SUBJECTIVITY, ALIENATION, AND LIBERATION IN LEVINAS AND MARX

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between (inter)subjectivity, normativity, and politics in Emmanuel Levinas and Karl Marx. At first sight, Levinas' depiction of a singular and unique relation to others—a bond which prohibits even the slightest trace of historical, hermeneutic or political context—appears not only at odds with the basic philosophical and political insights of Marx but the whole of the Continental tradition (spanning from, at least, Fichte and Hegel to Heidegger and Foucault). This much is evident from the numerous political critiques and appropriations of Levinas, which condemn him on the grounds that his epistemology, ontology and ethics are needlessly naive, insular, individualistic, and pseudo-theological. Against such readings I argue that if we are to retain the normative kernel of his thought while overcoming such politically limited interpretations we must radicalize and theoretically deepen this impulse to deworld the other.

This interpretation opens Levinas' thought to a new field of new possibilities which are explored through Marx and related thinkers, such as Fichte, Hegel, Hediegger, and others. I claim that a dialogue with Marx is particularly instructive because it can push Levinas beyond his limited conception of politics and alienation, while, at the same time, provide a better foundation for normative and political questions that were under- or poorly-theorized by Marx. Together, Levinas and Marx can further an understanding of subjectivity and politics that comprehends the importance of mediation, history, collectivity and universality without ceding the profound rootlessness of subjectivity, which, at every moment, retains the asymmetrical structure of the one-for-the-other.

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INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with Levinas was the essay "Useless Suffering," assigned in an undergraduate philosophy class. At the time I considered Levinas (more on reputation than anything else) to be representative of the kind of pathologies that I typically associated with a certain philosophical milieu. Though I had often found a certain kinship with the critical dimensions of thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, and Butler, I found that they too often downplayed—even wished away—larger economic and political questions. Their skepticism of meta-narratives, the state, history, authenticity and totality were not, in my estimation, off the mark so much as they were premature. One could not simply forgo an analysis of systems and structures under the pretension that they are, in reality, fragmented, incomplete, or illusory. My fear was that such analyses confused normative principles with the reality of the situation: if one wanted to be free from totalization it meant, in my opinion, confronting rather than shying away from questions like capitalism, imperialism and the state. Thus, to proclaim the end, or at least decline, of meta-narratives was to deepen, rather than subvert, the totalizing aspirations of capitalist social relations. The Levinas I encountered in "Useless suffering" seemed to more or less fit this mould, at least well enough not to force me to reconsider. Accordingly, I concluded the semester with a paper that juxtaposed conceptions of good and evil in Levinas and Augustine, where I argued that Levinas' conception of the good (which I interpreted as a reaction to a prior evil) precluded an adequate conception of solidarity and collectivity.

Three years later I somewhat hesitantly enrolled in a graduate seminar on Levinas. Almost immediately I experienced a sudden and surprising change of heart. After reading *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being*, and essays such as "The Ego and Totality," I concluded that I was wrong about Levinas: rather than a formidable skeptic, anti-rationalist or

deconstructionist, he was, in fact, much closer to a right-Hegelian. For all his talk about "totality" and the irreducibility of the "other," I believed Levinas to be a deeply conservative thinker committed to illuminating the ethical substrata of the status quo. I will always remember the look on Professor Horowitz's face (always more thoughtful and measured than my own) when I cynically asked him if there was "inherent content" in Levinas' philosophy. After all, I thought, of what value could Levinas' version of intersubjectivity contain if his conception of "responsibility" or "ethics" was blind to perception, history, and context—an apparent transcendental condition totally indifferent to the social designations that already inscribe the "other" as "neighbour," "stranger," "master," or "slave."

At the same time, as I continued to explore the relationship between subjectivity, history and politics the spectre of Levinas persisted. Whether I was engaging with Fichte's depiction of the relationship between the ego and the "not-I," the various dimensions of Heidegger's "being-with," Althusser's theory of "interpellation," or even Freud's hypothesis that the "oceanic feeling" of oneness with the universe was a remnant of a time when the ego could not differentiate itself from the external world, I found myself returning to Levinas in order to re-examine fundamental questions I had previously considered to be long settled. From this perspective I turned to the history of philosophy to re-interrogate the nature of the relationship between interiority/exteriority, autonomy/heteronomy, self/other, individuality/sociality, and activity/passivity.

One of the crucial developments I had explored in post-Kantian thought was the shift to consider the material and social dimensions of subjectivity. From Fichte and Hegel to Heidegger and Foucault, consciousness was increasingly understood as socially mediated, and, therefore, already an expression of a particular form of practical engagement within the world. As such,

even the most private experiences were already implicated in larger questions of society, power, representation, politics, and economics. Never questioning the merits of this mode of intersubjective inquiry (which still are, in my opinion, beyond reproach), I began to pay closer attention to the normative impulses that animated such investigations. Despite the fact that all such inquires were, in very general terms, universal in scope (i.e. they set out to illuminate the underlying broad structures and processes through which consciousness comes to be a "self"), they often came to radically different conclusions about the nature of the world and the role of the subject within it. I began to probe this phenomenon with a naive question: what is the relationship *between* one's analytical understanding of the world as it is, and how one theorizes their place within the world understood as such? Does the fact, for example, that, in theorizing society, Hegel speaks of Spirit and history, Marx of modes of production and capitalism, Heidegger of Being and language, and Foucault of epistemes and power, simply indicate a difference in understanding the world (as it is), or, do such (seemingly analytical) differences already speak to an underlying conception of what it means to be a subject, or at least a subject proper. Put differently, why exactly does a given thinker study *what* they study and, moreover, *how* is this inquiry framed as they pursue their object of thought. And, to complicate matters further, the force of the tradition begged one further question: what is the relationship between this (often implicit) background normative orientation and the material conditions in which said philosophers are situated.

While Levinas was ill-suited to answer all of these questions, he did seem extremely relevant to address the concern that seemed to me to be central: in what *way* do others concern me, and, moreover, how is this understanding relevant to theorizing questions of subjectivity and politics. What became immediately clear was that Levinas had forced me to reconsider whether

this philosophical tradition had adequately progressed beyond the normative foundations it had outstripped. Despite the fact that a succession of philosophers had effectively dismantled (or "de-centred") the sovereign atomistic subject, it seemed to me that the fundamental orientation of egoism persisted. Because conceptions of self-mastery, self-unity, and autonomy could no longer be taken for granted (as they had so often been in liberalism where they were simply gifted as a priori) they had to be reinstated as regulatory ideals to be achieved by the subject-yet-to-be. While philosophy presented many notable moments of exception, it also seemed to struggle in its attempt to re-orient our fundamental understanding of what it means to be a social and historical being. Subjectivity was often expressed as a return to self, or as a challenge to master ones contingent circumstances and disparate drives in order to fashion oneself as a unified free being. This manifested itself myriad of ways, from engendering new forms of egoism and individualism to grounding subjectivity itself within the expansive horizons of a particular form of life.

While these articulations contained immense insights, even when the category of the "other" figured prominently, such analyses seemed to misapprehend the nature, structure and significance of the inter-human relation. The relation to the other qua other was typically relegated to a secondary concern, something to be considered after the long after the self has recollected itself in and through society. The otherness of the other was thus placed under the rubric of its generic function (or role it is assigned in and through society). Perhaps most importantly, in the many instances where philosophy had indicated a path beyond this limitation, it seemed unable to seize upon or even find the conceptual vocabulary to articulate this impulse. Levinas thus represent a missed opportunity, a chance to better understand the sociality of subjectivity in radically new terms rather than from the standpoint of how to regain what had been theoretically lost. Even though more traditional thinkers of intersubjectivity far surpassed

Levinas' theorization of society, politics, and history, I became increasingly convinced that, despite his limitations (which are indeed significant), Levinas' depiction of a subjective entanglement with an other uprooted from the world had something very important to offer.

The primary challenge facing such a project was how to read Levinas' philosophical impulses in a way that preserved its critical import while, at the same time, being careful not to devalue the importance of history, difference, negativity, referential totalities, symbolic fields, hermeneutical horizons, and so on. While I believed (contrary to many of Levinas' interpreters) that this had been Levinas' original intent, it was in any event clear that by grossly under-theorizing the relationship *between* totality and infinity, he had invited a justifiable amount of criticism and confusion. In fact, my initial oscillation—which, I would later discover was fairly common among Levinas' detractors, who similarly oscillate between critiques which require theoretically inconsistent interpretations—was, at least in part, symptomatic of Levinas' own ambiguity with respect to history and politics. Levinas' limited engagement with politics (or any facet of intersubjectivity outside of the radically singular relation to the other) certainly raises more questions than it answers. For example: where exactly does Levinas draw the line between description and prescription; what is the relationship between philosophical and political totality (defined by the instrumentality of the situation); can his theory of generic alienation be given particular content; and can his definition of society as a "radical multiplicity" be conceived of in terms of a positive political project.

For many reasons Marx seemed like an obvious interlocutor. Although Levinas had indicated, in scattered sentiments, possible points of intersection, he had never engaged in a sustained dialogue with Marx. With a few recent exceptions, this lacuna was also present in the secondary literature, where the names Levinas and Marx were only invoked in order to preach

the fundamental incompatibility of their thought. This was especially unfortunate because the more I studied their respective thought not only did I discover a strong kinship between them but, despite these commonalities, they each had a particular clarity about dimensions of the intersubjective experience where the other remained confused or unnecessarily vague. I was thus convinced they each had something significant to offer the other that could push both of them beyond their respective limits.

At the core of both of their philosophies (even if it appeared in a slightly different register) is an expression of a rootless subjectivity, that manifests itself in the refusal to subordinate the inter-human relation to the generic socio-historic forces that inevitably mediate, at every moment, that very relation. As a result both articulate a universal aspiration that is skeptical of any attempt to *ground* the community within a specific culture, tradition, lineage, way of being-in-the-world, or particular "mode-of-life." Marx has value for Levinas insofar as he indicates the material and political possibilities (or better, necessities) of such an expression. Where Levinas finds paradoxes and dead-ends within the generic experience of human alienation, Marx describes the socio-historic contours of "totality" and signals not only what obstacles need to be overcome if Levinas' normative aspirations are to find material expression but the political means with which to do so. At the same time, Levinas' framing of the problem of intersubjectivity, specifically the nature of the inter-human relation, further elucidates Marx's emancipatory possibilities which become frustrated, even distorted, as he grapples with the immensity of the task at hand. In pursuing the material conditions of liberation Marx, at times, elevates those conditions themselves over the inter-human relation. As a result, without crucial insights provided by the other, the revolution sought by both Levinas and Marx remains partial and incomplete.

This effort at a rapprochement between Levinas and Marx is broken down into four chapters. In the first chapter I turn to Levinas' most ardent critics in order to outline the theoretical challenges facing any attempt to establish a relationship between Levinas and Marx, which is another way of saying between Levinas and politics in general. According to his critics Levinas' political pathologies follow directly from his unwavering eschewal of any dimension through which the experience of the "Other" is necessarily mediated (be it history, context, structure, politics, symbolic order, etc.). Levinas' attempt to deworld the other is understood (somewhat understandably) as philosophically regressive and politically reactionary. I conclude the chapter by clarifying the philosophical steps that such critiques relies upon and begin to examine their insufficiency, while taking serious the challenges presented by Levinas' critics and what they might mean for thinking Levinas with Marx.

Picking up from the first chapter I demonstrate that much of the "third wave" of Levinasian scholarship proceeds from a similar interpretation offered by Levinas' critics. Defenders of the Levinasian legacy thus often proceed to engage with radical politics by re-thinking the very foundation of his thought, which is still considered unnecessarily austere and hyperbolic. After exploring their attempt to set Levinas on better philosophical footing, while retaining the moral force of his general argument, I argue that, in contrast to both the critics and the "third wave" interpreters, the deworlded other is the very characteristic of Levinas' thought that must be preserved if we are to rethink the relationship between Levinas and politics. To this end I analyze the philosophical "depth" at which Levinas is operating, which is the essential problem around which political appropriations hinge. Here I claim that both neo-Marxist critiques and 'third wave' applications of Levinas' work rely on interpretations that are overly prescriptive, and thus reach the corresponding conclusion that his thought is needlessly naive,

hyperbolic, theological, provincial, and apolitical. In order to extrapolate the depth at which the "social relation" is operative in Levinas, I conclude with a close reading of his essay "Meaning and Sense" which affirms the interpretation that Levinas is well aware that our conscious everyday experience of the other is already mediated through society and history, and that he is aiming at a specific dimension of this relation which he takes to be crucial. This opens up new possibilities of how we might think these two kinds of relations together.

Having reframed the abstract nature of the relationship between the "other," context, and politics, the third chapter begins to delve into the philosophical substance of subjectivity. In order to begin to bridge the divide between Levinas and Marx, I return to Fichte, who is posited as the point of origin for modern theories of intersubjectivity. Fichte's novel modifications of Kant necessitate an exploration of the social and material dimensions of subjectivity. Fichte is crucial because he not only opens up the theoretical possibility of understanding experience in intersubjective terms but, in doing so, he outlines the tensions and contradictions that go on to define the philosophical tradition. Through Fichte I continue to explore the relationship between the Levinasian dimension of subjectivity with the increasing focus on activity, sociality, language politics and institutions. One of the main themes to emerge is the tendency to conceive of the intersubjective relation retroactively, that is, from the standpoint of its closure or return to self, rather than from the perspective of its entanglement with exteriority. To further prepare for Marx I conclude with a brief discussion of the relationship between Levinas and Hegel.

The Fourth and final chapter is a sustained dialogue between Levinas and Marx. I begin by outlining the insufficiency of the relationship articulated between totality and infinity. Levinas too often portrays society as an indiscriminate field of alienation and thus the "betrayal" articulated fails to indicate a proper path forward. As a result Levinas' blanket eschewal of all

social relations aside from the sui generis relation to the other paradoxically lends itself to a blanket acceptance of the status quo. I then turn to Marx to find a way to articulate this relationship with the material world in a new way while maintaining its critical import. In doing so I draw out the significant similarities between Marx and Levinas and why these (often overlooked) dimensions are of vital importance. This leads to a discussion of the tension within Marx's conception of alienation and politics, and how Levinas, without offering any simple solutions, can help resolve problems that Marx could not see clearly enough. Having addressed the tensions in Marx I turn to how Marx's critique of instrumentalization and capitalism can compliment Levinas' critique of totality and, moreover, clarify the relationship between philosophy and politics which is otherwise ambiguous in Levinas. I conclude by examining the implications of this dialogue for a theory of liberation.

CHAPTER ONE

The Deworlded "Other": Levinas' Neo-Marxist Critics

The gulf separating Marx and Levinas today is vast, to say the least. The relative consensus surrounding the meaning of Levinas' work has put more distance between him and Marx than just about any other two thinkers from the continental tradition. Given the general thrust of continental thought over the past two plus centuries, Levinas' depiction of a singular and unique relation to others—a bond which prohibits even the slightest trace of historical, hermeneutic or political context—will no doubt sound strange to modern philosophical ears. The post-Kantian continental tradition, for all of its differences in scope and ambition, is nothing if not an attempt to critique what is readily apparent by situating it within a larger context. Whether it be Hegel's example of a "tree" or "night" which begin the great dialectic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Marx's analogous "commodity" at the beginning of *Capital*, Heidegger's famous "hammer" from *Being and Time*, or Foucault's example of the apparent "unity of a book" in the opening chapter of *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* philosophical inquiry is synonymous with illuminating the complex of historical relations, networks and practices which are presupposed within a seemingly given object or concept.

Within this trajectory Marx is considered a particularly important watershed moment in our philosophical understanding of subjectivity. While the likes of Fichte, Feuerbach and Hegel paved the way, it is with Marx that we have the complete inversion of the Cartesian subject—where the subject is no longer directly posited as a *res cognitans* but rather understood on the basis of its embodied activity within a historical world of structures, fields and horizons. It should be stated at the outset that, for all my disagreements with the critics of Levinas, I am sympathetic to the spirit which animates their antipathy. The advances made in continental

thought represent a remarkable step forward in our philosophical understanding of subjectivity and it is thus for good reasons that Levinas may appear to many of us who stand in the long shadows cast by Marx (not to mention Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, Lacan, Althusser, and Foucault) as philosophically regressive—either wholly theological in nature or else a return to a strange form of postmodern idealism, empiricism or liberalism. And from here the path from philosophically regressive to politically ineffectual is, as we shall momentarily see, well-worn and requires little effort. Levinas is thought by his critics to be naive, religious, and, most likely, an ideological symptom of capitalism's total victory over our imagination. While these same commentators find time to to perform impressive theoretical feats in order to resuscitate the subversive dimensions of other so-called "class ideologues" like Plato, Aristotle, St. Paul, Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel, the legacy of Levinas, it would seem, is irredeemable.[1]

While the theoretical disjoint between Levinas and the continental tradition may preclude a broad reception from the outset, it is precisely this feature which has made Levinas attractive to an eclectic mix of post-structuralists, liberals, conservatives, and scholars of religion. What is appealing here (even if for radically different reasons) is how Levinas conceives of a sphere of intimate human interaction which lies at an apparent remove or "interstitial distance"[2] from the totalizing aspirations of history, politics and the state. Whether invoked to affirm or condemn the socio-political background which mediate our perceptions, identities and interactions, citing the name "Levinas" effectively permits one to bracket such features out of the analysis (at least temporarily).

[1] The three most prominent critics examined in this chapter, Eagleton, Badiou and Zizek, have engaged with many "unorthodox" (at least from a Marxist perspective) thinkers in their respective critiques of capitalism and corresponding ruminations on the idea of communism. For example, Badiou is fond of the universality found within Plato, Zizek is interested in recovering the lost subversive legacies of German idealism, Eagelton is keen on highlighting Marx's aristotelean roots (a point less endorsed by Zizek and Badiou), and all three are especially partial to the philosophical importance of the Christian legacy.
[2] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London: Verso, 2007), p.113.

Given this consensus it would seem that the names Marx and Levinas may in fact be linked, but only if serving as antipodal markers staking out the distance of this theoretical chasm.

In the following chapters these themes will be traced back to their origins to provide an alternate path between Marx and Levinas, but before undergoing such a task it is perhaps prudent to preface such an analysis by outlining the ramparts erected on both sides of this theoretical divide. As already intimated, regardless of which interlocutor we set before Levinas, there is really only one genus of criticism, though it acquires its species forms as it is taken up under different names and various causes. Whether philosophical or political in nature, virtually every critique stems from Levinas' attempt to posit the singularity of the "other," who transcends every context, defies every category and resists every attempt to apprehend. In this odd analysis the relation to the other is increasingly *de-worlded* the more it is *embedded*—two processes which should not typically coincide, and which are diametrically opposed in thinkers like Heidegger. In contrast to Heidegger, for whom penetrating the veneer of consciousness meant exposing the shared horizons of referential meaning, Levinas' aims at a level of embodiment beneath signification and still deeper than the familiarity with the world that already pushes and pulls the subject in one direction or another.

While we will pay special attention to thinkers that are more closely associated with Marx, Marxism and the radical left, these objections reverberate more broadly throughout the aether of continental thought. This also means we are equally interested in how certain philosophical impulses are heightened, muted, developed, negated and carried forward in the Continental tradition as Marx is refracted through other philosophical prisms like phenomenology, existentialism, critical theory, structuralism, and psychoanalysis. If we are to settle the outstanding accounts between Levinas and Marx we cannot not help but settle them, at

least in some small way, with the whole tradition. We will thus seek to identify various nodal points which need to be loosened, refashioned, even traced back so as to untie, so that we can push Marx and Levinas not only beyond their individual horizon but also beyond the trajectories which have carried them toward the present. To this end, the purpose of this chapter is somewhat akin to the role played by Ivan's famous tale of the "Grand Inquisitor" in the *Brothers Karamazov*, through which Dostoyevsky welcomes the most formidable expressions of doubt and skepticism in his exploration of faith. In the same way, by outlining the following critiques we will attempt to set for ourselves the highest possible challenge to overcome.

Levinas' Critics

For many on the radical left Levinas is an important philosophical figure insofar as he marks a key juncture, a kind of theoretical wrong-turn, which led us directly to our present predicament—a situation where so-called critical thought operates in service of (or at the very least, is powerless to disturb) the ideological edifice of late capitalism. "Whether they know it or not," Badiou explains, "it is in the name of [Levinas'] configuration that the proponents of ethics explain to us today that it amounts to 'recognition of the other'…'the ethics of differences'… 'multiculturalism'…Or, quite simply, to good old-fashioned 'tolerance.'" This contention, that Levinas' philosophy engenders a liberal political malaise, is ubiquitous among his political critics. Levinas is described as, at best, inspiring the kind of political quietism typical of "postmodern" thought and, at worst, providing the ethical facade of capitalist imperialism.

However, before we analyze the specific function Levinas may serve in today's ideological constellation we must first investigate the *philosophical* dissonance between Levinas and his critics which, as we already suggested, is at root. After all, Levinas is typically

implicated only indirectly in the failures of the New Left, as he never reached such political conclusions directly (in fact, as we will see, quite the contrary). In any case, we need to analyze things at a deeper theoretical level to get to the heart of the matter. While the conclusions reached by Levinas' many critics may be deemed here insufficient, the question which inspires them is certainly germane; the political remains an undeniable lacuna in Levinas' thought. Through such an exercise we hope to shed light on why and how Levinas' thought has, to quote Asher Horowitz, "remained open to being assimilated to liberalism—a view that his philosophy is far from endorsing, if not essentially opposed."[3]

The philosophical critique

Terry Eagleton's treatment of Levinas is in many ways paradigmatic, exhibiting the breadth of criticism and confusion that ensues from Levinas' odd phenomenologically inspired description which eschews—at bottom—any effort to situate the "other" within a context. As Eagleton laments, Levinas' relation to the other "occurs in some pre-reflective, pre-historical depths of the self, prior to knowledge, intention, commitment, consciousness or free decision."[4] Levinas' "Other" is thus "troublingly eternal, existing outside all social or historical context, denuded of all definitive cultural markers, transcending all moral or psychological factors."[5] Eagleton, and here he is certainly not alone, is not quite sure what to make of this (thus far accurately described) philosophical orientation, where Levinas seemingly (and all too hastily) seeks to undo centuries of philosophical labor from Hegel and Marx to Freud and Heidegger by indiscriminately tearing away every garment which had been meticulously constructed and

[3] Asher Horowitz, *Ethics At A Standstill* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2008), p. ix.
[4] Terry Eagleton, *Trouble With Strangers* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell Pub., 2009), p. 227.
[5] Ibid., p. 227.

layered over the subject. Lacking any typical reference point in which to ground such a philosophy, Levinas' becomes a catch-all for Eagleton, an easy target for all the frustrations and pathologies of the modern age, regardless of how contradictory these interpretations might be. Levinas' ethical theory is at once: "hyperbolic"[6] and "authoritative,"[7] yet, at the same time "abstract,"[8] "aloofly indifferent,"[9] and "portentously hollow"[10]; Levinas is described as politically impotent,[11] "characteristically backwoods, anti-enlightenment," and the great homogenizer of difference,[12] yet somehow also responsible for today's "tediously familiar brand of multiculturalism,"[13] and all the while masquerading as a "champion of Zionism"[14] (which might, Eagleton suspects, in fact be the secret telos of his philosophical project).

In Levinasian scholarship much has been made of the "Levinas effect"—where, the philosophy of Levinas is emptied of any positive content and thus become a kind of universal vocabulary through which the author gets to "say whatever we wanted to say in the first place."[15] Much like Marx's famous example in the *German Ideology* of the unalienated individual who is able to hunt, fish, and criticize as they please without becoming a "hunter" "fisherman" or "critic," Levinas, can similarly be a feminist in the morning, a deconstructionist in the afternoon and a theologian in the evening (and perhaps even a Marxist after the children are put to bed). What is especially apparent in Eagleton's analysis is that the inverse is also true, Levinas' unorthodox approach not only makes him easily co-opted for one project or another but also

[6] Ibid., p. 224.
[7] Ibid., p. 236.
[8] Ibid., p. 227.
[9] Ibid., p. 241.
[10] Ibid., p. 237.
[11] Ibid., p. 243.
[12] Ibid., p. 235.
[13] Ibid., p. 241.
[14] Ibid., p. 236.
[15] C. Fred Alford, *Levinas, The Frankfurt School And Psychoanalysis* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 1.

makes him susceptible to functioning as a repository or catch-all for whatever critique one might wish to level against the state of contemporary theory. Does his emphasis on subjectivity make him a humanist; his devaluation of consciousness and intentionality an anti-humanist; his focus on transcendence religious; his concern for the uniqueness of the other a liberal; his emphasis on the passivity of the subject an empiricist (as Derrida playfully suggests in Violence and Metaphysics[16]); his emphasis on the neighbour a Zionist, or at the very least a conservative?

Eagleton is, of course, absolutely correct that Levinas *begins* with an "other" beyond the grasp of history, politics and other socio-psychological factors. However, everything depends on how one interprets this moment. Absolutely crucial here is what one makes of the passage from Levinas' dichotomous relation to the "other" to the relation with "the third." While Levinas uses the term "the third" in more than one way (a literal third person, a social plurality, a universal or third person perspective), for the time being it is sufficient to note that it signifies the transition from a primordial relation to a unique other to the subsidiary realm of "totality" which includes everything from self-consciousness, language and representation to society, politics and the state. For Levinas to put the "other" before "the third" is to fall outside the sway of a tradition that has understood subjectivity on the basis of the totality of socio-psychological processes (be they synchronic or diachronic). This move triggers a visceral reaction in Levinas' critics, who assume (perhaps understandably?) that such a re-ordering is tantamount to a full scale rejection of the philosophical tradition constructed to combat the philosophical (and often political) individualism found in liberalism, empiricism, etc. As Eagleton explains, with reference to Lacan:

> If Lacan writes the other as Other, it is to insist that there can be no unmediated relation with it – *no liaison with the 'unique' other which does not pass through the refractions*

[16] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing And Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 190.

> *of the symbolic order as a whole.* What Levinas would call the 'third' is thus inscribed within any face-to-face encounter *from the outset*, as an estranging dimension of that rapport.[17]

Similarly, Zizek argues that Levinas' depiction of the "ethical relation" is (over and above being wrong politically) "wrong in its own terms, as a phenomenological description, since it misses the way the Third is always-already here…a paradoxical background-face…a formal-transcendental fact…a positive condition of ethics, not simply its secondary supplement."[18] Simply put, Levinas, to his peril, naively eschews the various matrixes which are presupposed in any act of perception or singular encounter.

This philosophical critique is, of course, neither new nor unique to our neo-Marxist critics. Derrida, in his essay, *Violence and Metaphysics*, which would introduce Levinas to a wide audience, was explicit in his skepticism that one could de-world the other in such a way. Invoking giants like Heidegger and Hegel, Derrida deconstructs Levinas' claim that the other is "infinitely other," a "positive infinity" who is able to maintain its status purely in-itself, apart from any relation or any negativity.

> The infinitely other, the infinity of the other, is not the other *as* a positive infinity…would not be what it is…if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite, of the *apeiron*…Can one respect the Other as Other, and expel negativity—labor—from transcendence, as Levinas seeks to do? The positive Infinity (God)—if these words are meaningful—cannot be infinitely Other.[19]

Such a description of unsullied exteriority, Derrida claims, is self-defeating, a performative contradiction; any attempt to announce such a presence would, paradoxically, require one to first "renounce all language, and first of all the words *infinite* and *other*."[20] Echoing Wittgenstein's

[17] Eagleton, *Trouble*, 241-2. Emphasis added.
[18] Slavoj Zizek, "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence," in *The Neighbor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 184.
[19] Derrida, *Violence*, p. 142.
[20] Ibid.

famous dictum that "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence," Derrida concludes that, while Levinas may indeed point to something beyond "Being and Logos," that "it must not be possible either to think or state this call."[21] Again, even for Derrida, Levinas is admonished for violating the fundamental lesson of the continental tradition—demonstrated for Derrida by Hegel's concept of "negativity" or Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world"—that identity can never be posited directly, it is always preceded by difference. The only way for any-thing to appear as a some-thing is if it is differentiated from every-thing else. Thus appearance as such always presupposes a prior background, where every-thing is brought together into a single horizon but expressed as a field of differentiation.

The typical philosophical critique of Levinas is thus not what one might initially suspect. It is not that Levinas' ruminations on the other are critiqued for myopically fetishizing difference, on the contrary, the standard charge is that he lacks any awareness of difference at all. The purported trouble with Levinas is that, because he has eschewed all difference (traditionally understood), when he attempts to articulate difference qua other, it is too strong and the other is quite literally posited as out of the "world" (in the Heideggerian sense). The other is not different the same way that a cat is different from a dog or chalk from a pencil. Sharing no common or mediating referent, the other is indescribably different. This is why Paul Ricoeur, like Eagleton, will label Levinas' philosophy "hyperbole," not in the sense of a "literary trope" but rather referring Levinas' "systematic practice of *excess* in philosophical argumentation."[22] What Ricoeur is attempting to describe by the term "hyperbole" is, for us, a crucial philosophical distinction. Hyperbole typically indicates the exaggeration and stretching of context, where, for the sake of emphasis, one extends a claim beyond practical or observable means. For example,

[21] Ibid.
[22] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: Chicago of University Press, 1992), p. 337.

one might say "you are the most unique person in the world" or "that is the best coffee in the world" which implies hyper-comparison, that one has surveyed all the people in the world or tasted all the coffee in the world before reaching their conclusion. Levinas is hyperbolic, for Ricouer, in the exact opposite way. He is not participating in hyper-comparison but rather situating the other completely outside of context and beyond comparison. Possessing no discernible attributes, no differences or similarities, the other is simply stands in for difference as such. For these reasons, the epiphany of the other must be "something different than phenomenon"[23] because in Levinas there is "no middle ground, no between,"[24] nothing to mediate my experience of the other. The common sentiment in all these critiques of Levinas, irrespective of the political or ethical commitments in which they are embedded (for Ricoeur this asymmetrical structure of selfhood makes it difficult to think reciprocity and recognition), is that the problems Levinas will encounter stem from his commitment to this deworlding.

The political critique

In the hands of our neo-Marxist critics, this philosophical misstep takes on a special political significance. The antinomy created between "ethics" and "politics" *a priori* circumscribes Levinas' philosophical analysis within a non-politics. "Ethics" implies, for Levinas, my asymmetrical relationship to the deworlded "other." "Politics," one the other hand, describes the exact opposite procedure where individuals are counted, compared and classified, according to some third person or universal perspective. To oppose ethics and politics in this way, Zizek claims, is to already become "postpolitical" because this philosophical dichotomy

[23] Ibid., p. 337.
[24] Ibid., p. 338.

necessarily excludes "the properly political dimension."[25] Reinhard, writing in the same volume on the "neighbour," puts the problem succinctly:

> "there can be no relationship between ethics and politics in Levinas's theory. This fundamental disjunction between the conditions of ethics (and the neighbor) and politics (and the citizen, on the model of "fraternity") should preclude any attempt to draw political consequences from Levinas's theory of the neighbor…ethics is inherently apolitical, must willfully ignore what would be fair or for the general good. To shift the other as neighbor into mediation with the other in the polis is precisely to give up on ethics; moreover, to try to bring politics to the immediate level of the singular face of the other, to see the other as a singularity, can only mean to give up on politics.[26]

To counter such a position, Reinhard continues, we must accept that "[t]he political is the condition of the ethical…the *two* can only be created by passing through the *three."*[27] It is not any particular content of Levinas' political views, but the very distinction between ethics and politics that is deemed the true political content of his philosophy (unbeknownst to him)—one which can only elevate the intimate, unique and singular by disavowing the political background (which is, for Reinhard and Zizek via Lacan, closely connected with the symbolic order).

This putatively Manichaean distinction in Levinas between ethics (the two) and politics (the three) actually impinges our ethical duties which, for Zizek, should aspire to universality and justice. If we "deny" the priority of the three and "stick to the postulate of a final translatability of the Third into a relation to the Other's face," then for Zizek we "remain caught in a vicious cycle of 'understanding.'"[28] Because the "Third is not secondary" but "always-already here," Zizek continues, our "primordial ethical obligation is toward this Third who is *not* here in the face-to-face relationship, the one in shadow, like the absent child of a love-couple."[29] This re-

[25] Zizek, *Neighbors*, p. 149.
[26] Kenneth Reinhard, "Towards a Political Theology of the Neighbor," in *The Neighbor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 48-9.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Zizek, *Neighbor*, p. 184.
[29] Ibid., p. 182.

orientation from the two to the three leads us to Zizek's "radical anti-Levinasian conclusion: the true ethical step is the one *beyond* the face of the other, the one of *suspending* the hold of the face, the one of choosing *against* the face, for the *third."*[30] To choose the other, to attest to the apparition of the face, displaces the "elementary gesture of justice" which is to "not to show respect for the face in front of me, to be open to its depth, but to abstract from it and refocus onto the faceless Thirds in the background,"[31] that is, to "disregard the privileged One whom I "really understand."[32]

Here we must briefly take note of the theoretical sleight of hand operative in such criticisms, a theme we will return to at the end of the chapter. The link between the philosophical critique and the political critique is not adequately explained, namely, it is never explicitly demonstrated how we are to transition from the "other" as radically incomprehensible to the "other" as the neighbour, who is familiar, the one I "really understand"? Eagleton makes the same transition (equally without explanation) noting that (supposedly despite the fact that he refuses to place the other under any rubric) Levinas

> has trouble with strangers – not, to be sure, with those of them who are 'proximate', but with the anonymous masses who at any given moment happen not to be so. (The case is even worse when the masses in question are non-European: witness his deep distaste for what he calls the 'yellow peril' in *Les Imprévus de l'histoire*.)[33]

Implicit in such critiques is the notion that, for Levinas, the radical "other" who exists beyond difference and outside of history can—through some unexplained process of theoretical metamorphosis—become my neighbour (who has a name, recognizable features, personality traits, citizenship, an occupation etc.) without first passing through the "third" (be it symbolic,

[30] Ibid., p. 183.
[31] Ibid., p. 183.
[32] Ibid., p. 182.
[33] Eagleton, *Trouble*, p. 241.

political, psychological or otherwise). Though Levinas often appears to have an all or nothing approach to context (which admittedly has its own problems, though they are different problems than the ones articulated here) where the other is either altogether foreign or already fully immersed in the world, many of his interpreters (and this is equally true of many Levinasians) subtly imply that the passage between these worlds unfolds slowly, where the "other" undergoes a transmutation from unknown to known which seems to progress from those close by to those far away. This unacknowledged slippage between levels of analysis would seem to account for Eagleton's earlier noted oscillation, where Levinas always says too much and somehow not enough: when considered from the perspective of the first position (deworlded other) Levinas is hyperbolic, demanding and overly authoritative, but when considered from the second perspective (other as intimate neighbor) Levinas is politically impotent, hollow, propping up the status quo or acting as a theoretical apologist for Zionism. This slippage between levels of analysis is particularly noteworthy because it names the primary difficulty faced with dealing with the ethical and political implications of Levinas' work. Eagleton's objection, for example, that Levinas' concept of asymmetrical responsibility is "ridiculous," akin to Hegel's "bad infinity," because it would seem to imply that I am "responsible for the secret police who are torturing me" or that I should remain just as open to "those who traffic heroin to schoolchildren" as to those who "beg us for bread," is prototypical of such a misreading in-so-far as it fails to address or even acknowledge the different levels of analysis.[34] These kinds of arguments, which are widespread both in critical and positive appraisals of Levinas' work, take the various terms that Levinas uses to describe the pre-conscious/de-contextual relationship to the "other" (like "ethics" "responsibility" "hospitality" "apology") as having the same implications and meaning

[34] Eagleton, *Trouble*, p. 237.

as they would on this side of "totality," where one relates to the other through deliberation, understanding, reason, and in the context of institutions, projects, etc. For the time being it is sufficient to note that this tension will be the major theme in the further chapters as we chart an alternative course for Levinas' relationship to politics.

