciding against the other Others, and one cannot decide for one of those other Others without deciding against that neighbor.

32. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 202. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159.

33. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 200. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 157.

34. Cf. E. Levinas, "De l'unicité," in *Entre Nous* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 215–17; and *Autrement que savoir* (Paris: Osiris, 1986), 59–62.

Custom, laws, and habit no doubt help us to apportion our resources with a considerable degree of justice, but Levinas gives us no reason to suppose that they absolve us from the ethical censure arriving from all those faces at once. A responsibility divided among countless Others remains an insatiable responsibility; it remains a responsibility which promises only to return again and again without possibility of ending.

In a manner not unlike what befalls the brute effort to be, the task of caring for the Others would then seem prey to a kind of slow exhaustion which would lower us gradually from zeal to resoluteness and then desperation finally into an indifference at the brink of horror.[35] The only thing that may save us from this danger—and Levinas himself seems not to have mentioned it—is the specific concretion of each call to responsibility. After all, when asked for help, one does not only think of the infinite responsibility which perhaps emerges there, but also attends to the particular needs of this person here and now. Faces rarely implore without also indicating what it is they need. Can it be that all that saves us from the same tragic consequences Levinas expects from fundamental ontology is a gaze turned humbly away from the otherness which transcends us and toward what ails the flesh and blood in which we meet it?

Still, this is not a possibility which Levinas can entertain without conceding limits to our responsibility and thus, by implication, qualifying the otherness of the Other. His argument tends therefore in the contrary direction, calling for a commitment to surrender any and all claim to anything strictly for ourselves. And from there, the "one" in one-for-the-Other can only be the center point of an obsession received from wholly outside but also turned ravenously inward. Responsibility is to occur in a constant and arduous turning of oneself inside out; the reversal of conatus essendi converts the inwardness of care of self into a ceaseless outpouring of gifts for the neighbor. This cannot occur by predetermined pace or in accordance with preestab-

35. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 207–9. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 163–4.

lished limits. Commitment to radical and infinite responsibility is without qualification. Nor, then, can this occur by degrees. Perhaps one does approach readiness for this commitment only slowly, but the decision itself is by definition stark and without reservation: one is not truly for-the-Other until one has resolved to wipe away every trace of being for-oneself.

Needless to say, Levinas's own argument militates strongly against the idea that one can actually reach this state of pure altruism by one's own efforts, much less sustain it. Since, then, if it arrives at all it would have to do so by surprise, befalling us or overtaking us, the real point of inquiry must be his conception of our attempt to commit to it and live by it. What would it mean to willingly submit all concern for oneself to concern for Others? What could be the motivation? And what would it be to get close? Let us note first that Levinas's analysis of the call to justice assumes that the plurality of appeals moves us to a point of sufficient lucidity to discern the needs and rights of the Other who is· one's neighbor, the needs and rights of the other Others, and one's own authentic identity as resource for them all. As brute event of singularization, this does not involve conquering one's self-serving inclinations but, to the contrary, receiving an image of oneself as one-for-the-Other(s). It is this image which must be recognized and accepted if one is to embark on what Levinas understands as the good life, the life approaching adequacy with being one-for-the-Other. Under normal circumstances, these are two different things: to receive an image and to accept it as the truth. Levinas conflates the two when he speaks of a unicity in the subject that would be anterior to its own identity with itself, and then invests the face of the Other, as trauma, with the power to exhume that unicity: the face of my neighbor singles me out without possibility of denial; my responsibility is irrecusable. One has not truly seen the face of the Other if one has not been traumatized by it, and one has not been traumatized if one has not understood immediately and unmistakably that one is one-for-the-Other. The face of the Other who is first on the scene, of the Other who is closer to me

than I am to myself, leaves me no room to pause and consider, no room to observe and interpret what approaches, and no room to consider its likelihood or appeal. The moment I see it, its message is already true. Whatever desire it is that motivates me to follow this path awakens at this same moment, and without possibility of my having summoned it. *This is not a desire that can be attributed to the individual will, which is by definition egocentric.* In the philosophy of Levinas, moments of supreme commitment—or if one prefers, events of grace—erupt from beneath individual freedom, taking possession of the soul long enough to carry it briefly beyond the range of action oriented first to oneself. This would seem to mean that my actions are therefore most responsible (most for-the-Other) when they are least mine. But this would also seem to mean an end to all concern with focus, distinctions, or the specificity of just who it is that faces me here and now. How could there be such definition in a desire no longer in any way shaped or guided by the subject whom it possesses? Absolute desire for the Good—or, what amounts now to the same thing, desire for the absolute—belongs not at all to me and it cares not at all for my neighbor. And by this alone can it be considered truly free of the narcissistic web of being.

The possibility of an eruption of this absolute desire, a desire which would be untrammeled in its rush toward what Levinas leads us to think of as the Good, is provided for in advance by the notion of an attachment anterior even to the form in which one makes sense of it—an attachment in which, brought to our attention by the face of the Other, we are to recognize an anarchic interruption of our relation with ourselves. Something has always already insinuated itself, always already touched us and then slipped away without possibility of detection, and yet not without tearing us open and turning us inside out, not without having *wounded us* at a depth beyond healing.[36] The passivity evident in this existential suffering is not only the site of my responsibility, as Levinas frequently asserts, but also the opening

36. E.g., Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 93. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 74.

of being to the Good. The movement to embrace my responsibility inverts the tendency of being to associate with itself, bending it back toward the source of an interruption which that tendency presupposes. As Levinas's discussion of other Others seems to confirm, this cannot be a question of abandoning oneself straightforwardly to the insatiable need of one's neighbor. Instead, it is a matter of a commitment made by an individual already availed of a social and cultural identity to transcend every norm or guideline embedded there, in favor of an identity which, whether ideal or simply fictive, would know no such norms or guidelines.