At any rate, while these arguments, often written in Lacanese (where the hidden/excluded element is what grounds the universal background which structures difference as such), may appear more nuanced than the standard leftist critique, it is functionally tantamount to the same objection one would expect from the more traditional Marxist/historical materialist position: the politico-historical context is not neutral, is not a secondary concern, and it certainly cannot be bracketed out—it structures every aspect of the battle ground on which these inter-personal dramas (no matter how intimate) play out. Hegel's dictum "the true is in the whole" still holds. To believe that we have escaped the realm of politics and ideology is, to the contrary, indicative that we are mired so profoundly in its depths that its outer limit has ceased to be visible. With his emphasis on subjectivity over structure, ideas over material conditions, ethics over politics, individuality over collectivity, Levinas represents nothing more than yet another naive liberal dressed up in post-modern garb.

Here we can return to Eagleton, who is even more pointed and precise in his political criticisms of Levinas. Similarly emphasizing the centrality of Levinas within our modern constellation, Eagleton furnishes him with the distinction as "one of the earliest postmodern thinkers,"[35] even boldly claiming that the far more prominent Derrida is but "an extended footnote to Levinas' own meditations."[36] Levinas is emblematic for Eagleton because he provides us with the general formula for understanding the political quietism of our times. In

[35] Eagleton, *Trouble*, p.233.
[36] Ibid., p. 247.

Eaglton's reading, Levinas (who is representative of the more general postmodern/poststructuralist position) represents a one-sided and reactionary theoretical response to the political catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century. Perceiving there to be a straight line "from the generic to the Gulag" these philosophies have, in both theory and practice, indiscriminately pathologized all forms of collectivity. For whatever gains have been made in the struggle against totalization, this myopic focus on the "other," for Eagleton, is ineffectual and self-defeating because it cannot distinguish between those forms of solidarity and struggle which enslave and those which liberate. As Eagleton explains:

> No more sophisticated notion of human fellowship is permitted. When Levinas thinks of solidarity he thinks of fascism, not of the resistance movements which fought to overcome it...At its most negative, it is the sign of the gradual atrophy of the sense of society. Politics is now the problem, not the solution.[37]

According to Eagleton the theoretical strategy of avoiding violence by precluding all forms of solidarity bars, from the very outset, a proper solution to the worst forms of violence. With a mocking tone Eagleton proclaims that it was not "jealous singularity which put a stop to Stalinism," nor were the armies who defeated Hitler "suffused by an experience of transcendent otherness."[38]

Again, for Eagleton the philosophical maps out perfectly onto the political: Levinas' refusal to accept the foundational pillar of the continental tradition—that "Otherness" cannot appear *ex nihlo* because "*it is constituted by our dealings with each other*, and is therefore bound up with identity and reciprocity"[39]—makes him blind to the increasingly global processes of exploitation, domination and marginalization which engender "otherness" in reality. Instead of forming alternative forms of global solidarity suitable for such challenges, Eagleton's Levinas

[37] Ibid., p. 233.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 237. Emphasis added.

precludes any such form of collectivity or alliance. The political upshot of such "postmodern" thought is thus impotent from the beginning, paralyzed by its fear that virtually every dimension of life (from language, thinking and reason to culture, politics and the state) is, regardless of content, ipso facto on a secular trend towards a violent totality:

> What one might loosely call post-structuralist or postmodern ethics reflects among other things a failure of political nerve on the part of a European intelligentsia confronted not only with the formidable power of global corporate capitalism, but still languishing guiltily in the long shadow of the Gulag and the gas chambers… A cautious liberal pragmatism, coupled with a salutary skepticism of grand narratives, may thus appear the order of the day. But though such pragmatism can valuably contest dogmatic irrationalism, it is powerless to transform the conditions which give birth to it.[40]

The impotence of the todays left—who today prefer to play in the shallow waters of the fragmentary narratives, intimate yet sectarian politics, and idiosyncratic notions of self-creation, rather than wade into waters deep enough to confront problems like global capitalism—can thus be easily traced back to Levinas' prohibition of any attempt to bind individuals together under a collective gaze. Echoing Zizek and Reinhard's concerns, Eagleton concludes that Levinas' insistence on framing the ethical in "such full-bloodily non-social terms" which remains a priori "aloofly indifferent to community, consensus, equality, civil rights, legality, universality, reciprocity, natural qualities, the generic and so on" means that it is "impossible" for Levinas to "conjure a politics…beyond the most banal variety of liberal pluralism" an opinion which, Eagleton boasts, is "almost universally acknowledged among his commentators."[41] The lesson is painfully clear—regardless of where it enters back into the philosophical analysis—if we renounce history, context, and structure *in the first instance*, we are doomed to be passive observers watching the spectacle of global capitalism unfold.

[40] Ibid., p. 233.
[41] Ibid., p. 241.

It is particularly germane to our present study that Eagleton goes on to contrast such a view of politics with Marx. In a turn of phrase that would no doubt make Marx proud, Eagleton proclaims that such a Levinasian "view of the *polis* as a place of alienation reflects an alienated view of politics."[42] The problem for Eagleton is that politics, according to Levinas' formulation, is incapable of generating positive values. At best we can hope for the occasional interruption of ethics into the political arena, but such a moment must recede before it can fundamentally transform politics.[43] Politics means the precise opposite for Marx than it does for Levinas: rather than tarnish the individual, politics (or better, "socialism") names the kind of "human community," which takes into account various talents, abilities and needs, which would be required to develop the "unique, richly evolved individual" in the first place.[44] The problem with Levinas, Eagleton asserts, is that his skepticism of the generic (including concepts, reciprocity and politics) "assumes a bourgeois notion of equality as abstract equivalence" which Eaglteon contrasts with Marx, for whom equality "must be incarnate in human difference, rather than riding roughshod over it."[45] Because Levinas insists on indiscriminately locating *all* politics under the generic rubric of domination, no amount of theoretical devotion to the other's singularity will prevent such aspirations from ringing hollow. What is required, Eagleton thus concludes, is that we find alternative theoretical conceptions which actually help us differentiate between those forms of social and political life which are steeped in domination and those that cultivate the growth of genuine human capacities.

[42] Ibid., p. 244.
[43] Ibid., p. 244. This is also the basis of Gillian Rose's critique, where "resistance" in Levinas is able to manifests itself "only as 'interruptions' which occur in 'the periodic rebirth of skepticism.'" *The Broken Middle* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), p. 251.
[44] Ibid., p. 246.
[45] Ibid., p. 246.

Badiou will state his objections to Levinas' in even stronger terms than these previous critics. At the level of philosophy Badiou's critique is by now familiar (Levinas misses the Lacanian dimension of the I/other relationship and, because it is unmediated, Levinas' "other" is essentially religious in character, where the "Altogether-Other" is an obvious stand in for "God"[46]) but politically, Badiou will argue that Levinas-inspired discourses play a more fundamental role in the ideological edifice of capitalist imperialism. Not only do such commitments to "the Other" and "difference" displace "the late class struggle"[47] but they contain a more authoritative injunction than the one they purport to critique. What is silently implied by a theoretical focus on "otherness," according to Badiou, is that a set of Western prerequisites (liberal values, parliamentary democracy, free markets) must first be accepted—thus this philosophical commitment to openness delivers, *in practice*, the "final imperative of a conquering civilization: 'Become like me and I will respect your difference.'"[48] While Badiou will, "[f]or the honour of philosophy," place distance between "Levinas's actual conception of things" and "this ideology of 'a right to difference,'"[49] the very fact that this discourse of "otherness" could be so easily inculcated within capitalist imperialism is damning evidence that Levinas's ethics (which is essentially, in Badiou's estimation, "decomposed religion") offers us nothing more than "a dog's dinner."

The challenges presented here for the prospects of thinking Levinas within traditions of radical politics are significant. For many theorists of politics thought, to which we could add

[46] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 21-3.
[47] Ibid., p. 23.
[48] Ibid., p. 25.
[49] Ibid., p. 20.

Wolin,[50] Wood,[51] Malabou,[52] Halward,[53] and Rothenburg,[54] Levinas' philosophical inversion of the continental tradition is symptomatic of the ideological hegemony of late capitalism. To begin an analysis with a relation to a deworlded other is, for these critics, to accept defeat in advance. The theoretical limitations of such a framework—which posits ethics in an antithetical relation to politics, which conceives of the social world (from concepts and representations to unions and political parties) as the generic field of indiscriminate alienation, which privileges the intimate at the cost of the universal, which recognizes the neighbour only by ignoring the structural, which placates revolutionary impulse by confining ethical action to periods of brief "interruption"—are simply too numerous, too essential, and too interconnected to be overcome. Levinas' fetishization of the "inconvertible" trace, as Malabou puts it, makes it impossible to "distinguish cosmopolitanism rigorously from hypercapitalism."[55] It would seem that there is as much sympathy for Levinas' critique of "totality" as one would expect for Thatcher's claim that "society does not exist" or Hayek's critique of central planning (which similarly caution that even a modicum of organization leads down the road to totalitarianism, or, "serfdom" to use Hayek's famous phrase).

[50] Richard Wolin, "Levinas and Heidegger: The Anxiety of Influence," in *The Frankfurt School Revisited, and Other Essays on Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 111-32.
[51] David Wood, "Some Questions for My Levinasian Friends," in *Addressing Levinas* ed. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).
[52] Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, trans by C. Shread. (New York, Columbia University Press. 2010), especially pp. 40-41; 76-7.
[53] Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
[54] Mary Anne Rothenburg, *The Excessive Subject: A New Theory of Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), especially pp. 200-5.
[55] Malabou, p. 77.

Prolegomena to a Radical Levinasian Politics

Are things really so simple? The upcoming chapters will be devoted to reexamining the relationship between Levinas, the "other," and "the third" in order to open up a new path between Levinas and Marx, one that speaks as much to their fundamental convergences as their differences (which are also important). However, we can note at the outset is that Levinas does not plot easily on this traditional philosophical spectrum which places structure, shared horizons and forms of collectivity at one end and freedom, autonomy, and rupture at the other. The dimension of the intersubjective relation that Levinas is describing is neither expressed in the totality of relations that "interpellate" the subject, nor in those moments of rebellion, where the subject is able to master its circumstances and break free from its horizon. As a result, Levinas' thought does not easily conform to the frameworks that construe subjectivity as a tension between the particular and the universal. This does not of course mean that this traditional schema fails to capture important dimensions and tensions of the human experience, it is merely insufficient to capture (at least) one specific dimension of experience, one which permeates all of Levinas work.

As a result, Levinas is easily dismissed, interpreted as a step away from, rather than a deepening of, theories of intersubjectivity. Because Levinas does not begin his analysis of the inter-human relation from a position oriented within a world already in motion, flooded with meaning and with a history, his philosophy is "forced" into a direction—the image of an intimate relation between two fully self-consciousness beings not yet sullied by the onslaught of society, history and politics—that he is resisting if not outright precluding. As we have seen, if we take Heidegger or Lacan to be the primary point of departure, one will understandably oscillate between extremes in trying to interpret Levinas, because his theory does not lend itself easily to

kinds of questions they are asking. Levinas is not against these philosophies but he sits at perpendicular angle, he cuts across their thought, is prior to, above and beyond their insights (which is also not so say superior or inferior). So the first thing we must acknowledge is the difficulty of certain myopic attempts to apprehend Levinas strictly through Lacan, Heidegger, Derrida, or whomever, without paying heed to the inertia of such frameworks, which tend to obfuscate more than they illuminate with respect to Levinas. Our first task will thus be to clarify Levinas' description of the "social relation" and how it differs from other accounts of (inter)subjectivity.

The second pillar is very much related to the first. If we are successful in clarifying the meaning of what we have been referring to as the relationship between "the two," we have an opportunity to rethink its relation to "the three" and thereby rethink Levinas' place within the contemporary politico-philosophical constellation. It is rather an uncontroversial fact that Levinas is utterly hostile to "differences" articulated in the traditional sense of comparing and contrasting. How then do we then go from this hostility towards difference to the (seemingly equally uncontroversial) claim that Levinas is the guru for the "cult of social differences"[56] who remains trapped in a "cycle of understanding"? The Levinasian "other" is not the one whom I recognize or is in any way familiar to me. This means, above all, that "responsibility" (a term we will further unpack) is not contingent upon the "other" possessing this or that attribute. In many ways Levinas' thought is antithetical to the kinds of difference traditionally articulated within philosophy. What is ironically overlooked by Levinas' many neo-Marxist critics is that Hegel and Heidegger are perhaps the greatest philosophers of difference while Levinas is the great obliterator of difference. In fact, the difficulty of extracting a politics out of Levinas (who is

[56] Eagleton, *Trouble*, p. 244.

anything but blameless in this regard) is that he obsesses about the first difference (the relation to the other qua other) without any analysis of the second kind of difference (where the other is assigned a set of designations through the complex web of socio-historical relations)—beyond the fact that the first difference makes the second possible, or, in his terms, it is "evidence which makes evidence possible."[57]

The first task is thus *not* to think Levinasian difference as if it is already an attempt to think difference in the second, more tradition, sense. To do so would be to interpret Levinas as offering a theory of the subject that is necessarily hostile to politics, and, accordingly, comprised by a constellation of moral platitudes which are theological, austere and hyperbolic. The problem thus arises when these two kinds of inquiries into the inter-human relation are collapsed as if they are competing answers to the same question. There is, as I hope to demonstrate, an immense gap between the Levinasian "other" and the "other" that appears to us refracted through the world of "totality" (where the other is situated in a symbolic universe, with a history, and the bearer of politics and power). The task is thus not immediately to criticize the Levinasian other from the standpoint of "the three" but to think the relation between these overlapping dimensions of experience. It is within this distance between the two "others" that we find the most interesting political and philosophical questions. In what way can the other be both known and unknown? How can the other bear the scars of power, stand under the weight of politics, be delivered to me through history, and yet be also remain exterior to all such forces? It is thus crucial if we are to rethink the relationship between these two worlds (of which Levinas are Marx are important representatives) that we do not traverse the gap separating them too quickly. We now have our initial questions to begin our dialogue between Levinas and Marx: On what

[57] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality And Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 204.

basis can we justify the priority of the “two” over the “three” and, moreover, what alternative consequences can we draw from such a formulation?

CHAPTER TWO

Levinas, Politics and the Question of Depth: A Response to the "Third Wave" of Scholarship

In the previous chapter we outlined some of the philosophical and political challenges posed by Levinas' critics in thinking Levinas together with Marx. We concluded with two questions to guide our inquiry: how can we understand, and ultimately justify, Levinas' insistence on the priority of a relation to a singular other abstracted from representation, society, politics and history (what we called "the problem of the two"), and, if we accept this priority, what consequences might this hold for thinking the historical and structural dimensions of subjectivity as well as attempts to conceive of new forms of collectivity, solidarity and struggle. In this chapter we will begin to answer these questions through a critical investigation of how this pursuit has been taken up by others. While the neo-Marxist critics seek to drive a theoretical wedge between Levinas and the possibility of a radical politics, there have been an increasing number of sympathetic interpreters who have articulated a positive relationship between these two seemingly antithetical impulses. In what has, following Atterton,[58] been described as a "third wave" of Levinas scholarship, thinkers have surpassed the commentary and exposition, characteristic of the "first wave," as well as the "poststructuralism" and "deconstructionism," which defined the "second wave," in order to explore Levinas' relevance for explicitly political issues including post-colonialism, feminism, ecology, nationalism and economic inequality.

While I certainly affirm the impulse to think Levinas along these political lines, the present work diverges with many of these important efforts in one significant respect. The very way in which these thinkers seek to surpass the political modesty of the previous "waves" of

[58] Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, "Editors Introduction," in *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University Press, 2010), p. x.

scholarship all too often relies upon the same interpretation of the deworlded other as the one put forth by our neo-Marxist critics. According to this re-imagining of Levinas, the task of the radical Levinasian is to overcome Levinas' inherent limitation by *replacing*, rather than expanding, his supposed abstract, hyperbolic, pseudo-phenomenological, notion of the other with a less austere and more nuanced and concrete approach. Thus the very feature of Levinas' philosophy which I hope to underscore as the foundation for a radical politics, is once again posed as *the* primary obstacle to be overcome. While such a reorientation may lend Levinas more easily to a given political context, I argue that such gains come at a high price. Such an approach risks losing the essence and critical import of Levinas' philosophy and, moreover, tends to obscure, rather than solve, our central problem of how to understand the nature of the intersubjective relation. In order to provide an alternative path forward for Levinas (and ultimately set the stage for our dialogue with Marx and related thinkers) I emphasize the centrality of questions of "depth" when it comes to interpreting what Levinas means and what consequences might follow.

Universality, Particularity, and the Limitations of Levinas

John Drabinski's *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* is one of the most in-depth and sustained efforts to re-think Levinas' relationship to radical politics. In the same way that Eagleton provided us with a blueprint for our critics, Drabinski's important work outlines the central questions and concerns guiding many of the "third wave" approaches to Levinas. Like other radically minded Levinasians (such as Simon Critchley, who laments that, despite an "explosion of interest," the scholarship still does little more than pay "homage"[59])

[59] Simon Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them," *Political Theory* 32:2 (April 2004), p. 172.

Drabinski is deeply dissatisfied with the state of Levinasian scholarship. Though Levinas' legacy has progressed considerably (no longer concerned merely with exposition and exegesis nor strictly confined to Derrida's deconstructive influence) it retains, for Drabinski, too much of a "conservative edge."[60] This is in part because of the dogmatic and insular approach taken by commentators who "have little interest in reading outside the text's internal references"[61] but is also, and more germane for our purposes, symptomatic of a tension present within Levinas' philosophy itself. According to Drabinski there are two opposing impulses directing Levinas' work. On the one hand Levinas' work "aspires to a certain kind of universality,"[62] as it seeks to uncover the conditions for ethics as such. As much is evident in Levinas' indifference to social or political particulars, preferring instead to describe the relationship to an other who is "uprooted from all roots."[63]

However, in-spite of this grand theoretical ambition, Levinas' philosophy is, according to Drabinski, thoroughly steeped in the *particularity* of his own socio-political context. This is implicit in Levinas' fixation on Europe (where he remained largely indifferent to global affairs) and is explicit in those rare moments when Levinas actually did find the time to comment on matters beyond his own provincial concerns. Levinas' now infamous statement in an interview with Raoul Mortley that "humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest – all the exotic – is dance,"[64] is indicative, for Drabinski (as it is for Critchley[65]), of Levinas' overall Eurocentric posture, which, as we shall see, cannot be easily isolated from his attitudes on philosophy, politics, and theology. On this matter Drabinski could

[60] John Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. xvi.
[61] Ibid, p. xvi.
[62] Ibid., p.x.
[63] Ibid., xii.
[64]As cited in Drabinksi, *Levinas*, p. 5.
[65] Critchley, "Five Problems," p. 176.

have also pointed, as Howard Caygill does, to Levinas' occasional and shocking appeals to "the worst kind of universal history" where he, in contemplating Russia's geopolitical positioning vis a vis the "Asiatic world" and "Europe," states that: "In abandoning the West, does not Russia fear to drown itself in an Asiatic civilization which, it too, is likely to carry on existing behind the concrete appearance of dialectical resolution?"[66] This is followed up by arguably Levinas' most embarrassing and loathsome statement: "The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past.'"[67] Such assertions, Caygill claims (in my opinion accurately) are so disturbing because they posit a "European identity that must be protected against a culture that is a stranger to its history" which, by any plausible interpretation "consigns a phantasm of Asia to the moon or another planet" and in doing so effectively strips "Asians of their humanity."[68]

Such sentiments are especially troubling for Drabinski because such "xenophobic" and "racist" sentiments have inflected much of the Levinasian scholarship. This includes the typical apologist positions which simply ignore Levinas' bigotry and thus fail "to take seriously the idea that Levinas might have very deep, well-established grounds for indifference to issues of nation and race," but also the far more troubling attempts by conservatives, like Nemo and Finkelkraut, to heighten and extend such Levinasian impulses in mounting a defence of "the West."[69] This trend is also apparent in the "revitalization of the religious dimension of Levinas's thought" which Drabinski describes as the "most peculiar and difficult turn in Levinas's work" as it often

[66] As cited in Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 184
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. xvi.

reproduces the Levinas' Eurocentrism, though now in a seemingly more innocuous form as an exaltation of monotheism.[70]

This touches on an interesting meta-philosophical problem, one that is certainly not unique to Levinas (and here Heidegger, especially with the emergence of the *Black Notebooks*, would be front and centre in this debate): what is the relationship between the "universal content" (or, if that term is considered too bombastic, perhaps we can settle for something more modest like: "the content which exceeds the bounds of the given context") of a philosophers thought and the various prejudices and limitations which inevitably arise out of the particularity of their situation? Put differently, can we interpret the idiosyncrasies of a thinker which we might find undesirable, or even despicable, as merely anomalous particularities which can be easily attributed to the inevitably flawed and finite human experience, or, conversely, do these missteps indicate something more profound, perhaps even comprise the "real" content in-so-far as they illuminate the pathological tint of a perspective. For example, one might be tempted (much like Marx) to dismiss outright the assumptions of modern bourgeois economists (such as the notion that, at base, humans are autonomous rational utility maximizers) because these ahistorical "universal" declarations are so steeped in the particularity of their situation that once they have been subtracted from these historical prejudices there is little if anything of interest to be recovered. The question we must answer is how ingrained are Levinas' biases (which are certainly real and troubling) within his overall philosophy?

For his part, Drabinski initially hesitates on this question. Levinas can be understood as both "critic *and* willing cultural operative;" does this mean that he enables, even makes possible, the reactionary thought of Nemo and Finkelkraut, or, on the contrary, should we see such

[70] Ibid.

applications as "a perversion of Levinasian ideas"?[71] Drabinski, here, seems to be attempting to navigate a middle ground here between those (like Zizek, Eaglteon and Badiou) who believe that any revolutionary potential of Levinas is subverted from the outset, and those who would uncritically adopt the Levinas' philosophical tenants. To this end Drabinski will place less emphasis on what we could think of as the "essence" of Levinas (as if it is a neutral or objective matter) and instead stress the important role that commentators have in carrying a thinker. While this has too often included an embrace of Levinas' more conservative moments, this need not be the case. However, this will take a fundamental rethinking of the ethical relation as it stands. To accomplish this task we must "decolonize"[72] Levinas' thought by placing it in dialogue with postcolonial thinkers and thereby pushing Levinas "across borders of history, culture and experience."[73]

While I certainly agree with Drabinski that it is more productive to focus our attention on how we should carry a thinker over obsessing about what a given philosopher "really" thought, at some level such an effort to explore Levinas' relevance within "politicized space"[74] must decide on how to what in Levinas should be discarded, preserved or transformed. Thus if we are to carry Levinas forward with more explicitly political aims we must present an answer to the question of *which elements* are to be highlighted in service of a political project and which elements are to be discarded because they impede such efforts (such as those inextricably bound to the prejudices and particularities of his specific context). It is here, where we are forced by the exigencies of interpretation to persevere and discard, where the rift begins to emerge between many of the critical engagements with Levinas and the one I am attempting to establish.

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., p. 8.
[73] Ibid., p. xiv.
[74] Ibid., xvii.

It is not surprising then that Drabinski will quickly shed his ambivalence and assert that there is indeed a deeper connection between Levinas' eurocentrism and his philosophy than many apologists would like to believe. As he states:

> Levinas's human prejudices are odd and jarring when they appear, not because his work sets some sort of standard up to which he fails to live (though that is often the tone of polemical critics), but because part of Levinas's racism or anxiety about national difference *proceeds from an explicit articulation of the Other's difference*.[75]

For Drabinski we are not talking about a clear (and embarrassing) violation of ones publicly avowed stance (like the evangelical preacher getting caught in a brothel) but a kind of violation made possible *by* and *through* and Levinas' philosophical articulation of difference. What is especially problematic is that Levinas' expresses his bigotry in the very language which is supposedly inoculated against such attitudes. This is Puzzling for Drabinski: how can Levinas, on the one hand, strip the "other" of all social, political and cultural signifiers and, on the other, still meet certain "others" with "cultural prejudice and chauvinism."[76]

In Levinas we are thus dealing with *two* distinct "others," the other to whom I'm responsible and what Drabinski calls "the other Other," the one who "appears as radical and alien, but does not register as obligating. An Other who is other than the meaning of the Other in Levinas's writings; epistemological distance is opened up, then responsibility fails to arrive on the scene."[77] This is, according to Drabinski, above all evidenced in Levinas' "Zionism," which leaves him "indifferent to the displacement of and violence against Palestinians."[78] The question which haunts Drabinski is: how Levinas can decry a responsibility which is utterly

[75] Ibid., xiii. Emphasis added.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., xvii.

indiscriminate only to rebuke such an ethics at the first sign of radical difference in the actually existing world?

The possibility of a hierarchy between two distinct "others" in Levinas' is central philosophical problematic for Drabinski. While accepting that there is something "transformative" in his ethics of obligation, Levinas still "remains tied to a kind of metaphysics, and so also a kind of epistemology of alterity, both of which *block* Levinasian thinking from the sorts of geographical wanderings with which it *ought* to be engaged."[79] According to such a formulation there is something *inherent* in Levinas' theoretical edifice which actually *prohibits* Levinas from extending the sphere of responsibility beyond a certain bound.

Here I would like to briefly pause over the important "ought" in the above claim that Levinas is prevented from the "geographical wanderings with which it *ought* to be engaged." The ambiguous nature of this "ought" is important for our considerations of the relationship between politics and ethics in Levinas. Is Drabinski here stating that Levinas sets an imperative in motion that he cannot simply live up to because of some analytical/philosophical failing, or, is he implying that Levinas cannot possible conceive of a sufficient imperative because his epistemology and metaphysics prohibit such a formulation? Such distinctions are vitally important as we continue to outline what is purged and what is retained in the attempts to carry Levinas forward.

In such condemnatory assertions Drabinski is far from alone. On a strikingly similar note, Caygill claims that Levinas' "Zionism" (and overall apathy towards the Palestinian people) does not, in fact, obfuscate is notion of difference but, on the contrary, allows us to understand his philosophy of responsibility with greater clarity. While Levinas is typically accused of stacking

[79] Ibid., p. 3. Emphasis added

the theoretical deck in a way that precludes political questions, Caygill states that his peculiar philosophical choices are actually condition by his political views:

> This introduces the notion of a political choice between others, one framed in terms of such others as 'my' family and people and those who are the third or the stranger. Such an understanding of the other puts into crisis the universal and foundational claims of an ethics of alterity, but, as noted in the discussion of *Otherwise than Being*, it is a restriction *intrinsic* to Levinas's thought on the relationship between other and third rather than a contingent lapse in its application.[80]

What Caygill is claiming is that the "political choice" between an in-group and out-group is already present in the way Levinas formulates his (supposedly) universal foundation. If these oddities in Levinas are not lapses or missteps and there is indeed something inherent to Levinas' thought that makes such a distinction between these two "others" possible, even necessary, then what is the precise nature of this connection between (as Drabinski put it) Levinas' "metaphysics," "epistemology," and eurocentrism?

To answer the question of how "deeply wedded" Levinas' philosophy is to "the idea of Europe"[81] we must return to the central question guiding our present inquiry: what we make of Levinas' insistence on, and justification for, the deworlded other? "Does the de-culturized notion of the face," Drabinski astutely asks "posed in a normative register (Levinas famously goes so far as to say one ought not notice the color of the Other's eyes), *compromise* the radicality of his thinking, de-linking the thought of the Other from the cultural, national, racial, and so political significations?"[82] With this Drabinski re-states the question posed by Levinas' neo-Marxist critics, does Levinas' *radical* philosophical move —which eschews all socio-historic context— *require* or *preclude* the project of a radical politics? While I will insist on the former, many of

[80] Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, p. 190. Emphasis added
[81] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. xvii.
[82] Ibid. Emphasis added.

those in the third wave argue that this is *the* nodal point which must be refashioned if we are to open up a possible dialogue with any radical politics.

The Question of "Depth": Implicit Normativity and Prescriptive Normativity

The logic articulated in Drabinski's thoughtful engagement with Levinas reverberates throughout much of the "third wave" literature, all of which is on sure footing once the initial theoretical ground is conceded. For this reason, before we analyze the consequences and proposed solutions from such a framing of the relationship between Levinas' philosophical and political limitations, I would like to take a closer look at the theoretical underpinnings of such interpretations. Here we must begin by analyzing how the relation to the infinite other is understood and, more specifically, what philosophical presuppositions are operative in such an interpretation.

My claim is that every interpretation of Levinas hinges on where one places the line between description and prescription in the relation to the other. The question which must be addressed (even if only tacitly) is, to what degree is Levinas describing a situation which he takes to be constitutive of human subjectivity as such, and, to what degree is he positing an "ought," akin to an ethical imperative or guiding principle. Of course this is not to say that such distinctions between description and prescription are obvious. Levinas aside, the vast majority of interpretive labour in philosophy (at least the continental tradition) is typically spent on this precise issue. Think, for example, of the famous debates around Heidegger's discussion of "the they" and "authenticity" in *Being and Time* (is he simply describing the dimensions of conformity necessary for any and all human expression or is the nature of the inquiry framed in such a way so as to implore us to master and ultimately break free from the fetters of tradition) or

Marx's analysis of capitalism (is "exploitation" purely a technical term or is it already indicative of his moral commitment to humanism), and what becomes clear is that, even at the best of times, there is no easy solution to such queries. Despite the difficulties involved, it is the task of every interpretation to wade into these murky waters.

It is worth stating at the outset that the point of this exercise (which will emphasize the "descriptive" nature of the deworlded other) is not to fetishize the difference between "description" and "normative," where the former is portrayed as pure objectivity and the latter as an explicit moral imperative. Our goal is to complicate the relationship between these two categories, while not altogether abandoning them. The predominant thread running throughout this dissertation is that there is a strong sense of normativity already built into the world. One of the fundamental lessons of history is that, while they often appear (or intentional portrayed) as inert, given, neutral, or inevitable, the background bureaucracies and institutions, economic structures, hierarchies, and symbolic and linguistic relations that mediate social interactions are normative in so far as they represent a constellation of congealed power relations (with a history of dominance, exclusion, solidarity, competing values, etc.,) which inevitably nudge humans in one direction over another. In the same way we can go even further and describe the "natural" world in terms of normativity, in the sense that the phenomena of which existence is comprised (be it the wind, trees, constellation of stars, or humans) have developed in such a way that certain possibilities are opened while others are foreclosed. Even though it would be strange to label these developments "good" or "bad" it can be helpful to recognize the push and pull of what simply "is." The fact that, for example, we evolved to have arms and lungs instead of wings and gills, or that was it commonly understood as the experience of human consciousness cannot be derived in isolation, matters a great deal for how and where humans relate to one another (even if

these facts do not themselves contain a narrow prescription of how exactly one *ought* to act towards one another, these broad considerations notwithstanding).

This is all the more true of written works. Even if an author seeks to bracket out explicitly prescriptive concerns they have already deemed their topic (and not some other) a valuable area of study, a decisions no doubt consciously motivated by a given set of concerns, and, perhaps more importantly, an interest that is, regardless of the authors intensions, already bound up and framed in such and such a way by the discursive flows (taken in the broadest possible sense) of their society, which means that they must appeal to certain conventions (even if negatively) if their treatise is to be intelligible to their readers. I am thus all too happy to concede that even the most descriptively minded work, like, for example, Darwin's "Origin of the Species," has an *implicit* normative dimension.

However, if we are to properly understand what exactly an author is saying, in this case Levinas, I think it is equally important to note the difference between this implicit sense of normativity and where thinkers are making overtly prescriptive statements. It would be a mistake, for example, to read Heidegger as simply advocating that one *should* unflinchingly conform to, or, alternatively, rebel against, the various customs of the day—even if one could legitimately argue that either is the normative thrust motivating his exploration of *Dasein*. By the same token, the line between prescription and description is what makes Darwin's legacy so complicated and controversial. In hindsight it is obvious that his scientific attempt to describe the evolutionary origins of humanity is thoroughly contaminated by the particular bias' of his day (racism, sexism, etc.). At the same time, despite these limitations he was able to reveal a fact about natural history that was not only true, but one that fundamentally challenged previous explanations about who we and how we got here. However, because this insight related to a

general theory of what it means to be a human, rather than a prescriptive theory of what being human *should* be, its content is far more ambiguous. On the one hand, Darwin is thought to be one in a great line of thinkers (along with Copernicus, Marx, Freud, etc.) who helped relativize human existence (or, in philosophical terms "de-throne the subject") which no longer stood at the centre of universe or at the beginning of history. On the other hand, Darwin's work was also taken up by the likes Herbert Spencer, who, with the help of economic theory, appropriated such insights in a prescriptive register and created Social Darwinism under the banner "survival of the fittest." A theory of evolution can thus foreclose possibilities, to be sure, but it would seem to be rather silent on whether this revelation should make one feel humble or superior.

At any rate, if it is important to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive normativity for even the most "objectivity" minded thinkers, I would say that it goes double for Levinas' peculiar analysis. The difficulty in raising these questions with Levinas is in many respects exponential, as he is attempting to go behind and problematize the possibility of such a clear demarcation between description/prescription, a fact evident in aphorisms like "ethics is an optics."[83] So in what follows I will try to be clear where I want to draw the line, why this is the case, and what is ultimately at stake.

How we interpret the precise nature of the intersubjective relation in Levinas has massive implications for how we understand his philosophical contribution and, crucial for our purposes, how it may relate to political appropriations. Specifically, where we situation the relation to the deworlded other with respect to consciousness and the totality of relations of which it is comprised, will have a dramatic impact on what political options are available to us. This relationship is especially difficult and confusing because Levinas is describing a relation that is

[83] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 29.

prior to and *beyond* the possibility of prescription, consciousness and agency. However, to articulate this relation he must utilize the very themes and language which he is intending to get behind. It is thus far from obvious when Levinas is using terms (which are thoroughly steeped in prescriptive normativity) prescriptively and when he is using them descriptively. This not only makes the division between prescription and description more confusing but it also makes it more theoretically important because prescription itself presupposes the very faculties (consciousness, agency, deliberation, reason, etc.) which Levinas is attempting to preclude at this fundamental level of the analysis. As a result, any residue of prescription or agency will obfuscate the very thing he wants to explain.

This is exemplified in the way Levinas defines "ethics." Traditionally "ethics" is all about prescription, that is, explicitly constructing a theory of rules and norms which we believe individuals or groups *should* use to govern their behaviour. But this not what Levinas means when he says "ethics." Instead Levinas uses "ethics" to exclusively refer to an intersubjective relationship that is irrespective of context and prior to consciousness. Thus "ethics," defined this way, not only precludes our capacity to reason and deliberate about how others should be treated but further brackets out how others become registered within consciousness. For this reason, if we are to better appreciate the "depth" of the ethical relation, I think it is helpful to make a sharp distinction between the precise inter-subjective phenomena he is attempting to describe (the "X") and what Levinas believes the normative implications of this description (why "X" is important, or what we should do in light of "X"). Such a distinction can help us locate the various levels of abstraction with which Levinas is using and, as a result, better situate the "ethical relation" with respect to the other important aspects of (inter)subjectivity. While the line of demarcation between description (X) and prescription (why X is important) is often less than obvious in the

continental tradition (just as we noted for the likes of Heidegger and Marx), what is unique about Levinas is that it is especially tempting to mistake the prescription (why X is important) for the description (X) itself, which, in turn, completely inverts Levinas' intended insight (thus we risk losing the X itself).

We are dealing with several levels of normativity operating at the same time so I want to absolutely clear about what I am proposing. One of the tenants of Levinas' philosophy is that the other-as-such contains a normativity that cuts across historical, social, political context. Although related, this is sense of implicit normativity is altogether different from the implicit normative aspirations which inspire inevitably frame Levinas' decision to undertake such theoretical endeavour (most obviously the events of the Shoah) and the kind of prescriptive forms of normativity, which appear in those moments where Levinas explicitly points to what he believes to be the ethical and political upshot of his analysis. My claim is not that these moments can easily be separated (as I will later address, Levinas has a hard time getting out of his own way in this respect) or that some are less or more important (one can no doubt find value at all of these levels). Rather, my argument is that if one makes no attempt to distinguish between the various levels of analysis, it will not only lead to confusion but can risk losing the subversive kernel of Levinas' philosophy and misconstruing the theoretical relationship between ethics and politics.

This is why questions of "depth" are absolutely central in Levinas. The ethical relation is "always already," "prior," "before," and "beneath," concepts like agency, hermeneutics, semiotics, reason, intentionality, freedom, performativity, and interpellation because these categories—which he places under the umbrella concept "ontology"—either presuppose a sense of subjective momentum which could grasp, desire, will, intend, comprehend or negate the other, or, they assume a category of generic intersubjecitivty (like culture, language, reason etc.) which

would similarly intercede by positing a third term which would mediate the normative impact of the other. Thus Levinas' *first* and most foundational claim is *not* the prescriptive declaration that it is morally wrong to mediate, reduce or annul the relationship to the "other." Rather, the fact that we, in this very precise sense, *cannot* mediate, reduce or annul the relationship to the other is what defines our experience of subjectivity; this passivity is what makes the subject and "I." This is why Levinas seeks to bracket out history, perception, reason, freedom, intelligibility—not because they are "bad" but because they, in a descriptive sense, obscure, or at least fail to illuminate, the nature of the very dimension of experience he is attempting to expose. In the same way, Levinas is not claiming that we *should* deworld the other for the sake of our moral duty (where, presumably, we mentally abstract the other from all context). Rather, he is claiming that the other *first* comes to us in a dimension of (pre)experience which is (again, in this precise sense) indifferent to consciousness and context.

For this reason, I believe it is important to "delay," so to speak, the prescriptive dimensions of interpretation, not because I think they are unimportant, naive or unattainable but because if we put prescription too early in the analysis it completely changes the X that Levinas believes to have critical import. Simply put, if we take Levinas as giving us an ethics in the traditional sense of imperatives and platitudes it undoes his sole ambitions to get behind, beyond and beneath ontology. In this sense I agree with Derrida, when he states that Levinas should be thought of as a meta-ethics (an "Ethics of Ethics")[84] and Critchley, when he claims that Levinas need not have used predicates like "goodness," though I would add that their own orientations (Heideggerian, Lacanian or otherwise) often reinsert the priority of ontology and thus similarly comprise Levinas' potential.

[84] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference* (London: Rutledge Classics, 2001), p. 138.

In this attempt to distinguish between the elements of Levinas' philosophy we inevitable run into what he has referred to as the "methodological problem."[85] The possibility of using non-ontological language which would still be intelligible is not an option available to Levinas, and, for this reason, he is "forced" to use language which presupposes an already active subject in relation to a predicate. This task is made all the more difficult because of Levinas' penchant for using terms borrowed from religious and moral lexicons to describe the passivity of the subject, such as "hospitality" "religion" "hospitality" "ethics" "election" "responsibility," "shame," "unworthiness," "goodness," "being-for-the-other," "teaching," "infinity," "non-allergenic" and "apology." While these terms are effective in illuminating the asymmetrical structure of intersubjectivity they have so much prescriptive momentum it is difficult to strip these terms of the meaning they carry on this side of ontology. Given my concerns relating to depth, I prefer the "darker" metaphors like "hostage" and "host" invoked in *Otherwise than Being*. While many have stressed a crucial difference in the understanding of subjectivity between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* I am less convinced. In attempting to describe the relationship on the hither side of ontology there is no semantic difference between "hospitality" and "hostage" because the faculties needed to establish such a difference are barred from the outset. The other enters before there is an "I" who can welcome or refuse their presence. This is why I think "hostage" is a more effective metaphor because it is less tempting to misread it as a prescriptive category (to my knowledge no one has yet used Levinas to advocate the taking of hostages), and thus highlights the implicit pre-ontological (as Levinas puts it) normative dimensions which I take to be essential.

[85] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p. 7.

Of course none of this is to deny the explicitly prescriptive dimensions of Levinas' philosophy. Levinas believes that the asymmetrical structure of intersubjectivity has massive implications for how we should live our lives and how we ought to structure our society. This will be further unpacked in the coming chapters but what I would like to highlight here is that *how* we understand Levinas will have equally important consequences for what we take these ethical and political implications to be or what Levinasian impulses we choose to mute or highlight. Such demarcations will, as we shall momentarily see, have dramatic impact on how understand subjectivity and what kind of political solutions are available to the questions posed by Levinas.

Third Wave Appropriations

Many of the "third wave" arguments have been crafted as a response to the insufficiency of previous attempts to think through the ethical and political implications of Levinas. We have already noted Drabinski's objection to conservative applications of Levinas, but this new wave of scholarship is also indicative of a shift away from other "liberal" and "postmodern" interpretations. As noted the radical bifurcation between the pre-subjective, anti-historical, and trans-political world of "infinity" and that of "totality" leaves Levinas open to radical ambiguity. While right-Levinasians feel politically content, comforted in their knowledge of the ethical foundations of their society, liberal and post-structuralist interpretations have equally shied away from radical politics, even if for dramatically different reasons. The Manichean distinction between totality and infinity can also lead to a kind of political skepticism which is characteristic of many liberal and post-structuralist approaches (a sentiment which, as we saw, is readily pounced upon by our neo-Marxist critics). Here the relationship between "totality" and "infinity"

is read as a paradox, where any and every ontological congealment - be it a symbol, word, army or institution - was conceived equally as a betrayal of the ethical. For many liberal minded interpreters Levinas' description of the other as a "singularity" non-reducible to history, politics and any collective banner, resonates in perfect harmony with the philosophical notes played by the likes of Mill and Locke. While the theoretical underpinnings are, in many ways, at odds with post-structuralist positions, such interpretations of Levinas have emphasized the same problems inherent in collectivities and radical politics. The liberal state then is left to itself in order to begin the undertaking of ethics at the level of the face-to-face.

For some post-structuralists this emphasis was heightened in the wake of prominent thinkers like Derrida and Foucault who sought to foster a ruthlessly self-critical spirit. The latter, especially, was, equally suspicious of "global" projects of emancipation as he was of the oppressive regimes represented in the status quo. Such a suspicion was thought to be justified because, in Foucault's estimation, the previous and impetuous attempts to "escape from the system of contemporary reality" have, like a repressed memory, only led to "the return of the most dangerous traditions."[86] In this vein Levinas was seen as a source of major inspiration for deconstructive projects focused on the pathology inherent in politics and other less obvious forms of discursive practices. Levinas gave many a valuable resource with which to eschew the realm of politics proper in favour of immediate, local, contingent, "non-totalizing" and often highly idiosyncratic revolts.

While the vast majority of "third wave" thinkers are deeply influenced by thinkers like Derrida and Foucault they seek to push Levinas beyond interpretations which shy away from historical and structural analysis or preclude new forms of collective struggle. While I share a

[86] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment" in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 46.

deep affinity with this general ambition, the course I will chart takes a much different route. Similar to the neo-Marxist critics, our radical interpreters similarly believe Levinas' anti-historical and apolitical point of origin make him especially susceptible to ills of excessive individualism, moralism, idealism, Eurocentrism, and religiosity. These cluster of critiques are all related, I claim, to the question of "depth" raised above.

This is most in the overt "liberal" interpretations of Levinas. For example, C. Fred Alford favourite analogy for extrapolating the ethical relation is that of a person sitting alone in their apartment who becomes startled when somebody rings the doorbell.[87] In this scenario the person is interrupted, even slightly annoyed with the disturbance, but soon has a pleasant interaction and realizes that their (literal) neighbour has opened up a new world to them. Although Alford occasionally notes the pre-subjective "depth" of the ethical relation, as this illustration suggests he repeatedly blurs the line of demarcation set up by Levinas. The narrative attributed to Levinas by Alford, which is representative of the vast majority of interpretations on Levinas, is that the autonomous sovereign individual is an undeniable ontological fact. We must, therefore, also recognize that with such freedom comes a range of pathological elements which seek to reduce difference to the same (which is akin to a "selfish" desire). Thus, from the perspective of morality, we should make room for altruism, hospitality and difference to counter balance our tendency towards sovereignty; a point which illustrates well the fact that the individualistic reading and the moralistic reading are two sides of the same interpretative coin. Read this way, Levinas is stating that we can, *in the realm of consciousness*, have a face to face encounter which is not necessarily mediated by history, politics and all the rest. Once this fantasy of pure ethical encounter in concrete experience is accepted it requires little effort to bracket out political

[87] C. Fred Alford, "Levinas and Political Theory," in *Political Theory* 32:2 (April, 2004), p. 150.

questions (which involve collectivities) from ethical ones (which involve individuals). Out of the necessity of this formulation Levinas is somewhere between apolitical and anti-political, and a moralizing idealist in either case. Thus it should come as no surprise that Alford concludes that, while Levinas' emphasis on responsibility over freedom makes him a strange kind of liberal, he would indeed "leave the institutions of liberal individualism much as they are, so that everything else might change."[88] This is why political questions hinge on the question of "depth." If, rather than understanding the ethical relation as a dimension of experience, we take the subject proper in all her capacities for reason, perception and reflection—to be the same "subject" who encounters the other, then Levinas offers little more than empty ethical platitudes which not only ignore but *disbar* the historical-politico context from consideration.

While the "third wave" is, in part, motivated by the inadequacy of such readings, the way they seek to transcend such limitations re-affirms rather than problematizing the tenuous theoretical basis on which the liberal readings proceed. Though less obvious than Alford's apartment analogy, we can perceive a similar dynamic in the virtually ubiquitous sentiment that Levinas' ethical relation is "hyperbolic" and "excessive." This common objection relies on a specific interpretation which views the relation to a deworlded other as indicating some kind of utopian moral fantasy, exposing either Levinas' naivety or willful ignorance. Similar to Riceour's objection noted in the previous chapter, Drabinski casts doubt that "such a detour from being and worldliness is possible,"[89] before affirming Derrida's stance that:

> Ontology cannot be simply swept away by the *hyperbolic* rhetoric of height and separation. Language cannot be critiqued by a few evocative words about excessive expression alone. Rather, being and language haunt Levinas's every attempt to think difference without identity, alterity without sameness, and so singularity without comparison.[90]

[88] Ibid., p. 168.
[89] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p.40.
[90] Ibid.

What is repeatedly put into question by such assertions is the philosophical credibility of Levinas' account of experience, *as if the purity of his moral ambition impairs his phenomenological judgement*. Critchley, whose sympathies also lie with Derrida in this respect, consistently derides Levinas on similar grounds stating that: "What Levinas says is hyperbole. Furthermore, it's a hyperbole that feeds an excessive masochism." [91] Despite the fact that Critchley is otherwise aware that "ethics is always already political…a relation to humanity as a whole,"[92] masochism, is a common theme in Critchley's interpretation of Levinas, which he finds needlessly imprudent because Levinas provides no possibility of relief or avenue for sublimation.[93] If Levinas is going to be mobilized to concrete ends, what is needed, according to such thinkers, is that we temper Levinas' extreme tendencies.

The obvious problem with such interpretations is that they burry the very question that I wish to bring to the surface. While all of these theorists repeatedly acknowledge Levinas' ambition of getting beneath totality they, like the previously noted neo-Marxist critics, tend to oscillate back and forth between worlds without much awareness or explanation. Trauma, to use Critchley's example, may be a useful metaphor, but only *insofar* as we remove it from a sense of pain or "masochism," which implies that something is being done to an already someone. Similarly, hyperbole already implies that we are operating at the level of conscious deliberation, where Levinas is giving us a framework of moral judgement. One does not, for example, consider the sun on a cloudless day, or the bluster of a hurricane, "hyperbolic" because this would presume agency, intention and deliberation. While humans, unlike the sun and the wind, have agency and intellectual powers, such faculties are not the basis for the relation that Levinas'

[91] Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 88.
[92] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 226.
[93] See also Simon Critchley, "'Das Ding': Lacan and Levinas," in *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998), pp. 72-90.

intends to describe. It is in fact possible that, on this question of passivity, Levinas might be wrong, however, the critique of hyperbole still misses the mark because it skirts the very issue by presuming that Levinas' claim relates to the world of from conscious deliberation. A clear example of this is found in Mari Ruti's dialogue between Levinas and Lacan, where she chastises (again, much like Eagleton) Levinas for failing to distinguish between the guilt of the offenders and the victims:

> As a consequence, if the Ku Klux Klan burns a cross on my yard, a multinational corporation poisons my water supply, or a gay-hating gang assaults me in a dark alley, my stance of unconditional generosity toward my persecutor would only feed power structures that have historically made some lives unbearable while simultaneously justifying various social atrocities.[94]

What is apparent in such a complaint is that, for Ruti, Levinas is positing (like Kant or Rawls) a context-neutral ethical imperative (which would turn out to be excessive to the point of absurdity and meaninglessness) rather than pointing to the passivity (a "passivity more passive than all passivity"[95]) at the heart of the human condition. This is not to say that Levinas does not make prescriptive claims. There are many instances where Levinas (especially in interviews and his religious writings) will directly deliver concrete ethical statements, but even then—and this point is absolutely crucial—these follow from his theory of intersubjectivity and not the other way around. The value of Levinas is not primarily found in the solutions he poses for how one *should* act but in the understanding he fosters of the conditions under which we must make such decisions.

Another variant of this strain of interpretation is that Levinas' "hyperbolic" language is not just indicative of his overindulgent moral sensibility but evidence of the theological biases of his philosophy. Tom Sparrow, for example, claims that, in order to think Levinas in concrete

[94] Mari Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, Other, Ethics*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p.30.
[95] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 146.

ethical and political terms, we need to undo such exaggeration which, for him, consist of the dispensable dregs left over from his theological influence:

> The notion that "the face of the Other" gains its ultimate significance by revealing the presence of divinity is seen as needless hyperbole. I think Levinas need not be so radical in his account of the face, that his ethics could retain its force even if it abandoned its theological foundation for a secular one.[96]

The sentiment already present in Drabinski is made explicit in Sparrows critique. Levinas is moving in the wrong theoretical direction: instead of going into concrete experience he is taking us out of the world. Not unlike the religions that Marx was so critical of, Levinas wants to lift our gaze to the heavens instead of directing it down towards the earth.

This dichotomy set up between abstract and concrete is crucial. A central passage utilized in Drabinski's critique (already witnessed above) is Levinas' statement from an interview where he remarked:

> The best way (meilleure manière) to encounter the Other is to not even take notice of the color of his eyes. When one observes the color of the eyes, one is not in the social relation with the Other. The relation with the face can certainly be dominated by perception, but what is meant specifically by the face cannot be reduced to the perceptual.[97]

For Drabinski such a claim is emblematic of Levinas' "excessive" and "austere" tendencies of Levinas' philosophy which "always leaves the world."[98] While Levinas is not innocent in this respect (as we will discuss later) what is key is that Drabinski takes this as evidence that Levinas' fundamental orientation leads us *away* from concrete existence rather than penetrating its veneer. To illustrate the point that Levinas is, first and foremost, prescribing a way of thinking about the other, Drabinski states that: "Levinas's proclamation regarding the color of eyes is, after all, in the normative register. This is the best way, the way one should encounter the Other."

[96] Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Washington: Zero Books, 2012), p. 84.
[97] As quoted by Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. 39.
[98] Ibid.

While it is, in a sense, true that Levinas is speaking about a prescriptive ways of thinking about and perceiving the other, this does not mean that this is an accurate summation of his philosophical edifice. While I believe this to be theoretically misleading, even if we stick to the level of prescription, it is far from clear what Levinas means by such a statement. Is Levinas, for example, positing a regulatory ideal that we should transform the material conditions of society to such a degree that the color of one's eyes (or skin) are more or less irrelevant? Or, conversely, is Levinas really suggesting that, in our present conjuncture, we should ignore structure and systemic oppression in our intellectual and moral pursuits? While we cannot address these important questions till we have inspected their philosophical foundations, at this point I merely I merely wish to highlight that such nuances matter a great deal when we get to the realm of prescription and politics.

While Drabisnki will readily acknowledge the profound depths intersubjectivity,[99] the thrust of his general argument is clear: for all its anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism, Levinas' critique of being and ontology, takes Levinas further away from a "sufficiently material" sense of embodiment, where the other's actual existing differences are taken into account.[100] Thus the radical alterity of the subject which presupposes the equally radical passivity of the subject is not taken as a description of a deeper pre-conscious level of embodiment (where sensation is not yet information) but something more abstract, ideal, normative which can only be accomplished by the will of the intellect and the strength of morality. Not only does this reinstate a third term that mediates, *from the start*, the terms of the relation but it opens up Levinas to the obvious philosophical and phenomenological critique

[99] For example, see p. 35, where he readily acknowledges the pre-subjective depth. However, like our critics, Drabinski oscillates between the other that appears in perception and the other that makes perception possible.
[100] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. 40.

outlined in the previous chapter: by precluding the social, historical and political topography on which we actually encounter concrete human beings, Levinas offers us nothing more than a difference-blind ethics which are at best represent one of the worst forms of naive liberalism and at worst provide the ethical facade of colonialism.

Familiarity, Heidegger and the other-as-neighbour

We can now return to the tension between Levinas' universalizing ambitions and his particular prejudices. Once the groundwork for this overall interpretation is established by such critics, they can look back at Levinas' individual prejudices they no longer stick out as aberrations. To recall, Drabinski and Caygill claimed that Levinas' philosophy can be seen more clearly when refracted through the prism of his Eurocentric and Zionist prejudices. This was because Levinas' epistemology and phenomenology, rather than universalizing the other, creates a gap between the familiar other and the strange other; a distance too vast for responsibility to bridge. Having analyzed the importance of depth we can now better understand how Levinas' sense of radical alterity allegedly transforms into familiarity, over the more expected or intended result of universality (that is, a responsibility indifferent to difference).

There is a decidedly Heideggerian logic in how Drabinski and Caygill establish a relationship between radical difference and familiarity. For Heidegger, the richness, context and innumerable specificities and differences of our experience occurs in the background, not really invisible but not really noticed either. This is because, in our everyday existence, we tend to occupy a mode of existence characterized by its "familiarity." No matter how intentional or idiosyncratic one's actions are, the majority of our experience is withdrawn into the background horizon. We open the door, catch the subway, use an idiom, give a hug, sleep in on weekends,

say a prayer, use a toilet, get married all without reflecting intensely on the material and symbolic context which preexists our individual use of it and on which these actions rely. We can only swim, so to speak, because the world is already flooded with meaning. Thus, for Heidegger, the ignorance with respect to the particular features of the other is not indicative of transcendence and alterity but, on the contrary, a situation where such differences are so superfluous and taken for granted that they no longer signify something striking, new, or at odds with our expected perception of the world. We ignore the color of one's eyes for the same reason we typically fail to remember the color of shirt worn by a bank teller or the pattern of a bus seat we use everyday: such features fail to carry any significance or meaning which is pertinent to the exigencies of a given task or project. That such features are so easily bracketed out is thus evidence that we are immersed within our life-world to such a degree that *certain* differences can be forgotten or relegated to the background. The colour of somebody's eyes or skin can thus go unnoticed in the same way we can take the door handle, the reliability of the elevator, the appropriate amount of personal space, for granted as we move about our day. Such particulars only become noticed or relevant when something goes wrong, when there is what Hediegger calls a "breakdown" (the door doesn't open, the elevator doesn't work, somebody violates our tacitly assumed personal space, etc.). This is politically relevant because the ability to occupy a decontextualized body is not a luxury shared by those whose eyes, skin, hair, might stand out apart from expectation. For some, the colour of their skin, hair or eyes might be the first thing noticed because their bodies are subject to a set of discursive power relations which render certain features germane which, in others, go otherwise unnoticed. There is an odd dialectic at play in such interpretations which invert Levinas' stated goals: the other subtracted from context is symptomatic of familiarity, entrenchment and finitude and not radical alterity, uprootedness

and infinity. The deworlded other presupposes a fictive homogeneity and is therefore evidence of yet another false universal claim—perhaps akin to calling a pink crayon "skin colour" or using the term "all men" because it is tacitly understood that to specify "white" "property owning" "protestant" and "male" would be redundant.

Along these lines Bernasconi questions whether the "abstractness of the face" does not "mark a certain continuity with abstract humanism and its complicity with homogenization."[101] Drabinski, highlighting the underbelly of homogenization, writes:

> This *Western-ness* is perhaps the most important enigma here, an operative concept whose near-invisibility helps make sense of Levinas's normative claims about a *proper* encounter with the Other. The familiar stranger is the stranger in the singular. That familiarity conceals the historical weight of the encounter.[102]

Here the "stranger in the singular" indicates the disavowal of real substantive difference rather than the unconditional acceptance of radical difference. Levinas' universalizing aspirations are thus putatively self-defeating, the more he attempts to think the other abstracted from particularity the further he becomes trapped within the insular bounds of his community. Drabinski expresses the same conclusion of the neo-Marxist critics but in even more damning terms: Levinas' can only profess this kind of ethics by repressing the political history of the marginalized. Thus "the context-neutral life of the face-to-face" is symptomatic of "a certain privilege of thinking in the European context alone."[103] This is why Drabinski believes that the colonial legacy continues to "haunt" Levinas like a repressed memory because one cannot speak about Europe, the familiar, the homogenous without speaking of the violent foundation upon which it rests.

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[101] Robert Bernasconi, "Who is My Neighbour? Who is the Other?: Questioning 'the generosity of Western thought'?" In *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments by Leading Philosophers Volume IV: Beyond Levinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 9.
[102] Drabinski, Levinas, p. 44.
[103] Ibid., p. 43-4.

These are difficult issues to disentangle to be sure. *If* Levinas offers little more than a difference-blind ethics, then the full force of these critiques are welcome and justified. However, my wager is, not only that this is not an accurate depiction of Levinas, but that Levinas has much critical insight to offer our present socio-political conjuncture. The cluster of concepts used to describe Levinas which we have outlined above—hyperbolic, excessive, abstract, immaterial, theological, moralistic, masochistic, individualistic, familiarity, Eurocentric—not only fail to capture, but cannot be reconciled with what I take to be essential in Levinas. This is why I am so anxious to point out the important ramifications that follow from issues of depth. To conclude this section, we will briefly outline the answers provided to the ill-posed questions before considering how a different reading of Levinas might pose alternative questions, which will, in turn, provoke a different set of answers.

Recontextualizing the other: third wave solutions

We now have a better understanding of how, exactly, the challenge of Levinas and radical politics has been framed and, specifically, Drabinski's claim about the inherent connection between Levinas' metaphysics and epistemology and his eurocentrism. What is then required to "decolonize" Levinas, is to replace his abstract, idealistic, verging-on-religious, philosophical foundation with a more "material" account of embodiment. "The Other," in Drabinski's terms, "needs to be re-situated in a wider political context. After all, are we not addressed by the Other in our own, and so the Other's, skin? Does that skin not carry with it wide and deep political significations?"[104] This philosophical re-orientation towards a concrete

[104] Ibid., xviii.

phenomenological approach has crucial implications for responsibility and for ethics, as Drabinski further states:

> The problem of the body, as we shall see, exposes Levinas's work – and so any future Levinasian thinking – to the sense in which the body carries memory and history into the encounter. If the body carries memory and history into the encounter, *then the ethical cannot be described, as Levinas describes it, as entirely outside being*. In this register, *being intensifies and widens responsibility*, rather than, as Levinas would have it, neutralizing the for-the-Other of subjectivity. The task of methodology lies in demonstrating the concreteness of this claim so that being is no longer understood as a construction and invasive, neutered force.[105]

To use the terms "neutralizing" and "neutered" to describe Levinas' philosophy is evidence of just how radical Drabinski intends his critique to be. "Neutralize" and "neuter" are perhaps the two most common term Levinas uses in *Totality and Infinity* to illustrate the various ways philosophy - regardless of its specific orientation, be it freedom, autonomy, biology, being-in-the-world, materialism or another variant of intersubjectivity - has sought to anticipate, and thereby cushion, the impact of the other. The stark difference between these philosophical claims cannot be overstated: for Levinas it is cognition and the referential totality upon which it relies that obfuscates the normative relation to the other (which cuts across all differences and every horizon) while for Drabinaski it is this abstract procedure which, by neutralizing every particular, deprives the other of a world, which, in turn, strips responsibility of any particular meaning or duty. Of course it behooves me to mention what is hopefully becoming increasingly obvious, that what we are dealing with are two different understandings of "abstraction" or "context." The first is (at least according to *my* interpretation) meant to awaken our understanding of the ethical relation by going back beyond the "natural attitude," or hermeneutical facade that accompanies our experience of others in perception, while the second understands Levinas as engaging in a mental exercise, where, for the sake of moral duty, he implores us to erase every attribute of the

[105] Ibid., p. 21 my italics.

other until nothing remains but an abstract form - much like the chalk outline of a dead body. This is all too apparent in Drabinski's statement that "when we *notice* the color of the Other, so to speak, our responsibility takes on particular, specific characteristics that, without that worldliness, might have remained simply empty – even if profound – senses of ethical obligation."[106] While we may agree with the first part of this claim (that, for the sake of ethics proper and politics eye color etc. is important) the assertion that responsibility (traditionally understood) might have otherwise "remained empty" is problematic insofar as it assumes that the condition of "worldlessness" on the plane of totality (consciousness, perception, history, etc.) is a possibility for Levinas. The deworlded space that Levinas invokes is not, and cannot be (for all the reasons mentioned earlier), an actual socio-political space somehow mysteriously sheltered from the world. Given Drabinski's assumption that this empty space is what Levinas is actually advocating, his alternative—*and not supplementary*—phenomenology is politically relevant because it can actually incorporate actual concrete difference, which opens a theoretical door for through which we can begin to consider a deeper analysis of signification, language, politics, history, namely everything Levinas brackets out.

Drabinski is far from alone in such an ambition. Enrique Dussel similarly views Levinas' "neutralizing" phenomenological account of the deworlded other as the main obstacle to be utilized for radical ends. Note the similarity of Dussel's critique and re-appropriation of Levinas to Drabinski's appeal for a phenomenology grounded in the politics of oppression:

> The face of the other, primarily as poor and oppressed, reveals a people *before* it reveals an individual person. The brown face of the Latin American mestizo wrinkled with the furrows of centuries of work, the ebony face of the African slave, the olive face of the Hindu, the yellow face of the Chinese coolie is the irruption of the history of a people before it is the biography of Tupac Amaru, Lumumba, Nehru, and Mao Tse-tung. To describe the experience of proximity as individual experience, or the metaphysical experience of face-to-face as lived experience be- tween two persons, is simply to forget

[106] Ibid., p. 42.

> that personal mystery is always risked in the exteriority of the popular history of a people. *The individualization of this collective personal experience is a European deformation derived from the bourgeois revolution. Each face, unique, inscrutable mystery of decisions not yet made, is the face of a sex, a generation, a social class, a nation, a cultural group, a historical epoch.* **[107]**

and again:

> The other person—metaphysical alterity, exteriority on the anthropological level—is primarily social and historico-popular. This is why the faces that are taken care of with beauty aids and rejuvenated by face-lifts and cosmetics of the oligarchies, aristocracies, and bourgeoisies—be they of the center or of the periphery—are faces that, like mummies, want to escape the contingencies of time. The eternalization of the present, in terror of the future, is the obsession of every dominating group. On the contrary, the withered face of the Bedouin of the desert, the fur- rowed and darkened skin of the peasant, the poisoned lungs of the miner whose face never sees the sun—these 'apparently' ugly faces, almost horrible for the system, are the primary, the future, the popular beauty.[108]

Once again the question of Levinas' political apathy is not phrased as a political question (that his political analysis fails to account for X issue) but rather as a philosophical one. This sentiment is also echoed by Bernasconi who asks if "Levinas's account of the encounter with the Other as stranger sufficiently nuanced as to be able to welcome the Other in his or her ethnic identity beyond the prejudices that divide ethnic groups?"[109] It is crucial to note that this disagreement is not about the specifics of class, patriarchy, colonialism, etc. but whether we have the necessary approach or framework to even incorporate such analysis. As Drabinski explicitly states (much like Zizek in the previous chapter), his "*appeal here is not ideological, but simply phenomenological*."[110] In tow with our neo-Marxist critics both Drabinski and Dussel depict Levinas as playing out some liberal philosophical fantasy which denies the way in which the singularity of the other is always refracted through the prism of "third"; that Levinas cannot possibly comprehend the mediating symbolic dimension which is, in turn, forged through various

[107] Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 44. Emphasis added.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Bernasconi, "Who," p. 23.
[110] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. 41

politico-historical processes. The face bears signification, to be sure, but, for these critics, it only can signify singularity *after* or *through* the intersecting fields of colonialism, racism, class relations, internalized patriarchal notions of beauty, etc.

The requisite reorientation to a more concrete philosophical perspective is, for obvious reasons, political relevant for these interpreters of Levinas. For Drabinski such a shift in perspective has the potential to push Levinas beyond his insular Eurocentrism and reverse the relationship between the "familiar others" and the "unanticipated Others."[111] If we replace Levinas' "colonial fantasy about the identity of Europe"[112] a conception of "identity-as-entanglement" we can better understand the way "Europe" is not conceivable without reference to its violent past.[113] Taking such history into account allows us to come to the radical conclusion that, contra Levinas, Europe is not only "capable of responding to the Other" but rather that "one is a responsible being *because* one is European, made of the Bible and the Greeks."[114] Rather than be deterred by borders of Europe, responsibility would now be necessitated by them. If "Europe" presupposes colonization, hierarchy, exclusion, marginalization and subjugation then responsibility means responsibility to the one "separated from me, outside the community" or it means nothing at all. As Drabinski continues: "Outside the community becomes not just an occasion of, but something close to a sufficient condition for, the ethical."[115] While Levinas, in Drabinski's estimation, makes such a formulation possible when it "comes to the role of Judaism" he—for the theoretical reasons mentioned earlier—cannot otherwise conceive of such a potentially subversive political stance.[116]

[111] Ibid., p. 22.
[112] Ibid., p. 4.
[113] Ibid., p. 8.
[114] Ibid., p. 5.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid., p. 8.