The desire which this threatens to awaken is not a possibility which can be accounted for either by the concept of horror or by a concession that even radical responsibility is mediated by principles and norms, if also aimed beyond them. Here it is a matter neither of the ego's failure to evade being nor of any strategy by which it may temporarily succeed, but rather a desire opposed to both. Opposed, and not merely distinct: the desire to remove everything between me and the satisfaction of an exterior command is a desire to purge myself of everything comprising my identity as this person under appeal, here and now. Pursued to its limit, the discipline of self-denial can pass over into a desire for death.

Against this, it is tempting to suppose that the self-denial in question could never quite extinguish our effort to be because it would never cease to invoke it, so that even the most severe ethical asceticism would remain under the power of something ultimately narcissistic. This hypothesis might then find further support from Levinas's constant and sometimes explicit avoidance of the language of moral conversion and political utopianism, except that it says nothing to the fact that the body of the argument nonetheless compels us to act as if sainthood were the proper ideal. A nonstandard reading of Levinas might therefore defend a more pronounced dualism of desires in his work: one would either be for-oneself, even if only minimally, or else for-the-Other, but then only in those rarest of moments mentioned in

the discussion of Grossmann's book. This second interpretation leaves open the question of how a powerful desire for an increasingly just life can spill over into the seemingly very different desire for death. What is the relationship between the desire inhabiting narcissism and the desire for death?

The only way to maintain a real difference between a desire for death and a narcissistic love of live, but without pretending that they have nothing in common, is to admit them as equally definitive forces within each of us. The only way to avoid severing what qualifies here as "grace" from human interaction—*the only way to maintain a hold on the idea that ethics has to do with more than the economy of self-interest*—is to suppose that "love of life" and "desire for death" stand for forces constantly at odds with one another, and that whatever balance makes life possible can sometimes break down, so that the release of unlimited force coincides with the disintegration of contours formerly marking individual identity.

In one important respect, this seems quite close to Levinas: life, as he himself teaches, is made up of endless tension. In quite another respect, however, the distance from him could hardly be greater: if being is effort-to-be, and if effort-to-be can be said of the person in whom one nonetheless also witnesses events of extraordinary selflessness, what one glimpses in those events will no longer be Spirit beyond being,[37] but simply forces no longer encumbered by it. Goodness will not transcend being but consume it. And ethics as first philosophy will indeed admit a religious horizon, but only to find religion contained within a materialist account of its phenomena.

The claim that one is responsible for one's neighbor before and outside one's responsibility for oneself depends on submitting the relation to being to the relation with the Good. This gesture installs ethics as first philosophy and opens the way to religion. In the philosophy of Levinas, this move is mediated decisively first by an acceptance of Hei-

37. Cf. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 5–6. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5.

degger's notion of ontological difference, but secondly by a reduction of the Heideggerian definition of being to act and effort. To Levinas, the analytic of *Dasein* thus appears as a description of solitary life still in need of completion by a move to the plurality of *Daseins* which this indicates. Levinas's own concept of "separation" is in part a concession that being is solitary and self-centered. However, it also refers to the relation which this can equally imply: the individual ego, as the "same," is in separated relation with the "other" person, one's neighbor. The asymmetry of this relation determines that, on one hand, the subject, as the Same, tends always to associate first with itself, while on the other hand precisely this tendency is to be considered a suppression of the proper nature of one's relation with the Other. One is always already responsible—radically responsible—and yet, in the more familiar sense, never responsible enough. One is ordered to one's neighbor before oneself, and also despite oneself. The only way to satisfy this pre-original ordering, and the only way to fulfill the notion of ethics as first philosophy, is to transcend being entirely. This possibility is not admitted by individual being or human nature, such as Levinas defines them. Ethics as first philosophy points toward and depends on events of grace. For ethics to elude fundamental ontology, something wholly Other must have interrupted the economy of self-interest.

This otherness is to be revealed to us in the face of a neighbor, which does not merely contest our narcissistic being, but breaks it open all the way to an anarchic assignment one-for-the-Other. Here "anarchy" must signify a relation not yet contaminated by being, one that is activated only by the human face. To submit to the appeal of that face is to put oneself in the service of a movement beyond being. That concrete appeal can therefore be said to stimulate a desire which, in its extreme form, tests the limits of life itself. The desire for goodness beyond being is an absolute desire, but also, and perhaps therefore, a desire for death. The real risk of ethics as first philosophy and religion is not, as Levinas seems to indicate, a misappropriation of the ethical appeal, but, to the contrary, a strange, uncontrolled willing-

ness to go precisely where it leads. Ethics, one must therefore conclude, has as much to do with limiting a desire beyond being as it does with keeping that desire in view. And here, where Levinas has perhaps overemphasized the knot between ethics and religion, one feels compelled to insist on an equal knot with self-interest. Prudence would require managing both a desire for the Other and a desire which serves oneself, irreducibly and without end.