In such a formulation the passage from the "familiar other" to the "alien other" is precisely the opposite route taken by Levinas. Taking, as a corrective, the likes of Derrida, Meleau-Ponty, Spivak, Glissant, Bhaba, and Fanon, Drabinski sets out on a project to overcome Levinas' problem of familiarity by thinking re-establishing a notion of alterity predicated on difference. One can only reach, for these theorists, the radically "alien" other, by taking stock of difference, rather than by a process of empty posturing which claims to conceive of pure difference as such, indifferent to all particulars. These objections, raised in the previous chapter by Derrida and Ricouer, now become highly politicized: because all identities rely on an always prior differentiation between self and other, we cannot speak about responsibility to an other "outside of the community" without understanding the historical and political processes which mutually constitute identifies of colonizer and colonized.

As a result all of Levinas' related problems—hyperbole, individualism, masochism, insularity, provincial chauvinism and seeming ignorance of structure and history—can be overcome if we retain the thrust of his moral injunction of responsibility while replacing his abstract, theological and idealistic epistemology and phenomenology with a more embodied and material one. This allows us to move rather easily from the intimacy and singularity of the ethical to the political. If the self can only emerge out of a complex process of differentiation, then every identity tacitly relies on an innumerable set of boundaries which demarcate it from everything else. The more we follow this trail of similarities and differences the more we can illuminate the broader political context that informs individuality. The particulars of our identity, no matter how personal or idiosyncratic, cannot be abstracted from broader questions of race, gender, class, heteronormativity, etc. Drabinski's claim that a "common history" is the condition

of possibility for "the solely singular"[117] is correct in the sense that, to take a personal example, a large part of my identity (the land I occupy, the language I speak, the education I received as a child, the food I eat, the hermeneutics of my body, my aesthetic tastes etc.) relies on the historical marginalization and subjugation of the indigenous population and other international communities, regardless of any beliefs or intentions I might have to the contrary. Thus, for Drabinski, Levinas' call to responsibility, when inflected with this dimension, should help us think in larger political terms while retaining Levinas' core philosophical categories (even if they are transformed). As he states:

> The host is constituted *as* the host, as the one capable of welcoming, by the refugee. The one excluded exercises a certain ontological gravitation, pulling the origin of the being of a city of refuge away from the self-constituting and self-legitimating state, and relocating the meaning of refuge, host, and welcome to the one excluded. The state is chosen by the excluded; the border marks, literally, the difference between refuge and refugee, and, in so doing, prescribes the flow of ethical, political, and ethical political meaning.[118]

Drabinski moves Levinas forward through a conception of identity which does not shy away from but presuppose borders, difference and exclusion. As a consequence, Drabinski extrapolates the terms of the ethical relation into larger geo-political categories. The other is no longer exemplified by the neighbour but by the one who is excluded and marginalized in order to make space for both me and my neighbour. The other is the refugee, the political prisoner, the oppressed worker, and the victim of war. Perhaps analogous to Plato, who, in the *Republic*, found it useful to interrogate the conditions of the soul by projecting them onto the city, Drabinski takes the "curvature of the intersubjective space"[119] characteristic of the face-to-face

[117] Ibid., p. 45.
[118] Ibid., p. 189.
[119] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 291.

and elevates its terms to describe the "asymmetrical political space of wealth, representation, and national and transnational violence."[120]

Elevating the terms of the ethical relation into socio-political categories draws into focus our last issue related to the question of "depth": what is the theoretical nature of the relationship between ethics and politics in Levinas? Does Levinas' strict demarcation between ethics and totality—where all signs, works, collectivities and institutions are equally construed as a "betrayal" of the ethical moment—disabuse us of the hope that a substantive political vision might be constructed from out of the ethical relation? Caygill, through a juxtaposition of Levinas (specifically *Otherwise than Being*) with Hegel's movement from subjective to objective freedom, outlines the political problems which are said to follow from Levinas' skeptical formula. The "proximity" of the other "disturbs any mediation between subject and substance" and, as such, the inter-human relation "does not create a 'result', as in the Hegelian movement from subjective to objective freedom, but leaves marks of its disturbance -– the "trace" -– in the present."[121] Where the abstract relation to the primordial other, for Hegel, begins the great dialectical journey which leads to increasingly larger and more complex forms of social institutions (identity, language, property, family, culture, religion, civil society, corporations, the state, international law and finally world history) Levinas' face-to-face encounter, unable to conceive let alone resolve an antagonism, remains caught in a perpetual cycle which fails to produce a positive remainder. The possibility of institutionalizing the ethical impulses contained within subjectivity, like that of Hegel's "concrete universal" which succeeds in making the abstract freedom of the subject manifest within the larger politico-economic structures, is, for

[120] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. 190.
[121] Caygill, *Levinas*, p.137.

Levinas, "excluded as an option."[122] However, while Levinas may, for the sake of ethics, indiscriminately eschew the various instantiations of social life, Caygill notes how such a rigid bifurcation reduces the possible impact of such ethics which implicitly "leaves intact the worst forms of state in the name of the other."[123] Here we arrive back at our original quandary of whether Levinas is, for all his radical altruistic jargon, a conservative when it comes to politics. In his summation of Levinas' politics, Caygill again relies on an interpretation which equates the "other" with the "other" we experience in the everyday world (through perception and dialogue) which is distinct from "the third," who represents the one far off or the one outside my immediate purview. As a result, as long as Levinas maintains an unconditional "precedence" for the other over the third, "it is hard to see that there is the importance that Levinas claims in the distinction between the state that proceeds from 'a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all.'" Levinas' "personalist argument"[124] which conceives of ethics as interruption without the possibility of positive constitution, offers little more than a "muted hope"[125] because it, at best, leaves the state intact while imparting us with a guilty conscience, and, at worst justifies the status quo.

This relationship between ethics and politics poses obvious challenges to any potential radical appropriations. Even if we accept the above critiques by Drabinski and Dussel and ground the categories of self/other in concrete experience and history (where the other is the exemplified by "the one excluded"[126]) the question still remains as to whether Levinas' framework resigns us to the fact that "ethics" can never amount to more than a brief and fleeting

[122] Ibid., p. 141.
[123] Ibid., p. 142.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid., p. 143.
[126] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p.189.

interruption of the political. On such questions Drabinski maintains the standard interpretation that:

> the ethical plays a primarily interruptive role in relation to politics. The tyrannical character of political life – the life of comparison, judgement, distribution of rights and goods – is both exceeded by the ethical (we are called to the Other outside political structures and prescriptions) and put in question by it (the fragility and precarious life of the Other expose the violence of politics, law, and the state). In that sense, we can say that the ethical *resists* politics and the political with the singular, though never in the name of an alternative political vision or ideology.[127]

While this focus on the ephemeral and temporary structure of ethics is considered one of Levinas' merits by commentators who are more skeptical of categories like essence, meta-narratives, emancipation or revolution (be they liberal, poststructural or other) for thinkers like Drabinski and Dussel this represents the final challenge to overcome if we are to fully politicize Levinas. Thus the last modification of Levinas is to re-conceptualize the "ethical" in such a way that it "intervenes in a productive register, rather than simply interrupting, then withdrawing, from political life[.]"[128] Appealing, once again, to Derrida's modification of Levinas, Drabinski claims that if we begin with an acute awareness of borders, fracture and difference - rather than "being" as an undifferentiated totality explicitly opposed to "ethics"—we can better describe the way ethics can on and transform the socio-political terrain, an option which Levinas "himself could not conceive."[129] Such a modification allows us to replace Levinas' abstract asymmetrical relationship with a conception of the "asymmetry of political space," which enables us to overcome Levinas' ineffectual conception of justice (defined as "abstract interruption,"

[127] Ibid., p.187-8.
[128] Ibid., p. 188.
[129] Ibid., p.189.

"betrayal" and "messianic deferral") by focusing, instead, on a "concrete practice of welcoming, hospitality, refuge, and ethically infused cosmopolitanism."[130]

Dussel takes a similar position, noting that Levinas "negative" and "critical" attitude towards totality necessarily "deconstructs politics."[131] While Dussel is more appreciative of the insight Levinas is able to achieve despite (seemingly unnecessarily) painting himself into a corner, he is also quick to point out the inherent limitations of such a position. Because Levinas only "philosophizes about an anti-politics of the Totality" he has nothing to say about "a politics of liberation" and thus for all the importance he places on ethics the "poor pro-vokes, but in the end, he stays poor and miserable forever."[132] To compensate for this glaring lacuna, Dussel attempts to set a dialectic between Levinas' skeptical "anti-politics" and the "critical politics" espoused by thinkers such as Marx and Albert Memmi. Thinking Levinas with philosophers more attuned to the "appropriate political and economic categories,"[133] Dussel outlines a dialectical movement between the revolutionary impulse to liberate the other and the inevitable degeneration of said moment:

> The liberation starts with the slavery of Egypt (*negative* aspect) and ends in the construction of Jerusalem (*positive* aspect). But when the dreamed 'new' Jerusalem is finally built, it slowly transforms itself into Egypt, the 'second' Jerusalem, the Jerusalem to be deconstructed ... and the history will continue, never repeating and always renewing itself, as the history of the politics of liberation.[134]

Levinas is indeed important for Dussel, as he above all others can illustrate the multifarious ways a given regime will ossify in pathological ways which label, define, restrict and subjugate the other. At his best Levinas is emblematic, for Dussel, of the purity of a revolutionary upsurge

[130] Ibid., p. 189.
[131] Enrique Dussel, "'The Politics by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy," in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 78.
[132] Ibid., p. 81.
[133] Ibid., p. 84.
[134] Ibid., p. 88.

where "the new dominations are not visible yet; the unavoidable institutional 'entropy' has not yet shown its erosion." This is before the "ambiguity" following the revolution when "the system is totalized, the Other is excluded, and politics transforms itself into 'the art of foreseeing and winning the war by all means.' It is the politics of decadence. Now we are facing Evil, the Empire." The unsullied hope of ethical relation can help articulate the requisite spirit of political optimism, "the creative times when the emancipators have not yet contaminated their hands with their people's blood"[135] where "Trotsky and Lenin still work together; Stalin has not created a domination yet."[136] This dialectic is an attempt to correct Levinas for his lack of foresight to realize that the revolutionary moment must be structurally embedded for the sake of the other (the positive moment) but, on the other hand, welcomes the self-critical impulse (the negative moment) which puts even the most self-assured revolutionary on guard against the inevitable ossification which will, in turn, begin the cycle anew.

Rethinking the Relationship Between (Inter)subjectivity, Ethics and Politics.

It is perhaps helpful here to clarify what I am *not* proposing by challenging the above critiques and re-appropriations. First and foremost, I am not claiming that we should clear Levinas of the charges of Eurocentrism or bigotry. Unlike many that come to Levinas' defence, I completely agree with Drabinski, Caygill, Critchley, Bernasconi and many others, that when it comes to issues of concrete history, culture and politics, Levinas' assessments are inconsistent and occasionally extremely problematic. I thus affirm their commitment to not simply pass over the "inconvenient" aspects of Levinas' thought. Second, while I feel it is necessary to differentiate between the different kinds of normativity which appear in Levinas, I am not

[135] Ibid., p. 89.
[136] Ibid., p. 90.

claiming that we must forever exclude the prescriptive content which permeates throughout Levinas' analysis. Finally, I am not claiming that, because Levinas' "ethics" operates on a different plane than "totality," it is somehow a misapplication to apply Levinas to concrete political issues. On the contrary, the very purpose of this study is to demonstrate that politics is much "closer" to the "ethical relation" than many would like to accept. I enthusiastically affirm the efforts to think Levinas with the critical engagements analyzing the structure of colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, fascism, capitalism, etc. However, for me, this desire to illuminate the socio-political terrain on which we meet (or are prohibited from meeting) the "other" does nothing to contest the value of Levinas' core philosophical insight. If Levinas' description of the relation to the deworlded other amounted to little more than another unfortunate attempt to masquerade a particularity (be it "Eurocentric" or "Zionist") as a universal; if it represents nothing more than theology and masochistic altruism dressed up in postmodern jargon; if it precludes the possibility of collectivity and prohibits anything but skepticism; if it cannot deliver anything more radical than the most banal form of difference-blind ethics which accepts the neutrality of society and actively discourages any and every attempt to analyze history and structure, then I would not only applaud the above criticisms levelled by the "third wave" scholars, but I would do so while sitting comfortably among the ranks of our neo-Marxist critics.

What I am challenging is that we can retain the force of Levinas' insights if we get to the political by insisting on difference, exclusion, or any other theme or attribute as the *basis* upon which someone is conferred with the status of "other." Instead of underemphasizing, diminishing or simply replacing Levinas' (seemingly embarrassing, by today's political standards) philosophical starting point, I propose that we fully appreciate, even radicalize, the depth of the

"ethical relation." This not only allows us to retain the normative import of Levinas' philosophy but, by accepting the pre-contextual/pre-conscious nature of the relation, we will also "arrive" at the political much earlier. If the Levinasian other is not, from the *first*, a proper noun—from such and such a place, whose language, skin, hair, genitalia, gestures, clothes, occupation, culture, political affiliations, class, etc. are rendered intelligible on the basis of a background referential totality of relations—but rather a radical singularity without referent, corollary, or concept, then, by the time we get to "Bob," "Hoang," or "Aakanksha" we have already traversed through both planes of existence.

A clear delineation between these two registers is crucial because the claim that there exists a primordial dimension of intersubjective experience which is radically indifferent to all particularity and difference is much different than the claim that, in my conscious experience of the world, I can experience the other as an *unmediated* singularity. The second claim would, to be sure, naively and impetuously dismiss the importance of history and politics. Hence, much like Drabinski, Dussel and others, I whole heartedly affirm the thrust of the philosophical tradition—from Hegel and Heidegger to Derrida and Spivak—that we are inextricably bound to each other through an innumerable set of overlapping historical practices, discursive fields, and social structures (even if I may or may not agree on how some of them conceive of the relationship between such practices, fields and structures). However, this in no way blunts Levinas' fundamental claim that none of these generic phenomena can be the basis upon which we *first* relate to the other. We are held hostage, beholden to the other, before we are free or immersed within a lifeworld. Our neo-Marxist critics are, in a way, correct that "the three" precedes "the two," but only if we understand the "two" as on the plane of consciousness. But

here Levinas would certainly agree that this version of "the two" already presupposes a mediating gaze capable of counting the terms.

This brings us to the most disingenuous aspect of the otherwise noble efforts to think Levinas in a political context. In setting Levinas up as fodder for the obvious critique that difference/context precedes identity, Levinas is portrayed as a hyper-individualist, seemingly wholly ignorant of his immediate philosophical milieu. It is incontestable that Levinas is fully immersed in Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Hegel and Marx and he repeatedly expresses the import these thinkers have for his understanding of intersubjectivity. Levinas is not, contrary to some liberal interpretations,[137] attempting to construct some kind of state of nature argument, where a self-sufficient singular individual encounters other individuals and slowly takes on a social character, adding language, culture, trade, and eventually politics. What is ignored in such interpretations is that Levinas is taking the great thinkers of intersubjectivity as point of departure and asking the important question of whether there is another kind of social relation which is prior, or deeper, than Dasein, intentionality, perception, negativity and the "ensemble of social relations." Drabinski's question: "How does the experience of cultural mixture open up the complex interstitial or creolized space of an identity *affirming, rather than obscuring, radical difference*?[138]" would seem to oppose Levinas to theories of difference rather than viewing them as potentially supplementary. Levinas does not offer us a more detailed phenomenology, nor does he mean to.

[137] See, for example: Robb A. McDaniel, "Garden-Variety Liberals: Discovering Eden in Levinas and Locke," in *Polity* 34:2 (Winter, 2001), pp. 117-139.
[138] Sparrow, *Levinas*, p.9. Emphasis added.

A similar confusion is readily apparent in attempts, exemplified by Sparrow, to set Levinas on alternative footing more appropriate to deal with the pressing political issues of his time. Here he states that:

> By refocusing his project on the sensuous aspects of faciality, Levinas is better prepared to confront criticism from potential detractors in feminist and critical race theory, or other fields that emphasize the corporeality of relations. For this, it must be shown that the material complexity of the Other is what places him/her beyond *comprehension*, without putting them beyond *contact*.[139]

For Sparrow the solution to thinking the other as an empirical reality to whom I can respond while preserve Levinas' sense of "beyond comprehension" is to intensify the process of traditional phenomenology and posit an innumerable amount of differences which makes the other both concrete and immeasurably complex. Sparrow here is doubling down on the critiques of Levinas; rather than shying away from difference what is needed is to translate Levinas into a hyper-awareness of difference which will turn into, at some point, an innumerable infinity. Presumably, according to such a logic, the other is singular because if you could add up the infinite number of variables—the creases in their skin, the mole on their back, their distinct laugh, their disdain for country music, their love of poetry, and on and on—the differences would distinguish this specific other as unique, different from all others. Like a snowflake you will never you can never encounter the same person twice. The obvious reply from Levinas would be that, not only does this abolish the passivity and asymmetry of subjectivity with respect to the other but conceives of the intersubjective relation as one where "I" must constantly affirm, even prove, the other's status as unique; where I am implored to perpetually "chase" the other and inventory their attributes in order to add more and more signifiers to my collection and they, in turn, must keep "running" so as to never be completely understood by me. Such a formulation

[139] Ibid., p. 84.

is, without a doubt, the antithesis of Levinas. It is ironic that such interpretations typically chide Levinas for his religiosity or seeming altruism but, the way they proceed reduces Levinas to nothing more than an austere moral theory, begging the question of what they find so appealing in Levinas in the first place?

Similarly, Bernasconi surmises that Levinas' "attempt to approach the Other as outside of culture" simply repeats "the violence, long since exposed, of a humanism that reduces the other to nothing more than a man."[140] Once again this apparent oversight is linked with the hegemony of "Western ethnocentrism" and, moreover, "ignore[s] the possibility that one of the ways in which the Other might challenge my self sufficiency is for the stranger to put in question my cultural identity."[141] Anticipating the objection that such a claim "confuses the distinction between levels" Bernasconi counters by arguing that "ethnicity" is central for Levinas' thought and that:

> In the face to face relation I discover myself as other than the Other: the Other is what I myself am not. Could it not be that, where there is ethnic—or sexual—difference, then the ethnic—or sexual—identity of the Other belongs to his or her very alterity as the Other's 'alterity-content?' And yet not in such a way as to confirm me in my own identity.[142]

What is clear in such assertions is that, for Bernasconi, the most primary "level" of Levinas' analysis still includes the prescriptive, phenomenological, and socio-historical concerns that I am claiming must be postponed to the second level. The very phrase "alterity-content," the postulation that "the Other is what I am not," and the normative presumption that this whole exercise is ultimately about challenging my "self-sufficiency" or "identity" makes it clear that, for Bernasconi, we are dealing with the subject proper, which, as I have attempted to

[140] Bernasconi, "Who," p. 17.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid., p. 18.

demonstrate, re-instates the priority of ontology/difference and simultaneously transforms the crux of Levinas' philosophy into a moral theory predicated on guilt.

Of course this does not mean that, even if read as supplementary, Levinas does not leave the traditional philosophies of intersubjectivity untouched. This will be dealt with in more detail in the next two chapters but for the time being it is important to note that, for whatever he believes he has to offer, Levinas does not want to simply replace every theory of intersubjectivity with his specific insights. After all, he claims that ethics is "first philosophy," not the only philosophy in town. This misunderstanding appears to create a lot of consternation and paranoia as if any and every mention of consciousness, history, or collectivity would draw the ire of Levinas. Littered through Drabinski's analysis, for example, is the suspicion that Levinas or Levinasians would rebuke such an interlocution with postcolonial thinkers of history, politics and embodiment: expecting that they would as nothing more than "a return to perception"[143]; or that it would "of course" raise the "objection from Levinas" that "this sounds a bit too much like political community"[144]; or further that such concrete reflections are "the most difficult methodological pill for Levinasians to swallow" because they illuminates the "repressed historical thinking" that "ought to to inform our conceptualizing of methodological motifs like 'Europe.'"[145] What is hopefully by now obvious is that such concerns are largely misplaced. If we begin from the proposition that Levinas is describing the structure of one kind of intersubjective relation, then it allows us to see that Levinas is not forever excluding such features from analysis but rather trying to explain why they should concern us in the first place. To speak about what is behind "perception" and "political community" is all-together different

[143] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. 43
[144] Ibid., p. 191.
[145] Ibid., p. 8.

from prohibiting or even diminishing the importance of such features. The needless antagonism set up between Levinas and politics, common throughout, is again evident in Drabinski's conclusion when he attempts to anticipate how Levinasians might receive his work. Admitting that the ethical "orientation and methodology" of Levinas can lead us to a broader political critique he adds the important qualification that such an effort would still require "us to temper his critique of worldliness more than a little bit."[146] While Levinas' wager is that a recognition of the priority of the being-for-the-other will transform what these social phenomena might look like, a "return to perception" is absolutely necessary, even demanded by Levinas—but this motivation is subverted if we "temper" Levinas' insight so that it fits neatly *into* perception. It is as if we expect too much from Levinas, and such assertions repeatedly force Levinas into a battle over the substance of ontology and phenomenology, which can then only make Levinas' claims of worldlessness seem ridiculous if not reactionary ("how can you say that the other's skin has no signification?"). But of course Levinas is intending to get behind and beyond such concerns to explain that, while utterly essential to an ethico-political analysis, such features are insufficient to have the final word on normative matters.

Meaning and Sense: Ethics, Relativity and Context

Levinas' most lucid treatment of his relation to his other theories of intersubjectivity can be found in his essay "Meaning and Sense," written two years before the publication of *Otherwise than Being*. Throughout Levinas systematically (at least as systematic as anything he does) addresses his work in relation to the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss, Husserl, and Bergson. Contrary to the impression one might get from reading many of "third

[146] Ibid., p. 200.

wave" scholars, Levinas deeply affirms the efforts of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to illuminate the invisible horizons which bestow meaning on the world. "This rectangular and solid opacity" Levinas states, "would become a book only inasmuch as it bears my thought toward other data still, or already, absent—toward the author that writes, the readers that read, the shelves that store." In symmetry with Drabinski's point about the entanglement of Europe and its colonies, Levinas states that "[t]hose absent contents confer a meaning on the given."[147] Paraphrasing Heidegger, Levinas further reflects on the referential totality of relations further implied by an object as simple as a book:

> It contrasts with the light, with the daylight, refers to the sun that rose or the lamp that was lit, refers to my eyes also, as the solidity refers to my hand, not only as to organs which apprehend it in a subject, and would thereby be somehow opposed to the apprehended object, but also as to beings that are *alongside of* this opacity, *in the midst of* a world common to this opacity, this solidity, these eyes, this hand, and myself as a body. There never was a moment meaning came to birth out of a meaningless being, outside of a historical position where language is spoken. And that is doubtless what was meant when we were taught that language is the home of being.[148]

What Levinas finds interesting about such formulations is that they annul the possibility of "pure receptivity" where "no given could enter thought simply through a shock against the wall of receptivity."[149] As Levinas continues: "To be given to consciousness, to flicker for it, would require that the given first be placed in an illuminated horizon—like a word, which gets the gift of being understood from the context to which it refers. The meaning would be the very illumination of this horizon."[150]

Levinas then connects the relevance of such philosophical articulations for normative and political questions. The "totality of being" implied in meaning is not a pre-given structure but

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[147] Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht, Bostoon, Lancaster: Martinus Nijoff Publishers, 1987), p. 75.
[148] Ibid., p. 79. Original emphasis
[149] Ibid., p. 77.
[150] Ibid.

through specific historical processes of "arranging and assembling" it takes on a particular cultural form.[151] Meaning is ascribed to expression differently in different circumstances, both within a given culture and across cultures. Such "diversity of expression" is not considered a betrayal of "being" because, for thinkers like Melreau-Ponty, being is not something that first exists and then is re-presented, it only comes to be through its illumination; thus the diversity of being is evidence of the "glitter of the inexhaustible richness of its event."[152]

Levinas contrasts such a conception of "being" (common, for Levinas, not only in modern phenomenology but also in thinkers like Hegel and Bergson) with Plato, for whom "the world of meanings precedes language and culture, which express it; it is indifferent to the system of signs that one can invent to make this world present to thought."[153] What interests Levinas in this juxtaposition is that, for all his faults, Plato refuses to accept the notion that truth, meaning and intelligibility can be exhausted by their cultural form; there is always a remainder, something prior to, and outside of, the specific iterations of becoming. This is, of course, contrary to the "antiplatonism of contemporary philosophy," for whom one must "traverse history or relive duration or start from concrete perception and the language established in it, in order to arrive at the intelligible." Thus the particularity and diversity of history and culture are "no longer obstacles separating us from the essential and the intelligible, but ways that give us access to it…[t]hey are the only ways, the only possible ones, irreplaceable, and consequently implicated in the intelligible itself."[154]

It would be, of course, a mistake to take such a comparison as a rejection of contemporary philosophy or modern phenomenology. What is clear in this essay is Levinas'

[151] Ibid., p. 83.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid., p. 84.
[154] Ibid.

admiration for thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Bergson and even Levi-Strauss. Interesting for our purposes is Levinas' discussion of Bergsons' conception of freedom and history. For Bergson, Levinas notes, the freedom cannot be separated or abstracted from the concrete history in which the subject is immersed. Levinas continues:

> The meaning of the decision to be taken can be intelligible only for him who would have lived through the whole past which leads to this decision. The meaning cannot be understood directly in a fulguration which illuminates and dissipates the night in which it arises and which it leads to its denouement. The whole density of history is necessary for it.[155]

What I hope to demonstrate is that Levinas is fully aware of the important ramifications and consequences of contemporary philosophy. Levinas is many things but he is not ignorant of, or hostile to, the importance of concrete signification, thematization, history, context or everything else that follows on the plane of "ontology."

Levinas is, however, skeptical that, for all its progress, this conception of being is sufficient to capture the full spectrum or significance of subjectivity. Again, with reference to Bergson, Levinas begins to outline the potential limitations of such a position where: "a meaning cannot be separated from the access leading to it. The access is part of the meaning itself. The scaffolding is never taken down; the ladder is never pulled up."[156] It is interesting that such a formulation could equally apply to Kant. Of course the difference is that for Kant the faculties of apperception which organize the world into an intelligible structure are the possession of the individual, while for those following in the wake of Hegel, Marx and Heidegger such categories emanate from society (and thus constitute of the individual rather than the reverse). In either case, what is inconceivable in this strain of philosophy is a referent exterior to the ways in which we apprehend the world. Herein lies the difficulty of interpreting what exactly Levinas is

[155] Ibid., p. 85.
[156] Ibid.

claiming: in what precise sense does he rejoin Plato in the search for a meaning beyond the flux of history, culture and politics?

We can begin to answer this question by examining Levinas', somewhat clumsy, discussion on the potential normative and political implications of such philosophical articulations. Following his exposition on the state of contemporary philosophy, Levinas abruptly states that the "political work of decolonization" is attached to such an "ontology," which establishes the equality between the "multiple and multivocal" expressions of culture. This thread is picked up a few pages later where Levinas begins to openly question whether such a philosophical orientation can deliver the final word on normative matters. Levinas is specifically responding to the notion that the plurality of cultural formations can only relate to each other "laterally," and not (as Plato would have it) through a third perspective which, standing apart from the flux of culture, is capable of functioning as an arbiter. Utilizing the metaphor of language, Levinas states that such a proposition effectively eliminates the "possibility of a Frenchman learning Chinese and passing from one culture into another, without the intermediary of an esperanto that would falsify both tongues which it mediated."[157]

There are many confusing and potentially troubling aspects of Levinas' attempt to highlight some of the implicit difficulties of contemporary philosophy and (what he takes to be) its ethical correlative, cultural relativity. The first is theoretical. Levinas' appears to be advocating for a third term which can mediate, and ultimately judge, between two terms (in this case cultures). This might seem confusing in light of his description of the face-to-face relation which outright excludes the possibility of a third term mediating the relation between "the two." On account of such confusion, Drabinski misreads Levinas' intention and assumes that the

[157] Ibid., p.88.

appeal to esperanto is to indicate yet another pathological example of how a third term necessarily "mediates, and so obliterates difference in the interests of instrumentalizing language and meaning."[158] But of course Levinas is not, in these pages, attempting to provide a sanctuary for the "contiguity of multiple expressions of being."[159] In fact, quite the opposite, which leads us to the second potential problem. Picking up on Levinas' ambivalence to cultural diversity, Bernasconi misreads this text in the opposite direction. While Bernasconi correctly recognizes that Levinas is promoting the concept of a master tongue which can function at a distance from a particular cultural formation, he once again takes this as further evidence of Levinas' implicit Eurocentrism—a seemingly plausible interpretation, especially in light of light of Levinas' infamous comments that humanity is made up of "Europe and the Bible, everything else can be *translated*." According to Bernasconi, "the Greek language came to serve Levinas as a kind of esperanto, providing the universal tongue in which everything can be said, unlike esperanto, without loss."[160] I think such confusion highlights the critical importance of questions of "depth" and the inevitable difficulties of simply transposing the pre- and post-ontological meanings of Levinas' foundational concepts (which is presupposed in all such attempts to convert them into larger social categories). While Levinas is indeed in favour of a normative expression irreducible to culture, he is not advocating for a third term which could mediate or buffer the immediacy of the face to face relation. To the contrary, his concern regarding his philosophical milieu is that they *only* focus on "being," which is, for Levinas, the mucilage secreted by the human-to-human relation, inevitably filling the interstitial gaps between individuals and binds them together within a horizon. Esperanto is thus a poorly chosen metaphor because, while Levinas recognizes

[158] Drabinski, *Levinas*, p. 121.
[159] Levinas, *Meaning*, p.88.
[160] Bernasconi, *Who*, p. 23.

the ethical lacuna present in contemporary "anti-platonism," he is not advocating for a non-relational entity or category which stands outside of history and society. As he otherwise states with great clarity: "Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. It's infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*."[161] What is primary for Levinas is not a transhistorical substance or (contra Bernasconi) a particular cultural, philosophical or theological formation but the most basic "orientation and of an unequivocal sense in which humanity stands."[162] It is out of such an orientation that a plurality of human expressions arise; which also means that we can distinguish these iterations from the more "fundamental movement" of being-for-the-other.[163]

Levinas' overall compatibility with the intersubjective tradition out of which Drabinski and Dussel emerge is made explicit as he argues that "contemporary philosophy insists, *and indeed rightly*, on its hermeneutical structure and on the cultural effort of the *incarnate being* that expresses itself."[164] Signification has a structure, a horizon, a history, and a politics—such presuppositions are beyond reproach, as Levinas continues:

> The other is given in the concreteness of the totality in which he is immanent, and which, according to Merleau-Ponty's *remarkable analyses*, which we have drawn upon freely in the first section of this essay, is expressed and disclosed by our own cultural initiative, by corporeal, linguistic or artistic gestures.[165]

What such quotes make perfectly clear is that Levinas' analysis of singularity or the face-to-face has already accounted for the dimension of "being" which many of his critics and acolytes claim he is unable to think. This is again confirmed as Levinas argues that the "presence" of the other

[161] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 26.
[162] Levinas, *Meaning*, p. 88.
[163] Ibid., 94.
[164] Ibid., p.95. Emphasis added.
[165] Ibid. Emphasis added.

"consists in divesting himself of the form which does already manifest him."[166] Key is that the other, in this formulation, is "already" refracted through the prism of "the third," however, this does not encompass or erase the radical singularity of the other. What becomes abundantly clear is that, even if the dimension of singularity/alterity is always "prior," it is *contemporaneous* (in what Heidegger would call "clock-time") with how we actually experience the other in our everyday life.

What also becomes clear from Levinas' discussion of Merleau-Ponty is that he is not attempting to avert our attention from materiality by outlining a highly abstract or idealized ethical theory. The sustained effort to deworld the other is an attempt to illuminate a "most ordinary social experience"[167] which underlays the register of experience that contemporary philosophy is aiming at. To refer back to Sparrow's critique and re-formulation, for Levinas, to place signification prior to pure receptivity is not to think more concretely. Rather, such a method necessarily abstracts from the immediacy of the social relation by inserting a concept or subjective momentum which, through the powers of cognition and perception, designate the other as "other." We will later describe the logic of this movement in greater detail but for now it is sufficient to clarify Levinas' intention, as he remarks that it is "[i]n the concreteness of the world a face is abstract or naked."[168] Levinas is attempting to move us toward, not away from, concrete experience. To begin before the beginning is not to deliver an abstract universal and austere moral theory, it is, however, to understand how my experience of subjectivity is "always already" an orientation toward the other.

[166] Ibid., p. 96.
[167] Ibid., p. 94.
[168] Ibid., p. 96.

If "ethics" does not, for Levinas, describe an intimate relationship between two self-conscious people (somehow sheltered from generic social processes) then how can we understand his insistence on its primacy? While Levinas is quick to flatter Merleau-Ponty he nevertheless continues to ask if such an impressive analysis has not forgotten the dimension of the "interlocutor."[169] To unpack the hermeneutical (or, better still, political) structure of intelligibility and signification is indeed impressive, but, according to Levinas, such an analysis readily obfuscates how "expression, before being a celebration of being, is a relationship with him to whom I express the expression, and whose presence is already required for my cultural gesture of expression to be produced."[170] Subjectivity is always intersubjectivity, not only because meaning presupposes a shared horizon but because it must be expressed to some-one. While the other is always situated within a horizon it does not, itself, make up the horizon, nor is it encapsulated by it. As Levinas puts it, the other is "not included in the totality of being expressed."[171] We are now better prepared to understand Levinas' insistence of deworlding the other, which he aptly describes in *Meaning and Sense*:

> But the epiphany of the other involves a signifyingness of its own independent of this meaning received from the world. The other comes to us not only out of the context, but also without mediation; he signifies by himself. The cultural meaning which is revealed—and reveals—as it were horizontally, which is revealed from the historical world to which it belongs, and which, according to the phenomenological expression, reveals the horizons of this world - this mundane meaning is disturbed and jostled by another presence that is abstract (or, more exactly, absolute[63]) and not integrated into the world…Whereas a phenomenon is already, in whatever respect, an image, a captive manifestation of its plastic and mute form, the epiphany of a face is alive.[172]

After justifying the primary of the other over and above "the world," Levinas immediately addresses the two issues raised throughout the first two chapters. The first is the question of

[169] Ibid, p. 95.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.

where prescriptive normativity fits within his analysis. Once again, in unambiguous terms, Levinas highlights the pre-subjective and thus pre-prescriptive depth in which the subject is defined by its inability to "be deaf" or "forget" the call of the other. Levinas continues:

> Consciousness loses its first place. The presence of a face thus signifies an irrecusable order, a command, which puts a stop to the availability of consciousness…Being called into question is not the same as becoming aware of this being called into question. The 'absolutely other' is not reflected in consciousness. It resists it to the extent that even its resistance is not convertible into a content of consciousness…A face confounds the intentionality that aims at it. What is at stake here is the calling of consciousness into question, and not a consciousness of a calling into question. The I loses its sovereign self-coincidence, its identification, in which consciousness returns triumphantly to itself to rest on itself.[173]

Such a passage highlights my concern of bracketing the prescriptive implications of Levinas' philosophy, not because they are unimportant or subordinate but because they miss the precise dimension of the inter-human relation at which Levinas is aiming.

This leads to a second concern which has been haunting Levinas in these first two chapters. We have demonstrated how Levinas acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which the other is, at every moment, ensnared within a totality of relations, however, is it still not the case the "appearance" of the other (conceived as prior and indifferent to this very context) confines "ethics" to momentary or fleeting outbursts? This overwhelmingly popular interpretation has two sides, each of which is equally problematic. In the first concern is that the call of the face retreats before it ever "arrives" and thus cannot (unlike Hegel's dialectic, for example) produce a positive instantiation of the ethical. The second complaint is that, as a consequence, Levinas is indifferent to the overall social and political configuration of a given society; the face comes and goes while the world of "totality" remains.

[173] Ibid., p. 97.

In this essay, Levinas' close attention to the question of depth offers a far more robust role for the deworlded other. Here he forcefully states that this dimension of the inter-human relation is "not reducible to a negative moment" because the "denuding" of the other is already a "a summons to answer."[174] Levinas continues that, "[t]he I does not only become aware of this necessity to answer, as though it were an obligation or a duty about which it would have to come to a decision."[175] The impetus of expression may be beyond/beneath/prior to representation but every expression will necessarily manifest itself in "ontological" terms. Although Levinas investigation of politics, culture, history, etc. is wholly inadequate, he is moved to extoll the exteriority or infinity of the other in order to make practical judgements about the world (and here we finally get to the prescriptive aspects of his thought). Levinas acknowledges that the critical move of the "anti-Platonists" (relativize cultures by severing meaning from transhistorical truth) was necessary to challenge the specific mode of "exploitation and violence" represented in the ongoing colonial period, nevertheless, he diverge from Merleau-Ponty, even if only *slightly*, by highlighting the limits of relativity.

This does not mean that Levinas hastily leaping to any hard and fast conclusions on ahistorical universal Truths (which have also served as cover for colonial violence). Ethical questions, according to Levinas, are not *purely* reducible to contingent socio-cultural formations because "meaning is situated in the ethical, presupposed by all culture and all meaning. Morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it."[176] The remainder that lies outside and beyond all culture and meaning is the relation to the other qua other, which is not enacted after the scaffolding of society has been erected but the very catalyst of subjectivity itself. Without

[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid., p. 100.

this distance between the self/other relation and the horizons which make the relation intelligible critical reflection and judgment itself would be unthinkable. For this reason Levinas calls us to "return to Platonism in a new way" and "catch sight, in meaning, of a situation that precedes culture, to envision language out of the revelation of the other (which is at the same time the birth of morality) in the gaze of man aiming at a man precisely as abstract man, disengaged from all culture, in the nakedness of his face."[177] Levinas is thus not against meaning, signification, culture, politics or collectivities. He is, however, adamant they have neither the first nor the final word.

Bridging the Divide Between Levinas and Politics

Of course such an interpretation is not without its difficulties. There are numerous instances where Levinas compromises the very aspects of his thought that I am seeking to radicalize and carry forward in various ways. In addition to the instances mentioned by Drabinski and Caygill, in the above mentioned essay, *Meaning and Sense*, Levinas will also bumble around the issue of decolonization with a surprising hint of nostalgia as he talks about the European legacy and the present state of "disorientation."[178] This sentiment is made explicit in numerous interviews where, to take one example, Levinas ironically struggles with the egalitarian indifference to culture exhibited by structuralism and (in his opinion) it's political corollary, decolonization. Referring to Levi-Strauss' seminal work "The Savage Mind," Levinas states:

> I do not at all see where the target of his vision is. It certainly responds, from a moral perceptive, to what one calls decolonization and the end of a dominating Europe, but my recant is primary—it is, I know worse than primitive: can one compare the scientific

[177] Ibid., p. 101.
[178] Ibid., p. 86.

> intellect of Einstein with the "savage mind," whatever be the complications, the complexities, that the "savage mind" may gather or accomplish?[179]

The radical reading proposed here emphasizes the very indifference to culture (at this level of analysis) that Levinas otherwise maintains as a way of making such statements theoretically incoherent. What is so valuable in Levinas' thought (and this will become more clear in the coming chapters) is the way it precludes any attempt to *ground* subjectivity within a conatus, cultural horizon or pre-established difference. And it is this understanding of the human, as already one-for-the-other, that not only enables us to make prescriptive claims but, because it is not simply just a moral code fetishizing the intimate relation between two self-conscious subjects, this aspect of sociality is necessarily enshrined within the totality of social relations (even if it is irreducible to those very relations). As a result, to think Levinas' politically is (or at the very least, can be) altogether different than asking how one might extend, to a broader context, a moral code designed to navigate intimate relationships—as if socio-political mediation could be slowly added after the fact, as if they were garments that could be put on and taken off.

This reading is thus not an effort to "save the appearances," reconcile what is irreconcilable, or ignore what is theoretically inconvenient. As Drabinski suggests, it is ultimately up to the interpreters to carry a thinker forward, however, contra Drabinski (and others) if we are to push Levinas not only beyond his individual prejudices and peculiarities but his overall ambiguous posture with respect to history and politics, we must *emphasize* rather than temper this very aspect of his thought. This is a sharp contrast to those claims that decontextualization was a way of privileging—at bottom—the neighbour, the familiar, the ethnic, national or the European. At the depth we are aiming, sensibility qua intersubjectivity is

[179] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 79.

defined by its open or unsutured quality, and, as such, Levinas' unfortunate sentiments to the contrary are simply inadmissible to the conception of subjectivity that we wish to carry forward. These aberrant moments therefore still carry significance, not because they illuminate the "true" Levinas, but for the opposite reason, because they represent the dimension of his thought that must be thoroughly opposed.

While we cannot do this topic justice here, this is how we must approach Levinas' ill-fated attempt to establish sexual difference as the model of difference as such. This articulation of the ontological difference between the masculine and feminine (which slowly wanes after its most pronounced articulation in *Time and the Other*) famously led to De Beviour's critique that, for Levinas, the woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."[180] This has led to interesting debates within feminist interpretations of Levinas,[181] the only point I would stress in this respect is that exteriority and difference, at this level, cannot be inscribed at the level of biology. Here I fully agree with Stella Sanford that (though he is not totally successful, as she demonstrates) Levinas' explicit shift to a "kinship relation 'outside of all biology'" indicates that the maternal metaphor should be understood as a "universal model" where, in this strict sense, "men might be mothers."[182] Levinas himself seems to recognize this very misstep in a later interview where he ponders whether "all these allusions to the ontological difference between the masculine and feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or two

[180] Simone De Beavior, *The Second Sex* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1953), p. 16.
[181] See, for example, *Feminist Interpretations of Levinas* ed. Tina Chanter (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2001)
[182] Stella Sandford, "Masculine Mothers? Maternity in Levinas and Plato" in *Feminist*, p. 190.

genders) they would signify that the participation in feminine and in the masculine were the attribute of every human being."[183] Even then he seems be blind to the way the very terms "masculine" and "feminine" might still obfuscate rather than illuminate the notion of difference he (often) struggles to describe, there is an interesting point in this insofar as Levinas is clear that, in looking at relations of sexual difference, love and, similarly in relations of filiation and friendship, he was attempting to show how one could be ensured within the relations of everyday life and still be radically other.[184] While this affirms our stance that these are co-existent dimensions of intersubjectivity (and thus must be analyzed in relation to each other), the fact that Levinas recognizes this fact but still prefers to analyze its implications for the structure of love and family rather than power and politics is all the more frustrating.

Lastly, this is also why we cannot read Levinas' preferred images of the "orphan," the "widow," the "poor," or, (the less frequently invoked but crucial for our purposes) "proletariat" as ontological designations. Rather, such metaphors are useful insofar as they contain a sense of asymmetry, exclusion, and rootlessness. Put differently, just as we must reject an analysis which would posit "Europe" or "Greek Wisdom" as the basis for counting as an "other," so to must we refuse the notion that one is an uncountable "one" (in the most primordial sense) *because* they are poor, hungry, excluded, or exploited (even if this conception of intersubjectivity has massive implications for how we think about the poor, excluded, exploited etc.). As Levinas in a moment of great lucidity states: "That the Other is placed higher than me would be a pure and simple error if the welcome I make him consisted in 'perceiving' a nature. Sociology psychology, physiology are thus deaf to exteriority."[185]

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[183] Emmanuel Levinas, "Love and Filiation," in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philip Nemo* trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 68.
[184] p. 69-72.
[185] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 291.

Underlying this whole discussion is the caution that we must be careful to not ask too much of Levinas. He does not intend to deliver a historical, political or sociological analysis, a comprehensive phenomenology, or even a robust ethical theory traditionally understood. This still means that we can and *should* criticize, as Dussel does, Levinas for having an insufficient political, historical and phenomenological account. However, it appears to me to be an untenable position to replace the ground of subjectivity with any of these concerns (where I recognize the other because of given feature) and still hope to glean anything of value from Levinas. To quote Levinas, the other does not, in the most primordial sense, concern us "in the collectivity of reason…nor by reason of his power and freedom…nor by virtue of the difference of his attributes which would have to surmount in the process of cognition…..but as other, independent on us: behind every relation we could sustain with him, an absolute upsurge."[186] Such an approach to Levinas is perhaps analogous to Kant's analysis of reason, which sought to clarify the limits of reason so as to make room for faith. This initial treatment of Levinas is, in large part, an attempt to not only clarify but quarantine Levinas' thought by exposing its limitations, so that we can make room for politics. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative to examine the various ways class domination, slavery, colonization, white-supremacy, patriarchy, etc. has shaped the way faces are perceived. This is indeed the impetus of the present dialogue between Levinas and Marx. At the same time, it would seem not unimportant to ask why politics, structure and violence concern us in the first place. If indeed concepts like freedom, equality, negativity, recognition, familiarity, and reason do not exhaust the meaning of being-with-others, as Levinas claims, then we must also ask if such concepts alone are sufficient for articulating a project of liberation.

[186] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 89.

CHAPTER THREE

En Route to Marx:
Tracing the Origins and Dimensions of Intersubjectivity

Where two roads meet: placing Levinas and Marx in philosophical context

We now have a better understanding of the theoretical and political anxieties that comprise the gulf separating Marx and Levinas. Whether stated in an effort to repudiate or simply reorient Levinas, what is shared by many commentators is the belief that Levinas cannot coincide with a radical politics unless his most foundational insights on the relationship between subjectivity, context, history, politics and "ethics" is fundamentally rethought. As a result, according to this construal, Marx can easily engage in fruitful dialogues with thinkers as different as Fichte, Heidegger, and Lacan because they share, at least in some broad sense, a common philosophical lineage. Levinas, by contrast, is considered to originate from a different genus, if not altogether *sui generis*. From the lack of interest garnered on both sides of the divide, one gets the impression that the result of any potential interlocution between Levinas and Marx would be, like a mule, sterile upon arrival. To paraphrase Kipling, Levinas is Levinas and Marx is Marx and never the twain shall meet.

There are several ways one could challenge this doxa. Most obvious, one could look at Levinas' own views on the legacy of Marx and Marxism. Here, especially in his later years, Levinas confounded many commentators as he not only affirms the "generous" spirit of Marxism, which, through its concern for the other, demonstrates the limits of individual charity, but further, laments the failure of socialism, saying that it was "one of the great disappointments" in history because it was the bearer of a messianic legacy which wielded political power only in

the hope that it could "make political power useless."[187] Instructive as these comments might be for challenging the status of Levinas today (and sentiments to which we will return), we will begin with a slightly different approach, one that seeks to go deeper than simply grafting the concerns of one tradition onto another in an ad hoc way. We will begin such a task with another reference to Marx, written already in 1934, where the Levinas boldly claims that, even if he did not go far enough, Marx was the "first" in the Western tradition to contest the "liberal" view of subjectivity which is blind to the "series of restless powers that seethe within him and already push him down a determined path."[188] It is somewhat ironic that the young Levinas would be so eager to to bring us back to Marx's fundamental insight that "being determines consciousness,"[189] because it is this precisely this break with liberalism that accounts for the present rift between Marx and Levinas.

Part of this story is by now well known, as, after Marx "breaks [it's] harmonious curve of development,"[190] philosophy becomes increasingly preoccupied with these "restless powers," and continues to challenge, even invert, the famous Carteasean formula whereby an autonomous and disembodied subject encounters and begins to represent the external world. Advanced by likes of Heidegger, de Beavoir, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, Wittgenstein, Adorno, Lacan, Arendt, Althusser, and Foucault, philosophy no longer sought to establish the sovereignty of the subject, but instead began to map out the history and dimensions of the embodied social experience—the concealed structures, "referential totalities," economic imperatives, symbolic orders and discursive fields—in which people are "thrown," "subjectivized" and "interpellated."

[187] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 80.
[188] Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in *Critical Inquiry* 17:1 (Autumn, 1990), p. 66.
[189] Ibid., p. 67.
[190] Ibid.

Interestingly, this philosophical shift initially attempted to distance itself from the "historicism" of Hegel and Marx, where schools of thought like phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and structuralism often eschewed historical analysis in favour of more synchronic approaches. However, perhaps for obvious reasons, philosophy increasingly restored its historical orientation (though, usually, avidly anti-teleological); after all, if there is no "sovereign, founding" or "universal form of subject," as Foucault famously insisted, then to speak of a subject is to grasp it in its historical specificity. Regardless of the specific approach or focus, what is significant is that the emergent social ontology sought to render visible the history, depth, complexity and interconnectedness of the human experience. The profundity of the de-centerment of the subject was singled above all else by the increasingly obligatory status of the prefixes "inter" and "anti" when dealing with theories of "subjectivity" and "humanism."

Levinas' philosophy of the "social relation," as he is quick to admit,[191] cannot be understood apart from these crucial developments. However, his contribution comes primarily in the form of a critique, one that names an otherwise unnoticed ambiguity in such articulations of subjectivity. While such philosophies are rooted in the observation that experience, no matter how intimate or idiosyncratic, is already mediated by the social, they too often fail to *adequately* distinguish between—let alone theorize—the relationship one has to others (what is sometimes called the subject-subject, or "interhuman" relation) and the relationship one has to the various socio-historical products that precedes, mediates and emanates from this relationship. It is obvious that these two moments are inextricably linked: on the one hand, it is impossible to conceive of human products like tools, symbols, language, culture, institutions, and borders without the existence of actually existing human beings, and, on the other hand, when humans

[191] See, for example, the way he pays homage to Hegel, Heidegger, Bergson, and others in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982).

actually do encounter each other this interaction unfolds according to the rhythms and logics of a given context (and not in a socio-historical vacuum). Nevertheless, Levinas' primary concern is that such a philosophical (and ultimately political) understanding of sociality preserves a remnant of the prior individualistic philosophies in-so-far as they subordinate the first moment (inter-human) to the second (generic), and, in the process, already miss the critical import of the former. As a result, the philosophical grounds for the naive egoism of "idealist liberalism"[192] may have been eroded in the wake of Marx, however, the fundamental movement of such an egoism—which obliterates the stature of the other as such—is not so much overcome as it is delayed. And it is on these grounds that Levinas concludes that "this break with liberalism is not a definitive one."[193]

For this reason, Levinas will often assume an extreme viewpoint from which Marx's rupture with the liberal subject, previously celebrated, becomes nearly imperceptible. Such is the case in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas famously insists that the whole of "Western philosophy" be seen as a single homogenous movement, because all hitherto philosophy has "been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."[194] For all its efforts to penetrate the veneer of the subject, this arc of intersubjective inquiry has, according to Levinas, left a foundational aspect of the intersubjective experience unthought—and in *some* cases debased beyond the atomism of Cartesianism or liberalism. Thus the much trumpeted transition from humanism to anti-humanism, or from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, is only perceptible if we still assume the perspective of the self-positing subject, and take stock of what had to surrender (sovereignty,

[192] Ibid., p. 67.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 43

primordial freedom, autonomy etc.). However, if we, following Levinas, survey this philosophical shift from the perspective of the other, who is "neutralized" just the same, such a shift will be imperceptible and Western philosophy will appear as an uninterrupted line from Parmenides and Plato to Hegel and Heidegger. Thus, in this *one* respect, Levinas posits a remarkable unanimity between liberalism, idealism, materialism, phenomenology, structuralism and post-structuralism.

This is why, despite his admiration and indebtedness to these critiques of the primacy of freedom, individuality or consciousness, Levinas remains largely indifferent to the specifics of these developments, and to the degree that they do concern him, do so mostly negatively—in what they either miss or befog. While philosophers increasingly rendered subjectivity intelligible by illuminating its historical, political, and hermeneutical horizons, Levinas is concerned with the primacy of a unique and singular relation to others which precedes, overflows, and remains altogether irreducible to any such horizon. The relation to the other thus occurs "prior to any world,"[195] and Levinas' entire philosophical project can be viewed as a painstaking effort to demonstrate this with respect to *every* and *any* world (be they linguistic, symbolic, economic, psychological, representational, thematic, political, and on and on).

While this context hopefully gives us the clarity to better approach the meaning and significance of Levinas' project, it does little to quell the fact that Levinas' theorization of everything outside the scope of this narrow relation remains wholly inadequate (though not altogether absent). While I maintain that Levinas' articulation of a singular and unique relation, which operates at a remove from consciousness and representation, is not only theoretically hospitable to political appropriations but, in fact, provides a normative perspective that implores

[195] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p.133. Emphasis added.

us to analyze history, structure and conceive of new forms of collectivity and solidarity, Levinas himself provides us with little more than a vague gesture in such a direction. Thus, even if it is for the wrong reasons, the critics of Levinas are on point in one crucial respect: if the subject to subject relation is left estranged from the world of "totality," *Levinas' overthrow of the liberal subject will no be less partial and incomplete than the previous philosophical revolution*.

Without an analysis of politico-historical structures one can say precious little about what it means for society to consist of an irreducible and infinite plurality of beings. While Levinas is carefully attuned to the importance and necessity of other dimensions of our embodied experience (like our corporeal relationship to "the elemental" and "need"), his gross undertheorization of the social world has led to the *repetition*, rather than the subversion, of liberalisms most pathological tendencies. Namely, the liberal propensity of abstracting subjectivity from the materiality of the situation to which one is wedded—a pathology described so cogently by Levinas in his early essay on "Hitlerism," where he identifies liberalism as a philosophy in which "man is not weighed down by a History in choosing his destiny."[196]

It is at the crossroads of these two incomplete revolutions where we will begin our dialogue. In following the path Levinas has set before us that leads back to Marx, we will attempt to chart an alternative course between them, one that can come closer to the "definitive" break that each of them sought. This requires both a rethinking of subjectivity and a re-imagining of political emancipation. Our task is then to think together these two intertwined yet qualitatively distinct moments of intersubjectivity: the dimension of what Levinas will call "neutral intersubjectivity,"[197] concerned with generic collectivities and socio-historical processes *and* the entanglement with the radical other, a bond which is not only irrespective of

[196] Levinas, "Reflections," p. 66.
[197] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 68.

consciousness but completely indifferent to the social context which mediates—or one could even say *predestines*—their meeting. The relationship between Marx and Levinas can now be addressed through the following two questions: first, why is the disarticulation of these two moments of intersubjectivity important and, second, what is the exact nature of the relationship *between* these two moments after they have been torn asunder? The first question speaks to Levinas' contribution for Marx while the second points to Marx's relevance for Levinas. It is thus through such a dialogue that we hope to provide a trajectory beyond Marx's and Levinas' individual articulations of the relationship between subjectivity, ethics, and politics.

The way I have conceived of this rapprochement between Levinas and Marx it is necessary to wade deeper into the philosophical waters than Marx often cares to go. Marx's relationship with philosophy in general, and German idealism in particular, is no doubt complicated and the subject of much debate. These issues will be explored in the next chapter but we can for the time being state that a *philosophical* conception of subjectivity, history, and society is inextricable from Marx. Like all thinkers, Marx can only make a his contribution by accepting, modifying and criticizing the set of politico-philosophical problems and frameworks that he inherits. I am thus largely in agreement with Rockmore's assessment that "in reacting against Hegel Marx does not 'leave' philosophy but in fact makes a crucial philosophical contribution."[198] Just as Levinas cannot be understood without some reference to Husserl, Heidegger and others, neither can we discuss Marx in abstraction from his philosophical lineage. While Levinas claims that Marx was the "*first*" to challenge the disembodied and atomistic notion of subjectivity, this is not in fact the case. To better understand the nature of this philosophical rupture with liberalism—and Marx's place within it—we will have to go back to

[198] Tom Rockmore, "Is Marx a Fichtean?" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36:1 (2010), p. 93.

Fichte. While Marx surpasses Fichte (not to mention Schelling, Hegel and Feuerbach) in many important respects, his theory of (inter)subjectivity is profoundly indebted to these earlier thinkers, even when Marx is the most critical of them.

The problem of "origins" is certainly a complex one and I readily admit that this prefatory discussion of Marx could have just as easily begun with Rousseau, Herder, or even Epicurus, the subject of Marx's doctoral dissertation. Fichte has been chosen because he opens up a new field of theoretical inquiry, one that will help us isolate and speak to the set of tensions which go on to define the thought of both Marx and Levinas.

Act or Fact?: Negativity, Materiality and intersubjectivity in Fichte

It may seem odd to begin a discussion about embodiment, materialism and intersubjectivity with Fichte. Fichte's response to Kant—which rebukes the thing-in-itself for not being idealist enough—represents for many the pinnacle of subjective idealism. However, as we will see the very nature of the steep ascent toward an all-constituting subject, freed from the fetters of materiality, brings about it own demise. One could say that Fichte not only establishes the philosophical foundation for latter dialecticians like Hegel and Marx but he provides them with a crucial object lesson, one where Fichte's system raises consciousness above material existence to such a degree that it collapses under its own weight and begins, in paradigmatic fashion, to resemble its opposite.

The argument of this chapter rests on two claims. The first is that Fichte's crucial modifications of Kant opens up a novel theoretical space—filled with new potentialities, tensions and pathologies—that will go on to define the continental philosophical tradition. While Fichte did not (and could not) develop all the dimensions and facets of intersubjectivity, he transforms

the philosophical understanding of subjectivity in such a way as to make these later developments possible. As a consequence, Fichte does not just set the stage for Hegel and Marx but already anticipates[199] many of problems and dynamics that go on to define continental thought, be it in the form of Marxism, existentialism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. Contrary to popular opinion (including Levinas' own assessment), Fichte's emphasis on activity, negativity, embodiment, and a *non*-intentional relation to others, makes it first possible (if not necessary) to explore questions of inter-human relationships, history, society, politics, alienation and species being. As Williams suggests, the problematics introduced by Fichte (which are subsequently picked up by Hegel) "begin a massive transformation of philosophy into social and historical modes of thought."[200]

The second claim is that, despite opening up a new horizon of intersubjective inquiry, Fichte is emblematic of Levinas' claims about philosophy maintaining its pathological spin despite its radical shift in orientation. While Fichte opens the up the possibility of, and tacitly relies upon, Levinas' primary insights, he initiates another influential tendency, one that proceeds by obfuscating, subordinating, and in some cases eliminating, this feature of the intersubjective experience. As the "ego" is demonstrated to be a socially mediated phenomenon, the immediacy, individuality and pre-social character of central categories like autonomy and freedom become increasingly untenable. Nevertheless, such concepts retain their fundamental nature and prominence, as something to be achieved *in* and *through* social relations. In a theme

[199] The common sentiment that thinker X "anticipated" thinker Y is somewhat problematic but without an easy solution. As Asher Horowitz once commented in a lecture (in response to such a refrain): "I do not anticipate my children." In such a way I would like to acknowledge that Fichte was, without a doubt, instrumental in changing the philosophical landscape, while, at the same time, avoiding the absurd claim that all such later developments can be explicitly traced back to Fichte. If the history of philosophy has taught us anything it is that few philosophers have actually read Fichte in a serious way, though this trend has certainly abated in recent decades.

[200] Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel On the Other* (New York: State University of New York Press), p. 6.

that will reverberate in the philosophical aether countless times and in countless ways: because subjectivity is transformed into a problem of how one might *cultivate* (rather than immediately possess) freedom and autonomy, the lingering question for Levinas (and, even if it is to a lesser degree, for Marx) to what degree do the "moments" which precede such mastery become interpreted retroactively, from the standpoint of the free subject (or at least the subject desiring to be free). This is no less true of the "social subject" who inherits all the same tensions and problems that plague previous articulations. This begs the proper Levinasian question of whether the adventure of embodiment and intersubjectivity was ever in doubt, or, if the foray into "otherness" was merely a necessary detour on the path to autonomy proper. The possibility of atomism and solipsism are now precluded, to be sure, as we are bound to others and to the world; however we must further understand the precise character of this relation. Our question, as we approach Marx is this: in what ways do the themes of "idealist liberalism" persist as we move from solipsism to recognition or from the immediacy of experience and consciousness to more complex forms of freedom?

Interiority, or, the infinity of the act

Perhaps an unavoidable symptom of breaking significantly new philosophical ground, one of the most interesting aspects of Fichte is that he captures an impressive swath of the philosophical spectrum. At some moments he represents the culmination of subjective idealism, where the object is fully dependent on the subject, while at other moments the materiality of one's situation completely engulfs the subject. Perhaps the best entry point into Fichte's philosophy of subjectivity is his telling modification of Kant's category of "intellectual

intuition." Whereas Kant used the term to signify the finitude of knowledge[201] (the impossibility of knowing the "thing-in-itself"), intellectual intuition plays the exact opposite role in Fichte's philosophy, where it functions as *the* feature that makes all knowledge possible. Fichte applauds Kant's revolutionary move, which broke with the passivity of empiricism by prescribing an active role for the subject, nevertheless, he remains skeptical that Kant's formulation is able to captures the radical kernel of subjective action. As a result, Fichte takes exception to the typical—or what he would call "ordinary" or "unphilosophical"—manner in which self-consciousness is typically portrayed. When speaking about self-consciousness, philosophers (including, for Fichte, the majority of Kantians) posit the "self" as a *pre-existing* object, which lies in wait to be reflected upon by itself. According to Fichte, this kind of "ordinary" thinking imagines that self-consciousness proceeds in the same manner as any other act perception, where the subject observes an external object (like a chair, tree or a sunset). The problem with such a formulation is that, in Fichte's estimation, it reproduces the same dichotomy, where "thinker and the thought are opposed,"[202] that *rightly* exists when I observe a chair (I am not the chair), within self-consciousness itself—a situation where, unlike the chair, the thought of the self *is* the self-proper.

For Fichte self-reflection is philosophically, ethically, and politically important because it is *qualitatively different* from ordinary perception, where we simply perceive independent object. As a good Kantian Fichte readily acknowledges that, even in such "ordinary" observations, perception is always an *act* of perception. However, this Kantian emphasis on the faculties of

[201] For example, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), p. 185. Here Kant clearly distinguishes between sensory intuition, by which we perceive objects, and intellectual intuition, where we directly know the object, a capacity that Kant states can only be ascribed to God.
[202] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Knowledge* ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 37.

apperception does not go far enough in capturing the unique feature of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is the one situation where there can be no separation between the subject and object: the self is both subject and object at the very same moment and thus, strictly speaking, the self does not exist prior to the thought which thinks of itself. The Kantian category of "intellectual intuition" thus cannot apply to the unique phenomena of self-consciousness, that is, the primordial ego can never be a thing-in-itself because it cannot exist (unlike a chair) apart from the *act* of perceiving itself. As Fichte states:

> [I]t is unphilosophical to believe that the I is anything other than its *own deed and product simultaneously*. As soon as we hear of the I as active, we do not hesitate to imagine a substratum that is supposed to contain this activity as bare capacity...The I is not something *that has capacities*, it is not a capacity at all, but rather is *active*; it is what it does, and when it does nothing, it is nothing.[203]

Thus, a description of subjectivity that is able to capture the profundity of the *act* must necessarily disregard the bounds of grammar, where the predicate (action) is necessarily posited as the effect of a pre-existing subject (a point Nietzsche illustrates with the example of lightning, where grammar inherently separates "the lightning from its flash"[204] as if lightning could be a subject independent of this action). Action is not something that subject just happens to do, rather, it is "only through this act that the self originally comes to exist for itself."[205]

This has four interesting implications for Fichte, all of which are particularly germane to our present inquiry. The first is that, because the "I" does not refer to a substance or set of pre-existing faculties, then subjectivity cannot be rendered in terms that would intuit even the slightest hint of passivity. On this point Fichte is unambiguous:

> The intellect…is only active and absolute, never passive; it is not passive because it is postulated to be first and highest, preceded by nothing which could account for a

[203] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right* ed. Frekerick Neuhouser trans. Michael Bauer foundations, (Cambridge university Press, 2000), p. 23.
[204] Fredrich Nietzsche, *The Geneology of Morals* trans. Horace B. Samuel (NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 26.
[205] Fichte, *Science*, p. 34.

> passivity therein. For the same reason, it also has no *being* proper, no subsistence, for this is the result of an interaction and there is nothing either present or assumed with which the intellect could be set to interact. The intellect, for idealism, is an *act*, and absolutely nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something, for this expression refers to something subsistent in which activity inheres.[206]

The problem with "being," as Fichte is acutely aware, is that it is *begins* from a position of passivity; a situation where the I is already bound to a determinate existence. While our conscious experience of everyday life of course begins from such a perspective (where I exist in particular body which exists within a given set of circumstances) this fails to grasp the infinite and irreducible potential operative within self-consciousness. This leads us directly to the second point, that freedom is always *prior*, and in *opposition* to, existence.[207] As Fichte puts it succinctly, for "the idealist, the only positive thing is freedom; existence, for him, is a mere negation of the latter."[208] This means that, for "transcendental idealism" existence is secondary and derivative, only conceivable "through opposition to activity."[209]

This brings us to the third point. While existence is derived from its opposition to freedom, we can, ironically, only become aware of our freedom once it has entered the sensible world. That is, freedom is only observable at the very moment it has been negated. Existence thus represents both the evidence *and* erasure of our freedom. In this opposition of freedom to existence we can observe that Fichte's notion of intellectual intuition does in fact retain *some* residue of the Kantian thing-in-itself, albeit in a new form. Even though the subject coincides with its act, this concurrence cannot be perfectly transparent, and, as a result, there is always something hidden and impenetrable about our self-hood. That is, we can never witness our

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[206] Fichte, *Science*, p. 21

[207] This is also how Fichte is able to reconcile his philosophy of intellectual intuition with Kant's prohibition on immediate apperception. Fichte states that the thing-in-itself is a category that can only be applied to existence and this is, to Kant's detriment, primarily the level of analysis in which Kant participates. Where for Fichte intellectual intuition "refers, not to existence at all, but rather to action, and simply finds no mention in Kant." *Science*, p. 46.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Fichte, *Science*, p. 69.

freedom *immediately* because freedom can only be observed to the degree that it becomes manifested within a finite manifestation. As Fichte explains:

> I cannot become conscious of my own freedom. *For freedom in itself is the ultimate explanatory basis for all consciousness, and thus freedom itself cannot belong to the realm of consciousness.* What I can become conscious of, however, is that I am conscious of no cause for a certain voluntary determination of my empirical I other than my will itself…one might well say that this very lack of any consciousness of a cause is itself a consciousness of freedom - and we wish to call it such here. In this sense then, one can be conscious of one's own free action.[210]

This point is crucial. Freedom is not a property witnessed *within* consciousness but the very frame of consciousness itself. Freedom is thus described as a "fact of consciousness,"[211] and "the most primordial act of the subject,"[212] which conditions and thus *precedes* consciousness. The self is thus always out of phase with, or lagging behind, itself, as it cannot translate—at least *completely*—its subjective essence into objective form.

The first three aspects (the non-substantial ego, that existence is derivative, and pre-conscious nature of freedom) reach their culmination in a fourth dimension of Fichte's thought, which is that philosophy is not just some pedantic exercise but a moral undertaking. If one departs from the standpoint of ordinary thought, which begins with categories like "fact," "being," "substance," "existence," "attributes," and "faculties," they remain, according to Fichte, confined by the shackles of finitude:

> It is therefore not so trivial a matter as it seems to some, whether philosophy starts out from a fact or an Act (that is, from a pure activity which presupposes no object, but itself produces it, and in which the acting, therefore, immediately becomes the *deed*). If it proceeds from the fact, it places itself in the world of existence and finitude, and will find it difficult to discover a road from thence to the infinite and supersensible; if it sets out from Act, its stands precisely at the point joining the two worlds, from whence they

[210] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation," in *Philosophy of German Idealism Fichte, Jacobi and Schelling*, trans. Daniel Breazeale. ed. Ernst Behler. (New York: Continuum, 1987), p.14. My italics
[211] Ibid., p. 36.
[212] Ibid., p. 37.

can be surveyed with a single glance.[213]

Such a perspective lacks any normative ground from which to make or evaluate between competing judgements. This is why, in his estimation, pseudo-Kantians, who ignore the primordial *activity* that underlies the faculties of apperception, have not the resources to explain or expound upon the moral categories. For this reason Fichte mocks the Kantians who begin with "fact," stating that their concept of "right would have to turn out square, say, and their virtue circular."[214]

Here we are finally able to see the full force of intellectual intuition in the Fichtean sense. In a sentiment which will become the *modus operandi* of subsequent existentialist thought, Fichte readily accepts that existence can only exist to the degree that it is determinate, nevertheless, if we begin from "fact" the subject will become an object so weighed down by inertia of its circumstance that it will fail to realize its latent potentiality. To forget the constitutive moment of subjectivity is to be chained to finitude: where the "I" is defined by arbitrary, yet static, social categories (where the "who" is always reduced to a "what"), where the individual will never signify to more than a collection of assorted labels (like "worker," "student," "mother"), and where thought is unable to transcend the terms of stale dogma (where systems and concepts can never express the meaning they have *for me).* In such a situation the ontological weight of the totality of relations which define us effectively extinguish the spark of freedom that lies dormant within each thought. Mired in the muck of finitude, Fichte—to foreshadow Marx—worries that thoughts begin to think the subject rather than the obverse.

If we begin from *act*, on the other hand, the future will become a realm of infinite

[213] Fichte, *Science*, p. 42.
[214] Ibid., p. 42.

possibility. As Fichte states, if I have regard not for the thought or object but for "myself," I will no longer be "restricted" by existence but will be able to "hold myself freely in this sphere."[215] In true philosophical self-reflection the I is able to "catch oneself in the act,"[216] that is think itself *with itself*, and thus determine its existence in accordance with its infinitude. The unity of the thinking act with the thought creates the possibility of a truly self-determined subject, a situation where the "I" is both the act and the limitation of the act—simultaneously infinite and determinate. This self-objectification enables the subject to transcend the "thing-ness" of its being and the rigidity of thought. This is why Fichte proclaims that philosophy (including his own) must be an *activity,* something lived for oneself, not just a set of concepts to be memorized and recited.

Negativity as a Bridge to the External World in General

Thus far it might be difficult to argue that Fichte's emphasis on the non-substantial ego is sufficient to support the claim made by Wood that Fichte is the **"**earliest decisively anti-Cartesian in the continental tradition,"[217] let alone Rockmore's assertion that Fichte philosophy provides us with "the origin of Marx's conception of human being."[218] Indeed, most caricatures end here, with the conclusion that Fichte's radicalization of Kant would seem to necessitate a diminished, rather than prominent, role for the external world. The question facing Fichte is the same one we will put to Levinas, after bracketing out the realm of phenomenal experience, does "being" remain an undifferentiated mass on the hither side of subjectivity, to be defined negatively, as

[215] Fichte, *Science*, p. 66.
[216] Fichte, *Foundations*, p. 23.
[217] Allen W. Wood, "Fichte's Intersubjective I," in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 49:1 (2006), p. 63
[218] Rockmore, *Marx*, p. 103.

little more than the evidence that subjectivity has been effaced?

While it is no doubt true that this modification does indeed exalt the subject beyond the bounds that Kant would allow, it ironically demands that Fichte take materiality more seriously. The Kantian subject was able to maintain a largely monological relationship to the objective world because of the radical bifurcation between the noumenal and phenomenal realms. Here the subject cannot grasp the object in its entirety but in no way is this limitation depicted by Kant as *frustration;* the subject simply takes what it can (by giving the world space, time etc.) and cares little about what is left untouched by perception (the realm where Kant famously leaves "room for faith"). The Fichtean subject is afforded no such luxury. The insistence on grounding perception in the *infinitely* free act, which *could* be limitless if it were not for the obstinacy of existence, implores Fichte to interrogate both sides of this relationship. The paradox of Fichte's idealism is that its exaggerated posture opens up the possibility of a dialectical relationship between the subject and object, or, subjectivity and the material world.

Defining the self as a free *act* means that selfhood and existence are, for Fichte, primordially coupled. The goal for Fichte is to discover self-consciousness proper, but this necessarily means that, because the self only exists to the degree that it acts, it must find itself *within* its activity. As he writes,

> In order to find itself it would have to find *itself* as only self-active; otherwise, it would not find *itself* and, since it does not find anything at all unless it exists, and does not exist unless it finds itself, it follows that it would not find anything at all. In order to find itself as an *object* (of its reflection), it would have to find itself, not as *determining* itself to be self-active…but rather as determined to be self-active by means of an external check (Anstoß) which must nevertheless leave the subject in full possession of its freedom to be self-determining: for otherwise, the first point would be lost, and the subject would not find itself as an I.[219]

[219] Fichte, *Foundations* p. 32.

Self-consciousness is accordingly not predicated upon a theoretical "efficacy in general" or a "possible efficacy,"[220] but a concrete practical relationship to the external world. As a result, to "find oneself" essentially means to *create* oneself, that is, to objectify freedom in such a way that the ego can identify itself within its objective manifestation. This means that activity already implies an "external check," or "something in opposition to that efficacy."[221] The act and the negation of the act (or the I and the not-I) are thus two sides of the same coin of subjectivity—even if Fichte will never relinquish the priority of act over fact, they are, to quote Gottlieb, "co-emergent or co-constituted."[222]

This point is crucial, we are not dealing here with the typical kind of platonic, religious or Rationalist dualism, where a pure substance (be it the "Forms," "God," or "Reason") becomes sullied as it enters the realm of existence. Freedom and existence are now dialectically related in the sense that freedom can only exist in the very moment that it has been negated (even if this negation is only partial). To put it in theological terms, God does not precede the creation of the world, rather, the creation of the world is, at the same time, the creation of God. Thus, Fichte can maintain that "being" is "utterly opposed to the self" while at the same time conferring it with the status of "an external prime mover." This is because without exteriority the self "would never have acted" and, Fichte concludes, "since it's existence consists solely in acting, it would never have existed either."[223] As a result *materiality of the subject*, which is immediately apparent in every desire, will and intuition, does not "precede nor follow the I," for Fichte but, on the contrary, these features "are themselves the I."[224]

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[220] Ibid., p. 30.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Gabriel Gottlieb, "Fichte's Deduction of the External World," in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55:2 (2015), p. 231.
[223] Fichte, *Science*, p. 246.
[224] Fichte, *Foundations*, p. 22.

Here, as we interrogate the relationship between freedom, activity and intersubjectivity, we must pause and appreciate the way in which Fichte has heightened the philosophical stakes. Fichte's construal of freedom, which eradicates any notion of a substantial subject, has effectively taken the philosophical spectrum, represented by activity on one side and passivity on the other, and folded it in half. There is no longer any moderate or nuanced position: Fichte has limited himself to a conceptual vocabulary that can only describe subjectivity in terms of absolute self-constitution or else a kind of radical passivity, where exteriority does not merely leave its imprint (again, because there is no substratum to be imprinted upon) but, on the contrary, calls the subject into being. This self-imposed limitation is perhaps best represented in Fichte's account of sensibility which is blanched of all sense of receptivity, where sensation is reduced a feeling of mere *resistance* as the subject attempts (in vain) to annihilate the object (and even this slowing down of subjective momentum, though still not passive, connotes a sense of weakness for Fichte).

The second of these options, where passivity which is not merely tolerated by the subject but constitutive of subjectivity as such, represents a significant theoretical possibility. Such a possibility is already evident in the *Science of Knowledge* where Fichte discusses the constituting role of the *Anstoß.* In line with our inquiry about the importance of philosophical "depth," it is telling that every interpreter or translator of Fichte is seemingly obliged to address the difficulty of defining, let alone translating, this conception of an external force that is constitutive of the subject. Does it mean "check," "limit," "negate," "constrain" or is it closer to "impetus," "push," or "impulse"? Though it is often implied or tacitly understood (though rarely directly confronted) is that, just as we saw with respect to the terms "hostage" and "hospitality" in Levinas, at this level of pre-subjective abstraction, the distinction between being "pushed" or "checked" by the

exterior world is rather meaningless. If there is no subject to speak of, being pushed and being obstructed are functionally the same thing in that both imply a relationship with the material world that engenders the self-proper. Thus the trouble defining *Anstoß* (and its related concepts) is not merely a linguistic problem but a philosophical problem of the highest order: how exactly do we conceive of the relationship between consciousness and materiality, both analytically and normatively.

For his part Fichte goes so far as to label the *Anstoß* the "first mover," because without desires, goals, objects, and ideas, the ego has no impetus to action. It would thus to be a misunderstanding to think of the *Anstoß* as only, or even primarily, an object (or not-I) that resist the will. The *Anstoß* is merely the brick wall that my fist cannot penetrate but already the fist and body that enclose the ego, the desire to break through, and so forth, because these are determinate instantiations of infinite freedom. This is important because the self-conscious individual does not experience all limitations *as* limitation; without this primordial limitation—where the pre-subjective act becomes fused with the *Anstoß*—self-consciousness would never arise at all. Freedom does not first *exist* and then, subsequent to its existence, become constrained. This gesture towards materiality and embodiment raises, for Fichte, the same challenges previously noted with respect to Levinas and Heidegger, namely a situation where a relationship with the exteriority is not a contingent event that befalls the subject but the very event of subjectivity as such. Thus negativity is not only something experienced by the subject as it reaches a limit or obstacle, but a phenomenon always already implicated in its experience of self-consciousness (which is to say the experience of experiencing anything at all). In fact, this is the very origin of the problem for Fichte, the subject is so embedded within its lifeworld that it becomes all too easy to forget the miracle of freedom which lies dormant within every self-

consciousness—evidenced by those who blindly follow their instincts, desires and social norms. Though he takes a circuitous route (to say the least), Fichte does certainly arrive at theory of subjectivity that emphasizes the materiality of one's situation.

Non-intentionality and the summons: Fichte's Levinasian moment

This dynamic becomes extremely important as Fichte moves from an analysis of the material world in general to the specific relationship between humans. It is especially when discussing the other, the most unique species of "not-I," that Fichte's radicalization of idealism opens the door to a new understanding of intersubjectivity. This development, however, is anything but linear or even. With one foot in monological idealism and one foot in an emerging form of materialism, Fichte is able to make significant headway but often in the clumsiest of fashions. As some possibilities are pursued, ignored or foreclosed, Fichte overcomes some of his most stark idealist tendencies, while others are simply re-introduced at a higher pitch.

The *Anstoß* continues to be a central theme in many of Fichte' subsequent works as he continues to investigate the depths of the relationship between the self and the external world. Fichte's discussion from the *Foundations of Natural Right* is of particular relevance to our present inquiry. As before, Fichte emphasizes the role of practical activity while, at the same time, doubting whether freedom left to itself can account for its own origins. This is because activity (or at least the kind that expresses the impulse of freedom) presupposes that the ego already understands that objects are "infinitely alterable" according to their "will," which, in turn, assumes a theoretical conception of the world, including not only the distinction between those things that are free to shape existence and those things which are not, but also an awareness of the various ways in which said transformations could take form. As Fichte states, the I "cannot

posit itself as having an effect on a particular object without all the while representing that particular object."[225] If one is to create, alter and represent the external world in a complex way one must necessarily possess a sufficient *concept* of freedom. Fichte is thus concerned, as Gottlieb nicely summarizes, with "practical *and* cognitive relationship to the external world," which means that freedom is "not simply as the ability to move around without interference but also as the freedom to make objective judgments…to have a cognitive relationship to the world."[226]

The full image of freedom cannot be deduced from the ego alone, it must, according to Fichte, be first observed outside the subject. Fichte thus concludes that an always prior encounter with another free being must be contained within the individual act, be it representation, thought or activity. This encounter with the other (already sketched out in the *Science of Knowledge*[227]) is described as a "bare *summons* [*Aufforderung*] calling upon the subject to act." As Fichte continues: "Thus as surely as the subject comprehends the object, so too does it possess the concept of its own freedom and self-activity, and indeed as a concept given to it *from the outside*."[228] Fichte's philosophy, as Williams put it, confronts us "with the following paradox: *autonomous* self-consciousness is not a given; it is a mediated result of interpersonal interaction."[229] Fichte has here opened up a different *kind* of relationship to the other, one that does not occur at the level of consciousness, intentionality or representation.

This non-intentional relationship with others is presupposed in thinking, knowledge,

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[225] Fichte, *Foundations*, p. 28

[226] Gottlieb, *Deduction*, p. 229. Gottlieb also makes an excellent case for why a relationship with the material world—an element typically absent in most accounts of Fichte's concept of intersubjectivity—is imperative to understanding Fichte's deduction of the interhuman relation.

[227] As Fichte states, "the consciousness of individuality is necessarily accompanied by another consciousness, that of a Thou, and is possible only on this condition." Fichte, *Science*, p. 49.

[228] Fichte, *Foundations*, p. 32. Emphasis added.

[229] Williams, *Recognition*, p. 57.

intelligibility, in sum, in how the ego experiences both itself and the external world. This relation is, by definition, non-intentional[230] because self-consciousness (that which is presupposed in intention) is *not the author* of this relationship, but the result. At times Fichte apprehends this point with great clarity. The inter-human relation, described as a "summons," has a noticeably different tone than Fichte's other discussion of the "not-I." Like the *Anstoß* this entanglement is described as prior to the thinking subject, however, it exhibits a more nuanced logic from that of simple negation. Concerning the non-human external world Fichte expectedly claims that free activity "aims at nullifying…objects," which gives the object a certain independence from the subject, but only in a negative sense, as that which "curbs," "checks," and "limits" free activity.[231] One might thus expect Fichte to describe the other as unique, but only insofar as it proves to be the most exceptional form of primordial resistance. Instead Fichte claims that it would be a "genuine contradiction," to believe that freedom could mediate this relationship because, at this level, freedom can only appear as something that "ought to exist in the future" but not "in the present."[232] Though freedom is the ontological ground zero for Fichte, this is the one place where he ponders the possibility of a hiatus, a place where freedom is secondary because the aim to "nullify" would already presupposes this prior relation. Freedom is to be found in self-consciousness, of that there is no doubt, and yet, as Fichte puts it in the *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy*, "[c]onsciousness begins with consciousness of a summons."[233] While some have posited a sharp divide between pre- and post- Husserlian

[230] I prefer the term "non-intentional" rather than the more frequently used "pre-intentional" because the latter reinforces the normative assumption that this relationship should be analyzed from the stand point of consciousness. This is the pervasive presupposition that we are attempting to challenge or at least suspend.
[231] Ibid., p 20.
[232] Fichte, *Foundations*, p. 45
[233] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 370.

philosophies of intersubjectivity,[234] it is this common feature, it would appear, that provides the basis for all intersubjective inquiry. Simply put, our relationship with others is not *only* something we intend (though it can certainly be that) because this very intention, like every intension, speaks to an always prior entanglement with others.

In the concept of the "summons," Fichte, however briefly, provides a conceptual opening capable of grasping the intersubjective relation in a way that does not merely consider the other from the standpoint of consciousness, and it is this precise inclination towards non-subordination that Levinas will later seize upon.[235] While Fichte has been justifiably credited with setting the groundwork for the intersubjective articulations of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Sartre, and even Lacan,[236] his "mirror theory" of intersubjectivity—where the self becomes self-conscious only through seeing its reflection in the face of the other—this aspect of the inter-human relation has a decidedly different feel in Fichte, at least in these moments, than it does in these later articulations. The non-substantial subject gives Fichte occasion to consider that ways in which the image of freedom is gifted by the other, rather than simply reflected or won through an antagonistic struggle. As a result, despite their obvious similarities, Sartre's emphasis on the conflictual nature of this encounter, where the "I" becomes fixed by the objectifying gaze of the other, is (at least at this primordial level) unimaginable.[237] While Sartre similarly begins from the

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[234] Steven Viatkus, *How is Society Possible* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 2.

[235] This point is noted by Williams (*Recognition*, p. 67), though, as it will become clear at the conclusion of this chapter, I take issue with Williams' general interpretation of Levinas, which follows many of the tropes I examined in the first two chapters.

[236] The degree to which Lacan belongs with Hegel et al is a matter of some debate. See, for example, Richard A. Lynch's "The Alienating Mirror: Toward a Hegelian Critique of Lacan on Ego-Formation," in *Human Studie*s 31:2 (June 2008), pp. 209-221. While I agree with much of Lynch's analysis (that Lacan is too often focused on internal division and self-representation rather than a intersubjective relation) it must also be stated, as many others have noted, that even Lacan's early formulations of the mirror theory were strongly influenced by Kojeve's lectures on Hegel and in Lacan's later formulations this influence was represented much more closely.

[237] For an excellent analysis of this point with respect to Levinas (rather than Fichte), see Steven Crowell, "Why is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context," in *European Journal of Philosophy* 23:3 (2012), 564–588. Crowell effectively argues that Sartre tacitly assumes this Levinasian dimension, where the self is already

standpoint of an infinite "nothingness," this (pre-)subjective realm already includes (at least in *Being and Nothingness*) access to the very faculties of self-consciousness that Fichte deduces as possible only out of this very interaction. Thus Sartre's pseudo-Levinasian claim that "I am possessed by the Other," is described as a theft, even if it is acknowledged to be a necessary moment of self-consciousness. Thus intersubjectivity is constantly posed as a retroactive challenge to regain what has been lost. "I should be obliged," as Sartre puts it, "to recover and found in order to be the foundation of myself. But this is conceivable only if I assimilate the Other's freedom. Thus my project of recovering myself is fundamentally a project of absorbing the Other."[238] At this point Sartre is careful to note, echoing Hegel (and to a degree Fichte), that, for the sake of my freedom, I must leave the "Other's nature intact," but, the point I wish to underscore is Fichte's departure from this model insofar as he acknowledges that there is no original crime because there is no freedom to speak of (at least in any substantial sense) prior to this interaction. Because this relation is not preceded by a mediating third term (such as freedom, cognition, or representation) intersubjectivity is conceived of (at least at this point) as an openness to others rather than a site of primordial contestation.

This lengthy analysis of Fichte thus serves a dual purpose. Not only can it help us better understand what is at stake in theories of intersubjectivity (what possibilities are opened up, and, of those possibilities which are developed, which are ignored, and which are foreclosed) but it can also help us clarify many of the interpretive issues raised in the first two chapters with respect to Levinas' supposed "hyperbolic" and "masochistic" language. Much like Levinas Fichte runs up against the inherent limitations of concepts like activity, negativity, representation,

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a response to the normativity of the other, but finds creative ways of masking such an insight in order to preserve the primordial antagonistic structure of intersubjectivity.

[238] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* ed. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 475.

self-consciousness and freedom. As a result, the translation of *Auffordung* (summons) is seemingly even more puzzling for interpreters than the *Anstoß.* While *Anstoß* already contained a sense of priority ("first mover") this primacy was more formal, as a necessary moment in the self-discovery of freedom as an embodied phenomenon. The *Auffordung*, or summons, goes beyond this sense of freedom expressed through limitation, as it represents the relation to the other as something closer to an exogenous moment of rupture—out of which freedom emerges as a possibility to be seized. Accordingly, the linguistic and philosophical limitations (both of which are predicated on the dominion of the subject) reproduce the same tension where interpreters quibble about whether the "summons" should be translated as "coercion," "request," "beg," "demand," "require," or "invitation."[239] Regardless of what term we choose, the crucial, and once again under-appreciated, point is that Fichte is describing a relationship apart from our gnoseological experience of others (where others are perceived in so far as they register as a set of facts within consciousness).

For this reason, Fichte's analysis of subjectivity can clarify the important connection that Levinas establishes between the singularity, normativity, and asymmetry—links that appears to be arbitrary, dogmatic and austere to the point of absurdity, once these concepts are taken as moral imperatives that merely describe how an already for-itself subject should perceive, or act toward, the other. Fichte, prior to making any prescriptive claims, is attempting to establish the complexity and depth of what it means to be a self-conscious being. Self-consciousness, it turns

[239] See, for example see Wood, *Fichte's Intersubjective I*, p. 73 and Williams, *Recognition*, p. 67-9. Williams, in my estimation, has a better grasp of the philosophical consequences of the issue while Wood tries to reconcile the difference by positing the summons as a balance between something we can and should do, a decision which mirrors our discussion of the ambiguity of Levinas' "responsibility." To be fair to Wood, he is, in many ways, faithfully reproducing the tension that remains unresolved for Fichte himself. While I have major issues with Williams' interpretation of Levinas, his comparison on this point with Fichte allows him to get closer to the heart of the issue, though he also struggles, like Levinas' commentators, with what terms like "demand" mean if they are taken in a pre-subjective sense.

out, entails many things. Not only does it require an understanding of what it means to be a free, active, and practical being but it also requires an awareness of how these capacities are already a testimony to our profound sociality. On this point Levinas and Fichte seem to converge: this emphasis on sociality invariably bring forth questions relating to the history and structure of various forms of life and thought (which we will momentarily get to), however, these concerns are grounded in, and thus cannot annul, the singularity and uniqueness of this entanglement with others. For Levinas this "responsibility" designates an orientation (and not a decision) which is antecedent to "freedom" and "representation," which is why it expresses "a passivity more passive than all passivity" or an "exposure of exposedness."[240] For Levinas subjectivity is ultimately an expression of heteronomy rather than the capacity that *can* open itself to an-other.

The other is singular not because they are (contrary to some Levinasian commentators) designated by me as special, infinitely complex or unique. Rather, they are singular because they are not *only* experienced as a representation which means they do not *immediately* come under a collective banner. Of course all the caveats to the term "experience" and "immediately" must be applied as they designate a form of experience which is prior to consciousness and thus in our everyday experience of others they must, by the very nature of consciousness, appear under a theme, representation, symbol and collectivity. However, at the same time Fichte and Levinas will insist that this does not therefore mean that these can function as mediatory categories which could accept, rebuff, or soften this dimension (though this dimension is also always already entangled with an ontological dimension which often rejects, excludes and subordinates the other, a point which we will increasingly address). As Levinas puts it: "[i]n approaching the other I am always late for the meeting. But this singular obedience to the order to go, without

[240] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 15.

understanding the order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to commitment, is precisely the other in the same…"[241] This dimension of the encounter persists whether the other is a stranger or "an old friend, an old lover, long caught up in the fabric of my social relations." In either case they will, in-spite of everything, "[assign] me before I designate [them] as a τόδε τι ['a this']."[242]

What Fichte helps illustrate is that the profundity of this commitment to others is not predicated upon religious, abstract or even idealist principles (again, I would argue that this represents Fichte's most important break with Kantian idealism). Rather, this relation speaks to the materiality and embodiment of subjectivity; an "inevitable orientation of being,"[243] where, as Fichte states, "*we are both bound and obligated to each other by our very existence*."[244] A sentiment Levinas will repeat in his simple formulation: "To be unable to shirk: this is the I."[245] The subordination of freedom and representation is thus not a search for an abstract ethical or religious "first principle" which would carry us *away* from the world, but an attempt to arrest the power and immediacy of self-consciousness in order to acquire a more profound understanding of what it means to be an embodied and intersubjective being. Of course self-consciousness, even in its most intimate and immediate expression, is already bound to the universal, as Fichte, (and to an even greater extent) Hegel, are well aware. But this insight is not by itself capable of revealing the structure of being-for-the-other, where the other is "the first one on the scene" who "orders me before being recognized,"[246] not because they are morally superior but because they

[241] Ibid., p. 150.
[242] Ibid., p. 86.
[243] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 215.
[244] *Foundations of Natural Right*, p. 45. Emphasis added
[245] Levins, *Totality*, p. 245.
[246] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 87.

are "more objective than objectivity"[247] or, similarly, "the evidence that makes evidence possible."[248] That is, the other will signify a content which is irrespective to the signs and symbols it inevitably carries with it, and thus exhibit a normativity around which subjectivity coils.

Neither first an obstacle nor a collective (though the other certainly can *appear* as both of these things) the radically singular other is what calls subjectivity proper into being. Fichte's *act* is, in context of the summons, not so much *act* as it is a response. As Williams describes, in strikingly Levinasian terms, for Fichte "freedom arises out of the claims of the other upon me."[249] Perhaps analogous to the way the an object in orbit will, through the consistency and symmetry of its circular path, create the illusion of independence and self-propulsion, masking the fact that it is an object in a state of perpetual fall around another body, self-consciousness, despite its sovereign appearance, is already structured as a response (or, responsibility, as Levinas puts it). In Fichte's terms, "I must be given to myself as free – as strange as that may seem at first blush."[250]

This movement is especially interesting in Fichte because the normativity of the other is derived from its potential to invert the relationship of freedom over exteriority, a priority which Fichte intended to establish. This inversion, which Levinas regularly labels "asymmetry," or the "curvature of intersubjective space," is once again captured by Williams:

> Fichte is not arguing that since I am free there must be others, for that would only establish *the other as a condition of possibility*. Instead Fichte argues the opposite: Because another has summoned me, I become explicitly conscious of my freedom and responsibility. In the *Aufforderung,* the other as the occasion for evocation of my

[247] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 26.
[248] Levinas, Totality, p. 204.
[249] Williams, *Recognition*, p. 58.
[250] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The System of Ethics According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 208.

> consciousness of freedom, has priority over my own activity. This priority of the other limits and inverts the transcendental primacy of subjectivity over being…Consequently, *Aufforderung* is not simply a transcendental condition a priori, but a fact, a given…it refers to the prior action of the other.[251]

Thus, the other is normative not because it tells the ego *what* it should do or *how* it should act. The other is normative because its very signification (prior or beneath intelligibility) makes possible a theoretical understanding of the self, the world, and the relation between the self and the world. While this address does not have the same appearance of solidity and permanence as the hermeneutical structures and the historical relations in which it takes place, *it is the meaning of subjectivity in the most concrete terms*.

Given Zizek's critique of Levinas' phenomenology (which is over and above his disdain for his "ethics") it is interesting that his "materialist" reading of Fichte highlights the very Levinasian dimension he elsewhere purports to disavow. Translating Fichte into Lacanese, Zizek implies that it is only through this traumatic encounter, where the ego is confronted with a "shock" of pure exteriority, that the subject is gifted its freedom. In Zizek's words,

> this 'shock' *has* to arise 'out of nowhere' because of the subject's radical finitude - it stands for the intervention of the radical Outside which, as such, by definition cannot be deduced...At this point, finitude (being constrained by the Other) and freedom are no longer opposed, since it is only through the shocking encounter of the obstacle that I becomes free.[252]

In this reading Zizek appears to understand quite well that a decontexutalized other that arises "out of nowhere" or from "the radical Outside," is not in fact the work of liberal moralistic phenomenological fantasy but rather points towards the asymmetry of intersubjectivity.

The alignment of Fichte and Levinas—in which the other implies a passivity "more passive still than any receptivity, in which for philosophers the supreme model of the passivity of

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[251] Williams, *Recognition*, p. 60. Emphasis added.

[252] Slavoj Zizek, "Fichte's Laughter," in *Mythology, Madness and Laughter* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 157.

the subject resides"[253]—illuminates the strange paradox of Fichte's idealism. Fichte begins a process that seeks to expunge all determinations and limitations from the subject, however, in doing so Fichte began to contemplate the kind of radical passivity alluded to by Levinas. While the *act* was invoked to establish the supremacy of the subject, by unfettering it of the weight of existence it effectively exposed the subject to a kind of vulnerability altogether different than receptivity traditionally understood. However, the Manichean character of Fichte's philosophy—where the subject is either absolute or it is called into being—also makes the looming revenge of the *act* that much more of a perilous prospect.

The retroactive subject and the journey to subjectivity write large

The summons is, however, only *one,* very *specific,* dimension of our overall social experience. As both Fichte and Levinas will readily acknowledge, this entanglement not only occurs within, but creates, a socio-historical world. Levinas, standing on the shoulders of Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and many more, largely takes these other regions of "being" for granted (and is thus largely content to illuminate what they obscure). Fichte, on the contrary, forges ahead to work through the socio-political implications, tensions and contradictions that inevitably arise. Above all Fichte's intersubjectivity complicates his earlier claim about the moral significance of true self-consciousness (or "philosophical thinking"). Here Fichte described freedom as the ability of the self to think itself *with* itself (or, as Hegel would put it, in and for itself), and thus truly determine itself by achieving a harmony between its subjective (the thinker) and objective (the thought) dimensions. Now that we understand the relationship between the self, others and the world, it turns out that this task is more difficult than we might

[253] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 48.

have initially anticipated. The "objective side" of self-consciousness can no longer be limited to the *thought of the self* because the "thought" of myself already includes my practical engagement with the world, which, in turn, relies upon my relation to others. As a result, Fichte's injunction to seize the infinity of the act by thinking *with* oneself necessarily means to think with oneself *with others*. We can now confirm Wood and Rockmore's earlier claim about Fichte because, here, self-consciousness—and the freedom discovered therein—no longer exists in a closed Cartesian loop, where the mind discovers itself through a strictly internal process. For those that follow in Fichte's footsteps, from Marx onwards, freedom is about the perpetual *re-collection* of oneself with others *in* and *through* the world.

This point is crucial because it marks the precise point where Fichte and Levinas will diverge. To be clear, this divergence is not so much the result of Levinas charting an alternative path through the socio-political world, rather, it results from the fact that Levinas stops at the point where Fichte is just beginning to gain momentum. This topic, as it pertains to Levinas, will be raised in the next chapter in much more detail but it is important to note that, much like Fichte, Levinas realizes that the primordial inter-human relation must manifest itself within a word, theme, context, work or other material phenomena. Much like Fichte's "act," this moment of actualization is rendered by Levinas as both "inevitable" and a "betrayal;" a necessary tribute which will invariably obfuscate the moment from which it lives, where the other is "for me." While Levinas does hint at the possibility that such a betrayal could be "reduced,"[254] such a possibility is rarely pursued. This, all too often, leaves one with the sense that the relationship between "responsibility" and "politics" remains circumscribed within a paradox, where human existence is defined by a kind of generic alienation that is inevitable and unavoidable (which

[254] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 7.

leads to the critiques discussed in the first chapter, which links the fear that all forms of representation are already totalitarian to the ineffectual politics of defeatism).

Fichte, by contrast, begins to increasingly focus on the other side of this equation. Here he becomes consumed by the way words, representations and political institutions actually change the way humans relate both to themselves and to each other. For the ego does not *only* relate to the other in the Levinasian pre-conscious singular way but also at the level of generality, where, through its interactions humanity constitutes itself as a "species." As Fichte writes, notably a half-century before Marx's famous articulation of "species being":

> The human being (like all finite beings in general) becomes a human being only among human beings; and since the human being can be nothing other than a human being and would not exist at all if it were not this…Thus the concept of the human being is not the concept of an individual—for an individual human being is unthinkable—but rather the concept of a species.[255]

This move is crucial for our discussion of Marx because Fichte's primary point is not merely representational (that I understand myself as a species) but *developmental*. Namely, that autonomy, individually or the form of consciousness itself is a product of a socio-historic development. Fichte thus describes how the perfectibility of the "species" does not originate in human "nature" but is rather the product of human (inter)actions: we must make ourselves what we want to become through education and "labor."[256] This transformation of intersubjectivity from a "theoretical problem" into "a problem of actions" is, according to Williams, "Fichte's most original contribution," because it demonstrates how consciousness is "embedded in various modes of social praxis, not all of which are transparently rational."[257] For all of Fichte's

[255] Fichte, Foundations of Natural Right, p. 37-8.
[256] Ibid., p. 132.
[257] Williams, *Recognition*, p. 62.

disparaging talk of finitude, norms, conformity, titles and labels, it turns out that freedom requires a particular set of socio-historic conditions.

Perspective is, however, everything. On the one hand, we can affirm the way in which Fichte goes beyond Levinas in thinking through the practical and political implications of human sociality. On the other hand, we must ask if Fichte sufficiently seizes the Levinasian moment, so as to lead to a radically different understanding of what it means to be a social being, or, alternatively, does this moment of heteronomy invite autonomy the same way an open wound begs for a suture? Put differently, is this dramatic expansion of the subjective field—where subjectivity is an expression of openness to others and to the world—viewed retroactively, that is, already from the stand point of its inevitable point of closure? On these questions, as one might by now expect, the results are mixed and uneven.

There are indeed times where Fichte expresses a yearning to accomplish, in social and political terms, something close to what Levinas describes at the level of subjectivity. This is evident in Fichte's discussion of the importance of education in creating "*a community among free beings as such,*"[258] which is opposed to society that would "employ rational beings as means for their own ends."[259] This utopic sentiment is encapsulated in his vision of establishing a political community free from cohesion, where, he concludes in similar terms to Marx, "the goal of all government is to make government superfluous."[260] However, modern society is, for Fichte, a great distance from these lofty aspirations. Once again anticipating Marx, Fichte describes society in an alienated state, where the social bond is experienced as in a perverted form, as pure instrumentality. As he writes,

[258] Fichte, *Foundations*, p. 10.
[259] Fichte, *Scholar's*, p. 17.
[260] Fichte, *Scholar's*, p. 14.

> We desired a member of society, and we produce a *tool* of society. We desired a *free fellow-worker* on our great project, and we produce a *coerced*, *passive instrument* of the same. Thus, as far as we were able, we have killed the man within the person we have treated in this manner; we have wronged him, and we have wronged society.[261]

In such declarations it is clear that Fichte has not only transcended individualistic conceptions of freedom (where others are a mere obstacle frustrating my trajectory or desire) but the more intersubjective variants, where the "I" has no choice but to engage with others and society at large if it is to recollect itself and actualize the freedom latent within self-consciousness. Here Fichte indicates a fundamentally different orientation, where one is already concerned for others in a way that does not circle back to the domain of egoism, where the detour into the social represents more than the expansion of subjective powers.

However—and it is a big however—as prominent, important and influential as these threads may be, they are too often mired in a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy which maintains the strict priority of the former in spite of the necessity of the latter. Fichte must abandon the possibility of a simple or immediate unity, to be sure, but throughout his philosophy there remains a longing to recover what was lost. As such, subjectivity is not defined by the ontological giveness of freedom, autonomy or self-coincidence but by the ability to *create* such a unity through mastery. Regardless at which level, be it the individual, collective, ethical or the political (all of which must converge on some level), the challenge of subjectivity-as-intersubjectivity is to corral the disparate circumstances, forces and drives into a coherent, and thus free, Subject.

The goal of self-coincidence runs throughout Fichte's analysis—from Jena to Berlin—as his object of inquiry increasingly shifts from individual consciousness to culture, politics and economics. At the level of the individual, Fichte describes the "drive" for "self-determination"

[261] Fichte, *Scholar's*, p. 27.

which is not given to me by "nature" (because this would imply a reliance on something external to my choice) but a drive that I "posit…as my own."[262] This autonomous drive "when apprehended in its totality" imparts us with the imperative that, "I am supposed to be a self-sufficient I; this is my final end. I am supposed to use things in any way that will increase this self-sufficiency; that is their final end."[263] As Kelly notes in his seminal work on Fichte's politics, the "[n]on-ego exists only for consciousness and for freedom…nature cannot be absolutely sloughed off, but it ought to be absolutely mastered."[264] The mastery of everything outside of the ego has obvious and important implications for the domination of non-human aspects of nature, while some have also enlisted Levinas to engage with such concerns[265] we will (with some trepidation, given the present state of things) bracket out ecological considerations in order to focus on the inter-human relation.

The self-gifted imperative to become "self-sufficient" is at obvious odds with Fichte's previously discussed "summons," which expressed subjectivity as a movement of one-for-the-other. Fichte grapples with this apparent contradiction throughout his work. Ever fearful of giving the final word to the other, Fichte will typically, and often contradictory, reassert the primacy of primordial autonomy. For example, in *The Foundations of Natural Right*, after describing the absolute necessity of the (prior and exterior) other, Fichte immediately counters this point by stating that "if there is such a summons, then the rational being must necessarily

[262] Fichte, *System of Ethics*, p. 203.
[263] Ibid., p. 201.
[264] George Armstrong Kelly, *Idealism, Politics and History* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press), p. 209.
[265] See for example: *Facing Nature: Lévinas and Environmental Thought,* ed. by William Edelglass, James Hatley, and Christian Diehm (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2012). Levinas' emphasis on "the elemental" and "there is" also represent a major source of inspiration for the "object oriented ontology" school of philosophy. See, Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Graham Harman, "Levinas and the Triple Critique of Heidegger" in *Philosophy Today* Winter (2009): 407-13.

posit a rational being outside itself as the cause of the summons, and thus it must posit a rational being outside itself in general."[266] In an effort to save the appearances, Fichte claims that "the summons" is simultaneously triggered through an act of cognition. This important modification effectively frees the subject from the grasp of the other, effectively making the response to the other conditional. Though the entanglement with the other was previously considered the ground of consciousness as such, Fichte now blurs the depth of human relations, referring to the "summons" at the level of the already self-conscious (and thus free) being, who can now "just as well refrain"[267] from the call of the other. Robert Williams sums up this point nicely as he expounds on the inescapable contradiction at the heart of Fichte's intersubjectivity: "The other who summons me is a phenomenon; however transcendentally-practically considered, I summon myself. The intersubjective significance of the summons seems to be subordinate to the requirement of autonomy...The phenomenal 'other' appears superfluous."[268] As a result "The other, who by summoning me, co-determines my determinability, is ultimately subordinate to or excluded by the requirement of strict autonomy, to wit, that all limitation and determination must be self-limitation."[269] In this vain the summons is reduced to a subjective echo, an exterior call that originated within the self. Such is a superlative example of what Levinas describes as the reduction of the other to the same by the imposition of a third term that mediates the summons.

The problem here is not mediation as such. Mediation is key to understanding Levinas' view of subjectivity, where the self is mediated through without collapsing the distinction between the two. However, Levinas' fear is that the radical nature of this entanglement is

[266] Fichte, *Natural Right,* p. 37.
[267] Ibid., p. 33.
[268] Robert R. Williams, "Life-World, Philosophy and the Other: Husserl and Fichte," in *Fichte and the Phenomenological tradition* ed. Violetta L. Maria Waibel, J. Daniel Breazeale, Tom Rockmore (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2010), p. 165.
[269] Ibid., p. 166.

obscured by reducing the other to a secondary, even contingent, aspect. By establishing the authority of a "third term," which *precedes* the for-the-other, regardless of whatever journey the subject may embark upon, it is always accompanied with a *metaphysical passport*, or a primordial justification for their trajectory. This is as true, as Levinas points out, for individualistic theories (where the other is posited as obstacle) as it is for intersubjective ones (where the other is the positive condition of my freedom). While the third term ensures the comprehension of being—where the other is intelligible insofar as they appear as a series of intersecting designations (friend, immigrant, old, educated, woman, baseball fan) which are inevitably bound up with my projects (where they are either useful or an obstacle) or the aspirations for how one should comport themselves in the world more generally—it cannot be mistaken for the primary movement of intersubjectivity.

The force and priority of the "third term" becomes all the more apparent in Fichte as he moves from the intimacy of consciousness and experience to the plane of society, culture and politics. Within this shift the category of the "summons" begins to take on a different connotation. Instead of describing a non-intentional, pre-conscious, social relation subtracted from the social particulars, the "summons" is now associated with general processes of socialization, such as education, culture and "upbringing."[270] While many commentators make little of this progression, this slippage does not in fact represent a seamless continuity. Instead of indicating a primordial openess towards the other individuals are now "summoned" by a community towards a particular socio-political end. Once again, this shift is not in itself a problem. In fact, the insight that even the most intimate relations between people take place against a larger historical background is crucial to understanding subjectivity in a substantial

[270] Fichte, *Natural Right*, p. 38.

sense (which is why we cannot leave these aspects unthought as Levinas so often does). However, what Levinas can help us perceive is the ways in which this shift in *analysis*—from subjectivity, individuality, experience to intersubjectivity, history and structure—has often been accompanied by a corresponding *normative* shift which merely reproduces the problems which were thought to be overcome.

In the case of Fichte, we can witness how the conditionality of the summons (already instituted at the level of the individual) is repeated at a higher pitch as freedom and reason become embodied within language, culture, and political institutions. Accordingly, Fichte increasing draw sharper distinctions between those groups of people who embody "freedom" and the principles "transcendental philosophy" and those that do not. Thus the distinctions drawn between "humanity in general" and "a limited political community," already espoused in his earliest works, become a theoretical touchstone for the mature Fichte, who, to quote Kelly, "'nationalizes' his vision of the community, only to insist on its cosmic relevance the more demandingly."[271] While Fichte does flirt with the notion of a pre-human savage (which he posits as necessary for dialectical reasons, that we cannot know ourselves as cultivated without positing a savage "other") it is crucial to note that these fissures between humans are not typically conceived of as irremovable or eternal. Instead such demarcations are invoked to highlight the distance humanity has to go, and the obstacles it has to overcome, if the human race will ever be unified under the collective banner of freedom. Fichte is thus in a bind: at the most basic ontological level, humans are essentially equal in terms of their *capacity* to be free, and yet, only certain individuals and societies have actualized or refined this capacity. As a result, in order to actualize a the future harmonious society, Fichte demands the cultivation of the "merely sensual

[271] Kelly, p. 253.

civilizations." Thus the proto-existentialist philosopher, who previously chided those who renounce their freedom by blindly accepting the dogma of convention famously, comes to the startling conclusion that: "It is the vocation of our race to unite itself into one single body, all the parts of which shall be thoroughly known to each other, and all possessed of a similar culture."[272]

There is thus some truth to the often invoked Fichtean formula that "I=I" provided that we accept that an awful lot happens in the "=" that separates the two terms. The ego, in which "nothing alien is imported,"[273] must recollect itself through a dialectic of fragmentation and appropriation, where the subject transcends itself through action and labor, slowly ossifying into a community and then a nation which, like the first embryo of freedom, is constituted as a whole. This journey thus concludes with a nation that is "without admixture of and corruption by some alien element that does not belong to the totality of this legislation."[274] Given that Levinas' primary interlocutor was Heidegger, it is especially fitting that language is considered by Fichte to be the key conduit in the transformation of the subject to the Subject. Almost a hundred and forty years before Heidegger proclaimed that "language is the house of being," Fichte wrote that "men are formed by language far more than language is by men."[275] Language is key, according to Fichte, because it is the congealment of a historical relationship between a people, land, culture, philosophy and politics. While language is used in an everyday manner to describe our immediate perception of the world, beneath the surface it contains philosophical worldview, or, as Fichte puts it, it directs us beyond the "sensuous" to a "supersensuous" realm of ideas.[276] These supersensuous ideas emanate out of the concrete experience of a community and therefore

[272] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Vocation of Man," in Popular Works: The Nature of the Scholar, the Vocation of Man, the Doctrine of Religion (London: Trubner & Co, 1873) p. 334.
[273] Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, p. 240.
[274] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Address to the German Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 104.
[275] Ibid., p. 49.
[276] Ibid., p. 37;43.

each "nation" exists within their own semantic horizon. As a result, problems inevitable arise if a nation is forced to adopt a foreign language (through conquest or cultural assimilation) because the newly imported symbolic universe will not match the experience of the community. For this reason, Fichte claims that, because all other languages have been severed from their roots, German is the sole remaining "living" language. It is not so much that Fichte thinks that freedom and reason only speaks one tongue, rather he offers a kind of procedural explanation for the superiority of German, namely that it developed "without interruption"[277] and thus it has been able to better preserve the philosophical principles of autonomy, reason and freedom. Put another way, because German is the linguistic product of the autonomous social and political development, it is intuitively equipped to speak the philosophy of freedom because it is already thoroughly steeped in its historical becoming. In Fichte's words:

> The first difference between the fate of the Germans and that of the other tribes produced from the same stock to present itself directly to our notice is this: the former remained in the original homelands of the ancestral race, whereas the latter migrated to other territories; the former retained and developed the original language of the ancestral race, whereas the latter adopted a foreign language and gradually modified it after their own fashion. [278]

The term "foreign" is pejorative for Fichte but not because represents something essentially different in kind or from an inferior "stock." Rather, it simply indicates that a given community has been cut off from its origins and, as a result, has become philosophically stunted. Dead languages, such as Latin (one of Fichte's favourite targets) do not connect experience to the supersensuous world of ideas and thus they become fixed, dogmatic and stale, or, in Fichte's terms, an "incoherent collection of arbitrary and utterly inexplicable signs of equally arbitrary concepts."[279] Somewhat paradoxically, it is because Germany is so firmly rooted in a place,

[277] Ibid., p. 49.
[278] Ibid., p. 48.
[279] Ibid., p. 57.

tradition and history, that it is uniquely suited to appreciate the dynamism of freedom and potency of life.

This distinction between living and dead languages has massive political import. The language of the German people "summarises at every step the totality of the sensuous and spiritual life of the nation as it is embedded in language in perfect unity, in order to designate a concept that is likewise not arbitrary but necessarily goes forth from the entire previous life of the nation."[280] German is much more than a language, it is a philosophical, cultural and political orientation, it is *the* historical manifestation of freedom. It is on these grounds that Fichte insists that the experience of subjectivity finds its highest possible expression in the "Fatherland." As such, Fichte demands that, above one's concern for "internal peace, property, personal freedom, life and the well-being of all" or "civic love for the constitution and laws," one be consumed by the "blazing flame of the higher love of fatherland that embraces the nation as the vesture of the eternal, for which the noble man joyfully sacrifices himself and the ignoble, who exists only for the sake of the former, should likewise sacrifice himself."[281] Germany is not, however, just one fatherland among many. Though Fichte is at pains to demonstrate the necessary connection between concrete experience, ideas, language, and unimpaired development of a given community, the development of the German people has universal implications. As a consequence of speaking and thinking in the sole remaining living language, the German people possess, both intuitively and explicitly, a superior understanding of freedom. They are thus uniquely tasked with ushering in a new era of universal freedom.

> Those who believe in spirituality and in the freedom of this spirituality, who desire the eternal progress of this spirituality through freedom–wherever they were born and which- ever language they speak–are of our race, they belong to us and they will join with us. Those who believe in stagnation, retrogression and circularity, or who even set

[280] Ibid., p. 57.
[281] Ibid., p. 107.

> a dead nature at the helm of world government – wherever they were born and whichever language they speak–are un-German and strangers to us, and the sooner they completely sever their ties with us the better. [282]

Not unlike Adam Smith's entrepreneur or Marx's proletariat, who can pursue their particular aims while remaining confident that they are serving the universal good (which is not, in and of itself a condemnation), the German alone is capable of being a true "patriot" because in serving their nation they "work for humanity as well."[283]

Without minimizing the immense differences between them, Fichte's view on the essential connection between language, history, embodied practices, cultural development, politics and the grounding of subjectivity make him a suitable proxy for Levinas' primary adversary, Heidegger (or, at the very least, Heidegger as interpreted by Levinas). Unlike other forms of nationalism, Fichte's jingoistic impulses are not rooted in biology, religion, ethnicity or even culture as such. Though Fichte's emphasis on origins and unbroken development might be *slightly* more mystical than Heidegger's articulation of "being," what they share is a normative emphasis on the ground, site, home, or horizon from which subjectivity emanates. This is not to be confused with simple conservatism; both maintain that such a grounding is essential in order to transcend uncritical traditions, petrified dogmas, and "idle talk," to use a lower stakes example from Heidegger. Freedom is not, then, a matter of arbitrary or spontaneous action, but demands that one takes hold of their life by mastering their circumstances. However, because the self is profoundly intersubjective, such a fate is only conceivable if one is fully immersed within a lifeworld that already points them in that direction. In this sense the German is already

[282] Ibid., p. 97.
[283] Johann Gotlieb Fichte, "Patriotic Dialogues," as quoted in Kelly, p. 259.

swimming downstream. The Fatherland thus represents the only freedom worth its name—a striving which can only take place against a solid ground. Such can never be the fate of orphans.

Such is readily apparent in Fichte's denigration of the "neo-Latin" nations,[284] those veritable orphans who cling to stale dogma the way shipwrecked survivors grasp onto wreckage just to stay afloat. Such sentiments are repeated in Heidegger as he pathologizes orientations that he perceives to be "rootless," "homeless," "groundless," or "worldless." While these terms are typically applied to the instrumentality and calculating logic of technology and, occasionally, liberalism (both of which blanche the richness of "being"), it must be noted that he mobilizes these same concepts to rehash the trope of the "Wandering Jew." Such is the case in his *Black Notebooks*, where Heidegger insinuates that the "groundlessness" state of Judaism, which is "not…bound to anything," explains their fickle nature, which "avails itself of everything," before claiming that is only through their "tenacious facility in calculating, manipulating, and interfering" that "the worldlessness of Judaism receives its ground."[285]

Towards a Rootlessness of Subjectivity: A Hiatus between the Particular and the Universal

This relationship between subjectivity and "ground" affords us the opportunity to further clarify the confusion surrounding the crucial import of Levinas' work, specifically, how the scope and depth of Levinas' analysis relate to ethical and political questions. It is, here, helpful to distinguish between two overlapping concerns that are inevitably invoked by any theory of intersubjectivity. The first concern relates to the scope of inquiry. On this point, Fichte's analysis, which stresses the activity, materiality and sociality of consciousness, reveals the

[284] Fichte, *Address*, p. 57-8.
[285] Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings VII-XI: Black Notebooks 1938-1939* Trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), p.76.

necessity of examining selfhood and the inter-human relation (narrowly defined) in a way carefully attuned to the various ways in which these activities and relations are organized within a particular mode of life, composed of structures, norms, fields and institutions that already push individuals down particular paths to predetermined ends. Regarding this aspect I have attempted to demonstrate that Levinas is not only open to, but, presupposes this very dimension of intersubjectivity (even if he does little to explicate it). Moreover, my enthusiastic support for such a perspective is the basis for this entire study. In sum, the import of Levinas' critique of "totality" must be located somewhere other than here, the scope of inquiry, which we have hopefully established as an *analytical* necessity.

This brings us to the second, closely related, concern. Now that we have our component parts—self, other, society—how are these elements configured together, or, from what perspective are they these elements articulated into a theory of subjectivity? On this question I have attempted to demonstrate that Levinas is particularly useful in both raising and addressing one specific dimension of this concern, which often remains implicit, overlooked and inadequately theorized. The Levinasian question, therefore, has nothing to do with whether or not the other is "always already" part of society (the central issue pinpointed by Levinas' politically minded interpreters)—this is beyond a doubt. What remains in doubt, is the status of the other within the trajectory and orientation of this movement. This claim has one crucial caveat, this is not to assert the untenable claim that "others" are unimportant, or do not figure prominently in philosophy. Even the most myopic forms of liberal individualism or vulgar structuralism will frequently discuss and valorize "others." Indeed, the category "recognition," which spans the sacred continental/analytical divide, is almost unavoidable in contemporary

theory. So the first thing we must note is that the movement of egoism discussed here is not the same as solipsism and, incidentally, has nothing to do with recognition.

The proper Levinasian question is: how is the other situated with respect to the relation between self and society? As Fichte illustrates, even if one accepts these parameters regarding the analytical scope (which effectively eliminates the possibility of expressing subjectivity as an unfettered freedom primordially encumbered by others and society), one could, at a deeper level, still conceive of subjectivity as, for example, a private recollection of the self admits the social world, or, a far more circuitous return-to-self which privileges the expansive socio-cultural horizons, or, alternatively, as a break from the movement of egoism, represented as an orientation already to-the-other. Our thesis is that the last of these options, which posits subjectivity as a perpetual hiatus within the return-to-self, can begin to account for, and even provide a image of, a *normative orientation* that, out of its responsibility for others, concerns itself with expansive socio-historic horizons, even if it is not itself—again, in the most primordial sense—rooted in them.

This runs contrary to the dominant thread of philosophy, where the drama of intersubjectivity plays out as a tension between the self and society. When "others" are assigned a role in this drama, they are typically already viewed from the perspective of the recollected subject, already mediated through the universal. Even when prominently addressed, others appear as a secondary or contingent feature, often portrayed as co-inhabitants of a substantial lifeworld. Others are certainly important (for a variety of moral and descriptive reasons) but they are apprehended all the same within the movement of egoism (or "the same"), which extends on an axis from particular to universal. As witnessed with Fichte, it is in fact, this tension garnered from the oscillation between particular and universal (or self and society) that typically propels a

given thinker forward. Once again Heidegger is an exemplar in this respect. The Heideggerian subject, deeply embedded within the social, is conveyed in terms of individual mastery, occasionally rebellion, and, at the other end of the spectrum, a more conservative being at home with oneself within a collective tradition—a sentiment which, in its most pathological form, leads to the total surrender of individuality, as is readily apparent in his infamous speech to his students: "Let not theories and 'ideas' be the rules of your being. The Führer himself and he alone is German reality and its law, today and for the future." Though it varies in degree and emphasis, this same oscillation between the particular and universal is also evident in Nietzsche (who unabashedly conceives of subjectivity as a project of self-creation[286] all the while acknowledging the role of destiny and history[287]), Sartre (where it is distilled within his concept of the "singular universal," which bends to the universal end of spectrum with his claim that the "militant" is able to overcome bourgeois subjectivity by becoming self-identical through their dedication to "the Party"[288]) and countless other philosophers, from Arendt and Foucault to Zizek and Badiou. While I would argue (perhaps against Levinas[289]) that such conceptions of the socially mediated subject have, historically, presented *many* opportunities to understand

[286] For example, where Nietzsche states: "*become who we are* - human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 336

[287] An interesting example is from *Ecce Homo*, where Nietzsche assumes a reflective, almost Hegelian tone: "My task, to prepare mankind for a moment of the highest self-contemplation, a great noontide when it looks back and forward, when it emerges from the domain of chance and priest and poses the question of why?, what for? For the first time as a whole." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (New York: Algora Publishing), p. 65.

[288] "…rather than taking your ego from you, the Party gives it to you. I state this without irony: it is definitely pleasing to discover oneself in the fraternal look of others…In him, the Party changes itself into him and into all others. As a creature of the Party, he will encounter the Party wherever he goes. The Party will be a necessary mediator between him and his closest friends…He is explained by his class and his historical circumstances: he views his inner self as he is viewed from the outside: no secret compartments and no double boom." Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Portrait of the Adventurer" in *We Have Only This life to Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Satre 1939- 1975* ed. Ronald Aronson and Adrian Van Den Hoven (New York: NYRB, 2013), p. 199

[289] This point is somewhat ambiguous in Levinas, as he will often make hyperbolic claims that reduce the entirety of philosophy to an "ontology," while, at other times, pointing to ways in which certain thinkers (such as Descartes and even Plato) have already indicated a path beyond.

subjectivity in terms that approximate Levinas' position (as we already indicated with Fichte and will continue to do so with Hegel and Marx), however, I do support his general critique that such moments are rarely adequately seized and represent fleeting moments too often overwhelmed by the tendency to subordinate the other to the, seemingly *primary*, relation between the self and society. As we have continued to note, along this journey, from self to society and back again, the other retains a primordial justification for itself in the face of the other, which is, in turn, comprehended on the basis of a mediating third term. In Levinas' words: "Like a shunt every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face. When taken to be like a genus that unites like individuals the essence of society is lost sight of."[290]

Language, meaning and the interlocutor

We can now return to the relationship between subjectivity and "ground." Just as Fichte's earlier convergence with Levinas, on the asymmetrical relation between other and self, helped us clarify important aspects of Levinas' deworlded other (unique, singular, etc.), so too does his marked divergence from Levinas help elucidate why this moment is so important. In response to claims (be they Fichte, Heidegger, or other) that subjectivity is a movement emanating from a primordial ground Levinas will respond by describing selfhood as a movement initiated by an moment of exogenous rupture. Subjectivity is thus defined by its rootlessness, which is always leaping outside and ahead of itself. Depth is here *crucial* because Levinas' first claim is not, contrary to the dominant interpretation, that Heidegger's social ontology is more or less accurate, and, as an moral corrective we must be careful to ensure that the subsumed other is removed from epistemological horizons so as to be liberated. Rather, Levinas' most fundamental claim is

[290] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 213.

that *the ground is not actually a ground*, at least not in the way Heidegger (and, by proxy, Fichte) thinks it is.

This point can be illustrated most effectively in Levinas' ruminations on language. Taken apart from the philosophical context he is responding to, Levinas' discussion of language often appears to be another exercise in deconstruction, where Levinas is seeking to destabilize meaning by pointing out the infinite regress or aporia operative within thematization (for example, how one might be tempted to read: "saying saying saying itself, without thematizing it…"[291]). But Levinas' concern with language is much different than, say, Derrida's, who, more or less works from within a Heideggerian perspective, even if he seeks to problematize it. Levinas is not concerned at all with the interplay of terms within a referential system but, rather, is attempting to demonstrate how the tension between subject and the ground map out onto the realm of language. Here language is theorized as a creative mode of individual expression which always already participates in a pre-established symbolic universe (of shared words, meanings, concepts, idioms, etc.), which is itself (as many gloss over) forged by a long history of historical and material processes. Language thus represents yet another example of the self-mediated through the universal.

Without denying the importance of either spontaneous expression or the fixity of the socio-historical universe, it is incumbent on Levinas to highlight a third, equally fundamental, dimension of speech. To paint a picture of language as *only* a subject immersed within a lifeworld, playfully navigating the rules of grammar, syntax, and semiotics, as if it were strolling through a lush orchard deciding what fruit to pick, is to once again cast aside the interlocutor as a contingent or accidental feature. This gives the impression that the for-the-other dimension of

[291] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 143.

signification is simply added on to language—which is already, in-itself, as as a pre-existing assemblage of codes and symbols—the way one would add and "address" to a package "one puts in the mailbox."[292] As Levinas would have it, language does not begin with "conatus and interest," nor should not be seen as "word-play" or a "game." Rather, it begins with a "saying" that is "[a]ntecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification."[293] In communication, therefore, there is always a "surplus of signification over representation,"[294] as language is the expression of for-another rather than a grounding within the ego (who decides to speak) or hermeneutical horizon (where language speaks the subject).

Levinas' primary point is that there is a meaning to language that cannot be grasped within the symbolic universe of language, or "the said," even if language requires such a manifestation. In this distinction between symbolic and pre-symbolic Levinas is not referring to the Lacanian constitutive exception that structures "the Real," but the very concrete way language expresses a certain intention of intersubjectivity prior to the specific content it inevitably confers. While the fullness of language is only intelligible if one understands the horizon of signification (context, syntax, grammar, etc.), in order to retain this generic structure, it has to be spoken to a some-one. The solidity and permanence of the symbolic universe would thus be very much cast in doubt for the solitary individual.

This existential structure of signification is expressed well in various images of the post-apocalyptic world. To walk in an abandoned city is to discover a world devoid of meaning; the

[292] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 207.
[293] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 5.
[294] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 206.

red octagon, the flashing lights, the various pictures, letters, and numbers would lose their universal character and be only "for me." In such a circumstance one could surely flatter themselves and raise their ego to the stature of the god-like figure aimed at in extreme variants of existentialism and libertarianism. Free from the objectifying gaze of the other and the limitations of social convention, one could surely fashion themselves as the creator of a new symbolic universe. As the lone arbiter of meaning they could set about the task of creating new forms of grammar, syntax and define objects according to their unencumbered subjective whim. Of course, without an interlocutor, such a world would remain meaningless, not just technically, but *existentially*. It would be devoid of the essential element of meaning, which is, the expression of signification as already for an-other. As Fichte discovered as he penetrated the abode of self-consciousness, it is only because subjectivity begins from the outside that it is able to move inward.

It is in this sense that Levinas states that, while language is indeed a *particular* expression of the *universal*, this movement is predicated upon an always *prior* leaping outside of itself and outside of context. This "prior" meaning of language—which is irreducible and, in a sense, external to the signification language acquires within a given context—does not of course designate a temporal priority. There is no disputing the prevalent view that the world is already flooded with meaning, constituted by an interlocking web of discourses, projects, socio-economic relations and symbolic fields. The meaning and concepts used to communicate, as Heidegger was fond of demonstrating, are already inscribed into our perception of the world: the escalator beckons us "to go up," the baseball bat "to swing," the subway "to go to work," the dollar bill "to spend," the illegal immigrant "to either exploit or deport," the cross "to kneel" and the national anthem "to stand up." Nevertheless, to *ground* subjectivity in *meaning over*

presentation, is to miss the very intention of language, and thus reduce it to a tool, a curriculum, basis of a community, or, in its most extreme form, the congealment of Reason. The leap into the unknown, what constitutes the "pre-ontological weight"[295] of language, is not an afterthought; a "world" in the Heideggerian sense, is only a world insofar as it is a world offered.

Crucial here is that in this formulation Levinas is not excluding or diminishing the. To the contrary, he is stating that Heidegger misapprehends its significance. By attempt to establish subjectivity qua language within "the foundation of the site,"[296] he has inverted the relation between subjectivity and the world made common:

> 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, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common. [297]

What is clear from this passage is that such an emphasis on the concrete *act* of presentation must not be confused with the decontextualized view of language as "a transcendental consciousness constituting objects," it is simply to not lose sight of the fact that, prior to interpretation (and all that it entails) language signifies "society and obligation."[298] As a result, "[l]anguage, far from presupposing universality and generality, first makes them possible. Language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality."[299]

This discussion of Fichte and Heidegger can also help us with the issue raised in the last chapter about how one should read Levinas' recurrent references, in *Totality and Infinity*, to "the poor," "the stranger," "the widow," "the orphan," and "proletariat." While there is no doubt, at

[295] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 43.
[296] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 77.
[297] Ibid., p. 76.
[298] Levinas., *Totality*, p. 206-7.
[299] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 73.

some level, Levinas is speaking to a concrete responsibility to those in need (which requires all the full spectrum of powers present within self-consciousness), however, over and above this, they are philosophically important because they are an expression of uprootedness, groundlessness, and homeless, all of which provide, for Levinas, a corrective metaphor to the coiling of the ego within a home, a site, the familiar, or the Fatherland. As Levinas put it, to be amidst other is to be "'concrete abstraction' torn up from the world, from horizons and conditions, incrusted in the signification without a context of the-one-for-the-other, coming from the emptiness of space, from space signifying emptiness, from the desert and desolate space, as uninhabitable as geometrical homogeneity."[300] Once again "emptiness" and "signification without a context" is invoked, not in order to abstract the individual from history and society, but to "confirms it" by demonstrating how "the relation that binds this multiplicity does not fill the abyss of separation."[301] Conceived of in this way, universality, represents something much more profound than bloated egoism or expanded particularity.

Intersubjectivity from Fichte to Marx

Fichte allows us to fully appreciate the odd nature of embedded subjectivity, where consciousness is both the *expression* of a relationship with the world and the *presentation* of this expression. In the first moment of this double movement, consciousness is grounded in, and is a manifestation of, our profound embodiment: the sensations we feel, our relations to other people, the objects we perceive, the symbols, themes and representations which form our ideas, and a whole host of other social, economic and political relations which simultaneously engender and circumscribe the experience of selfhood. In the second movement, the congealment of the "I"

[300] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 91.
[301] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 295.

occurs as this "input" it is interpreted and presented as "for me": where the collection of skin, hair, organs and limbs become "my body"; raw sensory datum becomes "cold," "hungry," "desire," or "danger"; the place in which I dwell becomes "my perspective"; the assemblage of words become "my thoughts"; the human in the corner office becomes "my boss," the intersection of market forces with opportunity becomes "my job"; the facts and theories about evolution and revolution become part of "my understanding" about who I am and how I came to be here. As Hegel so eloquently put it, The I is "at one with itself and all at home in itself… the crucible and the fire which consumes the loose plurality of sense and reduces it to unity."[302]

In navigating this double movement, Fichte delivers a prototypical example of Levinas' "reduction of the other to the same," while, at the same time, indicating the possibility of an escape. The simple "for me" structure of naive consciousness is endlessly complicated, negated and criticized as Fichte analyzes the historical social, linguistic and political dimensions of subjectivity. The viewpoint where the other is apprehended as simply "form me," is thus suspended, opening the door to an understanding of subjectivity attuned to the importance of sociality, activity, labor, language, culture, education, history and politics. However briefly, in these moments Fichte is able to think the importance of the totality of human relations, without reducing the significance of others to that very totality. Fichte not only approaches Levinas' conception of subjectivity as one-for-the-other but succeeds precisely where Levinas stumbles, in utilizing his understanding of intersubjectivity to criticize the politics of his day while re-imagining alternative possibilities.

However, despite these important advances and significant transformations the "for me" structure persists in Fichte, as the moments previously liberated are retroactively grasped from

[302] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of The Philosophical Sciences* Trans by William Wallace (Published by the Marxists Internet Archive 2009), p. 200.

the standpoint of their future development. As is evident from Fichte's ambiguity, oscillation and uncertainty, this new orientation can take on many forms, ranging from a re-invented individualism—where the challenge of subjectivity is to master its circumstances and forge itself itself into a unity—to the disposition, displayed unapologetically in Fichte's later years, where the free subject is little more than a medium, channeling the spirit of a nation on the way to cosmic unity. In either case the subject retains a metaphysical passport that justifies its trajectory in the face of the other. The other is given a prominent role in this drama but consumed by the "crucible and fire" all the same.

It is important to note the trajectory of Fichte's articulation of intersubjectivity while at the same time avoiding any dogmatic or pseudo-idealist claims about the necessity of such a progression. Just as Levinas was responding to a particular historical moment, Fichte's philosophy is a product of, and a response to, the problems, events and relations of his time. It is, for example, noteworthy that Fichte's variant of nationalism was anything but an expression of Germany strength. The infamous address was an attempt to rouse the political spirt of the people in the devastating wake of the Napoleonic wars. Nevertheless, his concrete circumstances notwithstanding, Fichte's journey from the eidetics of consciousness to a political theory of human emancipation not only demonstrates the necessity of a theory of intersubjectivity but foreshadows the normative complexities and tensions that accompany such an analytical shift.

It would be impossible to chart, at least in any meaningful way, the development of Fiche's insights on embodiment, negativity and intersubjectivity as they are reformulated, modified and critiqued by numerous thinkers en route to Marx. If space permitted we could refer to Schelling's philosophy of nature, which emphasizes subjectivity as the striving against a

"ground" which "precedes consciousness" and occurs "outside of time."[303] If we were to do so it would also be illustrative to once again highlight Zizek's appropriation of Schelling (where he admires the way "the subject predestines himself – produces the 'cipher of his destiny', as Lacan would have put it – when, in an extra-temporal eternally past, always-already-accomplished unconscious free act, he chooses the eternal character of his temporal existence"[304]) or, similarly, the terms in which Heidegger expresses his affirmation (namely that Schelling gets to the essence of freedom, where "[t]rue freedom in the sense of the most primordial self-determination is found only where a choice is no longer possible and no longer necessary"[305]) to further demonstrate how this oscillation between individuality, freedom and agency on the one hand, and society, necessity and structure, echoes through the annals of philosophy. We would also be remiss if we left out Feuerbach's important writings on sensuousness, passivity and the relationship between the "I and thou," so instrumental for Buber's later formulation, which itself had an enormous influence on Levinas (even if he believed Buber was similarly unable to fully break from the pull of ontology). These threads, however important, must remain loose ends.

This being the case, it would be imprudent to progress to Marx without at least a passing reference to Hegel. Not only is Hegel important to understand Marx, but crucial to understand the contemporary philosophical landscape. The only thing more consistent than the declarations espousing the death of Hegel's totalizing philosophy are the efforts to resurrect him. His elaboration of concepts like negativity, dialectics, recognition, identity, intersubjectivity, struggle, revolution, history, and dynamism have his continued relevance for critical theory,

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[303] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 52.
[304] Slavoj Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 18.
[305] Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (Athens: Ohio State University Press,1985), p. 154.

Marxism, historical materialism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, theories of decolonization, and even analytical philosophy. It is thus no surprise that Hegel's name is still invoked, more than any other, in reference to Marx, who (depending on who you ask) either absorbed, too much, too little, or just the proper amount from his master. While a proper analysis of Hegel is here impossible (let alone a survey of the modern interpretations and applications of Hegel) it may be fruitful to pose a few potential Hegelian objections to the dynamic laid out above in order to further clarify the theoretical terrain before we turn to Marx.

We can begin with Williams's analysis of the transition from Fichte to Hegel, which outlines the general tension between Levinas and Hegel. Williams' makes two interrelated points that are important for our understanding of Levinas' place within the intersubjective tradition. The first is the suspicion that Levinas represent a return to dogmatic first principles, the very thing Hegel sought to overcome in his critique of Kant, Fichte, and most of all, Jacobi. The second point is that, by demonstrating the contributions and insufficiencies of these thinkers, Hegel has already incorporated Levinas' concerns into his system while going far beyond them. These two points are summed up in the following claim:

> I argue that Levinas' critique of ontology is already present in Hegel's critique of classical metaphysics, and that the position Levinas urges against Hegel in Totality and Infinity is in fact Hegel's own. The latter does not reduce the other to the same, but rather grants otherness its due and allows the other to be.[306]

While Williams' analysis of the transition from Fichte to Hegel is overall extremely insightful, he relies on a misreading of Levinas (similar to the one we have traced in the first two chapters) which not only enables him to proclaim the superfluousness of Levinas and but also allows him side-step (if not reproduce) the crucial problematic highlighted above.

[306] Williams, *Recognition*, p. 16.

To examine why this is the case, we can begin with Hegel's general critique that, despite all of Fichte's advances over Kant, he remains trapped in his trademark dualism. Thus while Fichte conceives of the relationship subject and object in a reciprocal and dynastic fashion, this dialectic is inchoate because it is unable to find a proper resolution. While Hegel's appetite for unity has drawn the ire of many, Williams astutely points out that Hegel's concern for Fichte's unresolved dialectic is rooted in the political desire to *avoid* tyranny. On Hegel's reading, Fichte dialectic represents a "bad infinite," because the striving ego, if it is to fully know itself, perpetually requires a new limit (or "not-I") that must stand in opposition to the ego.[307] The ego can thus never be reconciled with its other because this antagonism represents the very constitution of the ego's freedom. Fichte is thus, according to Hegel, caught in a contradiction: on the one hand, freedom is socially mediated and thus requires mutual recognition, but, on the other hand, the relationship to others is still expressed as a limitation on freedom. Without the possibility of reconciliation, even though the I requires the other (or non-I) to become self-conscious, each must stand opposed to the other. This dualism is politically relevant for Hegel, as Williams describes, because it creates an intersubjective concept of freedom that *requires* "domination, mastery and servitude."[308] If self-consciousness requires that one dominate and one be dominated, it is easy to see why Fichte's theory of recognition represents for Hegel an "internalized conflict of lordship and bondage."[309] Because others are both necessary for freedom and, at the same time, a limitation of freedom, Fichte can only overcome the heteronomy of intersubjectivity by forcing a unity by means of political coercion and tyranny. It is thus, Williams repeatedly claims, for the sake of equality and mutual respect—rather than

[307] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Vol III Medieval and Modern Philosophy* (Berkley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press 1990), p. 236.
[308] Williams, *Recognition*, p. 82.
[309] Ibid., p. 83.

sacrificing individuality at the altar of the Absolute—that Hegel adopts and reformulates Fichte's conception of recognition to entertain the possibility of a higher unity. For this reason, Hegel's advance on Fichte, Williams claims, is rather obvious: since Hegel better understands the depth of intersubjectivity, the ways in which community is the "enhancement and concrete actualization of freedom,"[310] he is better situated to conceive of an "I that is a we and a we that is an I."

Before looking deeper into Williams' interpretation of Hegel, we must flag a few problems with this reading. The first is that both Hegel and Williams *overplay* the degree to which Fichte perceives of others as a "limitation." As demonstrated earlier, though it often expressed in terms that are highly contradictory, Fichte is consistent that others, in particular, and communities, in general, are the *positive* condition of the ego's freedom—far beyond the sense of a necessary limitation. More importantly, while this simplification of Fichte makes for an easier narrative (that Fichte is forced by the contradictions of his system to opt for tyranny) it allows both Hegel and Williams to *ignore the potential tensions that arise as Fichte increasingly adopts the exact theoretical position that they are advocating*. Some of Fichte's most troubling tendencies occur precisely where he has most convincingly abandoned the notion that community is negation of freedom. Instead of grappling with this tension Williams' uses Fichte as a theoretical scapegoat as a way to avoid such a confrontation. Ignoring the degree to which Fichte's pathological tendencies are carried over into his theory of intersubjectivity, Williams repeatedly argues that such problems can be easily traced back to Fichte's inability to *fully* commit to the sociality of the subject.

[310] Ibid., p.149.

It is thus interesting that Williams, following Hegel, dismisses Fichte's most obvious break with the logic of other-as-limitation, the "summons," writing it off as just another variation on the *Anstoß.* Williams critique of the "summons" is somewhat surprising given the above concern with other-as-limitation. Williams does not, as one might expect, argue that, with respect to the summons, Fichte's ego is still *choosing* to limit itself for the freedom of the other (and thus that the summons might represents a moral injunction which approximates the "harm principle"), which is altogether different from the view that the freedom of the other enhances my freedom. Williams surprisingly argues the opposite, that Fichte is too radical in his assertion that the ego requires a summons to become free. By depriving the ego of any recourse, the self is *too* dependent on the other, and thus Fichte simply inverts the previous asymmetry of the *Anstoß* where the ego dominated the other—in the summons the other dominates the ego. Whatever its gesture towards intersubjectivity, the summons is, as Williams puts it bluntly, "the language of alienation and Kantian *Moralität.*"[311] In either case, the *Anstoß* or the summons, the possibility of a proper resolution to this antagonism is foreclosed and thus the looming potential for a forced unity, or tyranny, remains.

Having dispensed with the asymmetrical relation (where, from the first, either the subject or the other hold the upper hand) Williams argues, perhaps counterintuitively, that Hegel's reformulation of Fichte's concept of recognition is able to overcome Fichte's limitations (society as a constraint and the dialectic of dependence/domination) by emphasizing conflict at a deeper ontological level. To summarize Williams' argument: Fichte's important contribution to philosophy was to discover the structure of recognition as the basis of self-consciousness and

[311] Ibid., p. 83. By now it should come as no surprise that Williams' critique of Fichte is almost verbatim the Eagleton's critique of Levinas noted in chapter one, where, Levinas' "view of the *polis* as a place of alienation reflects an alienated view of politics."

thus freedom. Hegel's contribution is realizing that Fichte's description cannot not be taken as the transcendental condition of consciousness as such—which assumes that recognition is a "more or less automatic"[312] or immediate—because the process of recognition is in fact the product of a history of human struggle. We cannot thus simply analyze the nature and processes of the individual consciousness or speak of freedom as an immediate transcendental capacity (as Kant and Fichte do), rather, we must understand how forms of consciousness have developed in concert with struggles, revolutions and institutions and how these social processes, in turn, determine capacity for individuals to actualize their freedom. Mutual recognition cannot thus be simply assumed or dogmatically asserted but is but one potential outcome of the human experience.[313]

This is crucial because, according to both Hegel and Williams, Fichte's notion of intersubjective conflict remains at a stage of arrested development, where one is still subservient to the other. Hegel avoids such subservience by placing more "ontological distance"[314] between subjects, which means that subjects, being distinct and relatively equal entities, engage with each other in a moment of primordial, but *temporary*, conflict. While such an emphasis on conflict is perhaps more violent than two ego's bound to each other from the start (each in an asymmetrical fashion to the other), it also presents the possibility of a (historical) resolution.[315] In sum, Hegel's view of recognition as a process of becoming can better account for harmonious relationships which preserve the ontological distinctness of individuality while, at the same time, conceiving of society as the enhancement and fulfillment of individuality. The degree to which this dynamic

[312] Ibid., p. 87.
[313] Ibid., p. 87.
[314] Ibid., p. 83.
[315] Ibid., p. 87.

is substantially different from Fichte's position is a question we will bracket out to pursue the more important connection Williams makes between Hegel and Levinas.

All of this is evidence for Williams that, contrary to the many "caricatures" of Hegel, his "holistic social ontology is quite capable of incorporating the other without reduction of the other to the same."[316] While Williams is convincing in his claim that the preservation of difference is a central feature of Hegel's social ontology, the claim that he already incorporates the thrust of Levinas' insights is based on a misreading of Levinas. For Williams, Levinas, like Jacobi before him, seeks to "preserve the independence and integrity of a phenomenon" by denying any "knowledge of it."[317] By precluding the possibility of a "phenomenon," "appearance" or "ontological theme," Levinas attempts to ensure that "the other cannot be reduced to the same (egology) and self and other cannot be parts of a totality."[318] According to Williams, Levinas avoids reducing either the self or the other to "the same" because both the "self and other *absolve* themselves from each other within their relation, and so remain absolute within the relation."[319] Because Levinas advocates that the self and other form a mutual pact to let the other exist as separate and distinct entity, Williams concludes that "Levinas would side with Fichte," because, for both, the relation to the other "only limits the self, rather than with Hegel for whom the social is an enhancement and fulfillment of freedom."[320]

Once again Levinas' purported skepticism and irrationalism provides the perfect philosophical fodder. In proper Hegelian fashion Williams seeks to demonstrate that Levinas' ambitions are in fact well intentioned, even useful, however, they are too contradictory, one-

[316] Ibid., p. 300.
[317] Ibid., p. 285.
[318] Ibid., p.298.
[319] Ibid., p. 300.
[320] Ibid., p. 300.

sided and ultimately self-defeating to accomplish their goal. Williams proceeds to raise the familiar aporia associated with Levinas' "anti-ontological" thought (how can one use the terms of ontology and reason to speak about a non-ontological other), leading him to ask how an "utterly transcendent, unknowable other" could possibly "obligate."[321] Crucial here is that Levinas' musings about transcendence and responsibility are taken to be pre-conscious, but in the sense they are moral edicts from another realm (not unlike Plato's forms) rather than a further contribution to an embodied theory of intersubjectivity. As a result, the "pre-freedom, pre-conscious obligations" that Levinas speaks of are simply "asserted dogmatically, or taken as immediate facts or truths."[322] Once Levinas' one-sidedness and inherent dogmatism is established, Williams need simply repeat Hegel's critique of Jacobian skepticism that demonstrates how social mediation is already implicit within such skepticism ("the one who philosophizes as a skeptic has to appropriate the very thing he rejects in order to make his case") and thus ethical concerns—like the respect for difference—must be accomplished on the ontological plane. This dialectical movement allows Williams to confidently conclude that Levinas' concerns and critiques are indeed important but they not only misunderstand their own foundations but have already been incorporated into the Hegelian system:

> Levinas' critique of ontology is already present in Hegel's critique of classical metaphysics, and that the position Levinas urges against Hegel in *Totality and Infinity* is in fact Hegel's own. The latter does not reduce the other to the same, but rather grants otherness its due and allows the other to be.[323]

While I am not unsympathetic to Williams' claim that Hegel represents the "greatest social ontology yet produced in the West," his zeal to find a dialectical resolution between Hegel and Levinas reproduces the very dynamic that has caused so much skepticism of Hegel's

[321] Ibid., p. 286.
[322] Ibid., p. 286.
[323] Ibid., p. 16.

dialectical method (expressed from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Adorno and Levinas), where unity is established by excessively pruning those particular features which do not easily fit. While it makes for an excellent narrative, the conflation of Levinas with the Jacobi and Kant leads to a gross misinterpretation of Levinas and thereby misses what could have otherwise been a fruitful dialogue.

The key consideration is, once again, the status of mediation. From Williams' description one gets the impression that Levinas simply adopts Kant's prohibition on direct knowledge of the thing-in-itself and simply converts it into the ethical maxim. Williams is thus able to assert that Hegel would "deny Levinas's claim that the related terms remain absolute within relation" because "if the relation is real, the *relata* must have an effect on each other."[324] Of course there is a *some* truth to the assertion that Levinas is concerned with the tendency of dialectical movements to collapse the distance between two terms involved within a relation, however, his scepticism of negativity and resolutions has a decisively different logic than those posed by Kantians, liberals, or existentialists. Levinas' does not place the other beyond the reach of knowledge and mediation so as to guarantee it's autonomy, nor does he abstract from history and structure to extoll the virtues of spontaneity, rebellion and rupture. Levinas' critique of dialectics is not opposed to mediation but is an attempt to dislodge the perspective from which such mediation is taken in. Levinas, as it has been demonstrated throughout, is thus not against a concept of "totality," but, on the contrary, is attempting to search for its normative foundations, which is essential to make judgements about society, politics and history (rather than ignore them). Accordingly, the distance between Levinas and Hegel is *not* rooted in Hegel's attempts to conjure up the totality of relations that mediate our experience of ourselves, others and the world

[324] Ibid., p. 300.

around us. Levinas readily accepts that Hegel had made incomparable strides in our understanding of subjectivity,[325] but, he also doubts that he has grasped the *full* spectrum of intersubjective mediation because, in his attempt to take in the "whole," he assumes a perspective of *a priori* freedom.

The claim that Hegel privileges a particular viewpoint within the whole might seem at odds with Hegel's expressed disdain for dogmatic or one-sided claims. In fact, it is the interplay between competing claims (be they philosophical, social, economic, or political) that thrusts the dialectical forward. Hegel thus aims to incorporate disparate ideas and experiences (often by historicizing them) into his philosophy without either subsuming their individual contribution or overly identifying with any particular element. Nevertheless, Hegel is also well aware that such an external or detached perspective is impossible to attain. Ever emphasizing the embodied and historical nature of ideas, Hegel famously states that "each individual is in any case a *child of his time*; thus philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes."[326] This Hegelian emphasis on situatedness presents an interesting parallel to Kant's relationship between finitude and faith: the more Hegel emphasizes the finitude of understanding—which is why even the philosopher (let alone the common person[327]) sits janus-faced, unable to grasp the future significance of the present moment—the more he points towards a perspective which can survey, perhaps even redeem, the

[325] See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo (Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 37, where Levinas lists the *Phenomenology of Mind* as one the five most important works in the history of philosophy.
[326] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21-2.
[327] Interesting and somewhat relevant is Hegel's well known disdain for Fichte's desire to "preach" philosophy to popular audiences.

whole of history from a single glance.[328] Even if Hegel, himself, is not close enough to the end to fully grasp its significance, subjectivity is a story told from the perspective of freedom, and its striving to actualize itself in and through the world. Though Hegel is less seduced, relative to Fichte, by a fetishized view of language and culture (which is not to say he does not have his own racist and xenophobic moments) he similarly blurs the lines between an *analysis* of the whole and a *normative foundation* that privileges the orientation of the whole over the relations that, at every moment, usher it into being—a well known concern of Marx.

It is not my intention here to re-hash the debates, as old as Hegel himself, about whether concepts like the "Absolute," "Spirit," "Universal," "World History," or the "cunning of reason" are inherently teleological, metaphysical or even theological, or whether they can be salvaged through a Marxist, Lacanaian or any other kind of "materialist" framework. Instead we will insist that the questions that Levinas raises are unavoidable, even if we accept Hegel's insights into mediation, history and struggle while downplaying the degree to which he, like Fichte before him, prioritizes the relations that orient individuals over the relations between individuals. For example, one can read Hegel the following proclamation from the *Philosophy of Right* as largely descriptive in nature:

> At the forefront of all actions, including world-historical actions, are *individuals* as the subjectivities by which the substantial is actualized. These individuals are the living expression of the substantial deed of the world spirit and are thus immediately identical with, they cannot themselves perceive it and it is not their object.[329]

Here, rather than interpret it as yet another example of Hegel inverting the subject into a predicate of "world spirit," this passage could be read in line with articulations of intersubjectivity such as Heidegger's "*Dasein,*," Foucault's "*épistème,*" or the concept of

[328] While Heidegger, mirroring Marx's critique, claims that despite his historicism, Hegel "jumped over own shadow into the sun," it is clear that Heidegger could notspare himself from the same fate.
[329] Hegel, *Right*, p. 375.

"lifeworld," developed from Husserl to Habermas, where the theoretical ambition is to illuminate the ways in which the sum of human relations produce a world that cannot possibly be fully comprehended, even as that world is produced and reproduced. In this register, Hegel's insights are certainly *invaluable*, not only because they shed some light on what it means to be a social being but because they provide the basis for political critique, where it is imperative what capacities have been developed or suppressed, what voices have been amplified or marginalized, in what ways have power and oppression been inscribed into the seemingly neutral and largely unnoticed political unconsciousness.

Nevertheless, the Levinasian question persists: in Hegel's impressive analysis, how is the relation between self, other, and society understood? Is the ultimate significance of other comprehended on the basis of the meaning they derive within totality, or within movement able to comprehend the rise and fall of a succession of totalities? Simply put, does Levinas not have something to offer Hegel, something much different than Williams' assertion, apropos of Heiedegger, that Hegel has already conceived of the relation to the other as a "letting be" rather than a "return to same"?[330] For of its important contributions notwithstanding, does Hegel's dialectic of antagonism and reconciliation provide a sufficient explanation, and ultimately a justification, for both the responsiveness of subjectivity and—at the level of prescription—my concern and responsibility for others?

While we cannot adequately address this question here, my initial claim would not simply be that, by prioritizing freedom (both individual and social), Hegel debases the other, rather, Hegel, like many of the those who contribute to our understanding of intersubjectivity, does indeed gesture towards, or sometimes even presuppose, something close to Levinas' idea of

[330] Williams, p. 155. Against Williams we must repeat that one should not equate Levinas' "unable to shirk" with the late Heidegger's "letting be."

subjectivity as a going outside of oneself *prior* to the thought of a return. One of the best examples of this, though it is couched in condescension towards the "uneducated," can be found in the underrated essay *Who thinks Abstractly?,* where Hegel attempts to reveal the highly abstract nature of everyday common sense. Hegel claims that abstract thinking is not, as is commonly believed, the lone purview of the philosopher, but is most prevalent in ordinary experiences, where individuals are routinely perceived on the basis of a single attribute that is taken as representative of the whole. Such an instrumental reduction of the complexity of being, Hegel explains, is the height of abstract thinking: "This is abstract thinking: to see nothing in the murderer except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul all other human essence in him with this simple quality."[331] Hegel concludes the essay with a similar example of the "common soldier" who is, for his superior, nothing but an "*abstractum* of a beatable subject with whom a gentleman who has a uniform and port *d'epée* must trouble himself."[332] Not only do such insights already set the groundwork for Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, but his sentiment that we are "troubled," so to speak, by the "other" in manner altogether different from the one suggested by a uniform (which signifies "beatable subject"), expresses something close to what Levinas will endlessly circle in his meditations on experience, philosophy, love and war. However, such affinities cannot be properly explored—how such a moment becomes are misunderstood, muted, obfuscated, or expanded—if one already assumes, as Williams does, that such a dialogue has already taken place.

These considerations are even more important for those who emphasize the materiality and historical specificity of Hegel' philosophy. Andrew Cole, for example, will counter the

[331] G.W.F. Hegel, "Who Thinks Abstractly," in Philosophical Classics: From Plato to Derrida (New Jersey: Prentic-Hall, 2000), p. 905.
[332] Ibid., p. 906.

philosophical readings of Hegel (from Kojeve and Sartre to Lacan and Zizek) that attempt to abstract the universal lessons about the nature of self-consciousness, politics and intersubjectivity, in order to demonstrate the degree to which Hegel (pace Marx) is already a materialist. According to Cole, Hegel is less of an idealist than his readers, who insist on translating—both linguistically and philosophically—the concrete feudal antagonism between the "Lord" and the "Bondsman" as a generic master/slave dialectic, giving the impression that it can function as a "Platonic foundation" which applies to every and any relation of subjugation.[333] There is no doubt that Cole's analysis of the Lord and the Bondsman dialectic, which profoundly anchors Hegel's within Feudal relations, helps us appreciate the theoretical specificity of Hegel's conception of labour, struggle, domination, possession and private property. However, Cole's materialist assessment and appropriation of Hegel, which is, in large part, aimed at demonstrating Marx's debt to Hegel, leaves the Hegelian paradox detailed above (where accepting ones particular or finite perspective is bought at the price of a larger metaphysical perspective) a glaring lacuna. In Cole's zeal to prove that Hegel's master/slave dialectic hold significance to feudalism alone, he ratchets up the tension that, to the degree that this historical reading is true, Hegel forecloses the possibility that the number of communities that can be said to be "self-conscious," at least in any meaningful sense. In fact, the only time Cole addresses this glaring shortcoming is to underscore the point that Hegel specifically had feudal relations in mind, evidenced for Cole in Hegel's proclamation "that ancient slaves never achieve self-consciousness."[334] While Cole parenthetically dismisses such a view out-of-hand—and the point here is not to attribute such a perspective to Cole, which would be misleading and ludicrous—he fails to address the looming philosophical and normative implications of such a myopic

[333] Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2014), pp. 65-9; 82.
[334] Ibid., p.71.

materialist reading, where only the struggles that fit a narrow set of historical criteria are believed to lead to self-consciousness proper. Hegel might indeed, as Cole suggests, have had his specific and concrete material relations in mind, but this does not make his larger "idealist" conceptions about history and subjectivity any less apparent, in fact, quite the contrary. And these problems do not solve themselves simply because Hegel's most metaphysical features appear antiquated from our modern perspective. This is particularly concerning because Cole's overall aim is to demonstrate the degree to which Marx "adopts more or less wholesale Hegel's dialectic."[335]

It is thus not surprising that he makes little of Susan Buck-Morris' meditation on Hegel, the master/slave dialectic and universal history from the perspective of the Haitian revolution.[336] This is unfortunate because such an engagement might have shed more light on what Hegel, and his theory of Feudalism, history and subjectivity, has to offer us today. Buck-Morris, for her part, does address such question as she seeks to free Hegel's most valuable insights from the fetters and prejudices of his time. In doing so she gives us a hint of what we are searching for as we seek to conjoin the two moments of intersubjectivity that we have thus far been separating. There is a distinctive Levinasian sentiment in her re-formulation of Hegel's concept "Universal History":

> rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. And it is in our empathetic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state, that we have a chance of understanding what they say. Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences. A person's nonidentity with the collective allows its subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source

[335] Ibid., p. 65.
[336] Ibid., p. 82.

> today of enthusiasm and hope. It is not through culture, but through the threat of culture's betrayal that consciousness of a common humanity comes to be.[337]

In this formulation Buck-Morris gives a us a clue as to what universality might look like from a Levinasian perspective: articulated as a point of rupture indifferent to culture, difference, and identity, rather than the expansion of egoism or an all-encompassing container enveloping every particular. To this we might simply add that such "discontinuities," "betrayals" "vulnerabilities" and "non-identities" do not *only* emerge as "residues of events,"[338] but are first expressed in the most ordinary of experiences, and it is on this basis that we are able to recognize the emancipatory potential of such a rupture with totality. For what else is the "raw, free, and vulnerable state" that Buck-Morris speaks of if not the "nudity of the face." And, this being the case, we must also concede that the face already begs for alternative forms of politics, solidarity and struggle.

[337] Susan Buck-Morris, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), p.133.
[338] Ibid., p. 148.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alienation and Liberation in Levinas and Marx

In the previous chapter we described how Fichte both anticipates and sets in motion a broad spectrum of intersubjective inquiry. On the one hand, Fichte erodes the possibility of the atomistic subject, presented as an immediate or autonomous unity. In one of the most definitive statements on subjectivity Fichte will argue that self-consciousness proper—the ultimate self-relation wherein the founding *act* of subjectivity can be presented as an object *in* consciousness and thereby seized upon *by* consciousness itself—is itself a socially mediated accomplishment.

Upon close inspection social mediation was found to contain two dimensions which are inextricably linked and co-emergent, yet distinct moments which cannot be conflated. Fichte begins by exploring the inter-human relation (arguing that consciousness presupposes the presence of others, a presence which gifts the image of freedom and humanity in general to the subject) before turning his attention to the generic relations that mediate and give the inter-human relation its texture and defining characteristics. In his mature philosophy Fichte becomes increasingly preoccupied with the social contours that structure the relation in which subjects face each other. As a result, the abstract and static image of two solipsistic egos catching sight of their reflection in the face of the other is concretized and put in motion as Fichte continues to theorize the "active" side of subjectivity through his analysis of language, labour, institution and politics.

Through a crucial modification of Kant, Fichte ushered in a second philosophical revolution, one that broke the closed loop of apperception to investigate the complex intersubjective processes that mediate consciousness. But Fichte was also found to be an

exemplar in a second, related, sense. While he dissolves the theoretical foundations of the pre-social subject, he displays the recurrent temptation to retroactively conceive of subjectivity in the very terms eschewed. Once again anticipating the philosophical currents to come, he conceives of this project both at the level of the individual (where the dependent ego must master the external word of the not-I to create itself as a self-sufficient unity) and social (where the goal, expressed in the same terms, becomes to create a cultural/linguistic/political Subject). Thus Fichte inaugurates a complex understanding of what it means to be social and historical being. While he opens the door to a profoundly different understanding of the social and historical dimensions of consciousness, the challenge of subjectivity is consistently posed from the perspective of what had been theoretically lost. Sovereignty is no longer an immediate attribute of the self-conscious subject yet continues to function no less as a regulatory principle—something to be achieved as the subject attempts to recollect itself (either psychologically or politically) amidst the social and natural world. From such a perspective the "other" becomes indistinguishable from generic social relations, which is portrayed as the flux of history that, depending on the moment, ought to be either mastered or submitted to.

In this Fichte not only foreshadows the *analytical* breadth and depth of subsequent inquiries into intersubjectivity (the increasing focus on the ways in which language, culture, labour, economics, politics, power etc. shape the very experience of consciousness) but the *normative* orientation that continues to animate such articulations. Here we can return to Levinas' critique of Western philosophy, which we are now better equipped to address. Levinas' most consistent claim is that despite the opportunities afforded to philosophy by this meander into the social, the tradition has "most often" taken the form of "a reduction of the other to the

same."[339] It should now be clear that Levinas is not here claiming that all philosophy ends in the pseudo-Hegelian culmination of Spirit which extols the universal at the expense of the sublated particular. Rather, Levinas notes that the very axis itself, that links particular to the universal, is constructed in such a way as to subordinate the signification of the "for-the-other." Thus, regardless of where one finds themselves on the spectrum, be it Kierkegaard or Hegel, the "for-the-other" is a conditional proposition, secondary to the ground from which subjectivity emanates. As a result, the other qua other is relegated to the background, as something to be considered long after the foundations of identity, society and politics have been set.

To begin to understand the relation between subjects as conditioned by the totality of relations, without grounding subjectivity itself within this very totality, we suggested that such a accomplishment required the interruption of the return-to-self (a movement which extends from the particular to the universal). This inquiry has led us to a new question, how can the totality of social relations be thought (rather than simply dismissed) from this new perspective, that is, from the perspective of their interruption? It is with this question that we have expressed the need to return to Marx.

We can begin this investigation with one more of Levinas' references to Marx, taken from an interview with Richard Kerney:

> When I spoke of the overcoming of Western ontology as an 'ethical and prophetic cry'…I was in fact thinking of Marx's critique of Western idealism as a project to understand the world rather than to transform it. In Marx's critique we find an ethical conscience cutting through the ontological identification of truth with an ideal intelligibility and demanding that the theory be converted into a concrete praxis of concern for the other. It is this revelatory and prophetic cry that explains the extraordinary attraction that the Marxist utopia exerted over numerous generations.[340]

Levinas' unabashed affirmation of the "prophetic cry" found within Marx is itself an intriguing

[339] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 43.
[340] Richard A. Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 33.

path that will momentarily pursue. However, before doing so we must address the conspicuous *irony* of Levinas' statement. Such a purported fidelity to Marx would merely be misleading, rather than ironic, if Levinas was simply ignoring the concrete normative commitments of philosophers like Fichte (which we outlined in great detail in chapter 3) by reducing German idealism to the ambiguous and retrospective gaze of Hegel's "owl of Minerva" (which is itself a limited reading of Hegel). What makes this gesture ironic is that, despite being viewed as one of the pre-eminent ethical philosophers of our time, Levinas' work too often retains the same retrospective and ambiguous character that he is purporting to eschew—and projecting these political shortcomings onto the preceding philosophical age does little to solve this lacuna.

It is also, from our perspective, somewhat ironic that this very ambiguity stems from the very element of Levinas' thought which we have attempted to underscore for the explicit purpose of thinking Levinas with politics. Emphasizing the pre-subjective depth of Levinas' thought has thus put us in an interesting theoretical predicament. The course we have charted has intentionally foreclosed the well-worn path of simply translating the "ethical relation" as an intimate ethical imperative. While this remains an attractive option insofar as it leaves the reader with obvious moral imperatives, such an ethics can only be bought at the price of politics and history. By emphasizing the pre-subjective depths of the relation our reading has established the theoretical possibility of a radical Levinasian politics and, at the same time, exposed the Levinas' insufficiency for taking up this very task.

Generic and Specific Alienation

The primary reason for this insufficiency is that, although Levinas provides a view of subjectivity well suited to ground a theory of alienation,[341] it fails to adequately distinguish between generic and specific alienation. Far too often Levinas depicts all the generic bonds that bind subjects together within day to day existence (themes, identities, institutions) as an undifferentiated mass, where *every* relation is equally distinguished in its incapacity to adequately encompass the "face." This radical bifurcation between "totality" and "infinity" is on one level necessary, in order to ensure that the subject remains rootless and ungrounded with respect to the Other:

> The condition of being hostage is not chosen; if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his as-for-me, and the exits found in inner life…The implication of the one in the-one-for-the-other is then not reducible to the way a term is implicated in a relationship, an element in a structure, a structure in a system, which Western thought in all its forms sought for as a sure harbor, or a place of retreat which the soul should enter.[342]

At the same time the reluctance to *navigate* this rigid demarcation separating two worlds, that is, to engage with the very substance of life, effectively reproduces (especially at the level of politics) the very pathology Levinas hoped to address.

The tragic irony of Levinas is that, in his attempt to escape the grasp of the "neuter," he charts such an extreme course that he finds himself reunited with his great adversaries on the other side of the world. If the famous ambiguity found in Hegel stemmed from the fact that he sublated *too* much of the subject into substance (family, institutions, the state, etc.), which left it very much in doubt whether alienation was about *comprehending* ones destiny or *changing* it, Levinas' ambiguity arises for precisely the opposite reason. Because *none* of the social relation is

[341] A possibility already indicated in Asher Horowitz's, "'All that Is Holy Is Profaned' Levinas and Marx on the Social Relation," in *Totality and Infinity at 50* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2012), pp. 57-78
[342] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981), p. 136.

permitted to manifest itself as works (themes, institutions, etc.), the everyday world becomes nothing more than an indiscriminate field of alienation. In the end a blanket refusal is just as incapable of critique as a blanket acceptance.

Levinas typically addresses such concerns under his concept of "the third." Like many of his concepts, "the third" reappears in numerous contexts, sometimes with different, even contradictory, connotations. While Levinas gives *some* credence to the view that "the third" should be read as a literal third person who complicates the purity of a relation to the other,[343] in general "the third" refers to the inescapability of mediation, universality, reason and judgement. As Levinas states, in my view correctly, "the third party is the very fact of consciousness," and not "an empirical fact," that is, "the third" does not appear as a fact appearing *within* consciousness, because consciousness is already mediated by the universal, where "all the others than the other obsess me."[344] As we have suggested all along, this means that a "commitment" in the everyday sense of the term "already presupposes a theoretical consciousness, as a possibility to assume, before or after the event, a taking up that goes beyond the susceptiveness of passivity."[345] Thus the "third party" is the "birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy."[346] This means that, for all the talk of exteriority, singularity, and decontextualization, Levinas is well aware that "the transcendence of the face is not enacted outside of the world" and that "[n]o human or inter human relationship can be enacted outside of economy."[347] The "beyond" that Levinas speaks of is therefore necessarily "reflected within the totality and history, within experience."[348]

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[343] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," in *The Levinas Reader* ed. Sean Hand (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA, USA: B. Blackwell, 1989), p. 247.
[344] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 158.
[345] Ibid., p. 136.
[346] Ibid., p. 128.
[347] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 172.
[348] Ibid., p. 23.

Thus, contra Levinas' critics, it is not that Levinas is allergic to politics, but that he declines to explore the relation between subjectivity and politics, at least in an in-depth and nuanced way. Therefore, the primary lacuna facing Levinas does not in fact stem from his *initial* insistence of bracketing out every dimension of experience, save for one, but rather, it arises from his imprudent decision to re-introduce the totality of the social world all at once (and once for all). In contrast to Hegel, who meticulously reconstructs the nesting spheres of experience, from sensation, desire and consciousness to religion, family and the state, Levinas theorizes more like a magician, who, at the conclusion of their trick, pulls down the curtain one more time to reveal the world they had previously made disappear.

Thus, in one theoretical step we go from the asymmetrical relation to the other outside of every reference all the way to freedom, reason, reciprocity and representation, where humans all appear on "equal footing as before a court of justice," and a "society in which there is no distinction between those close and those far off."[349] And with this, a unique story comes to a familiar end: "In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality.[350] The question, perhaps the *only* question, is: when we return from the journey to infinity and back again, do we feel at home or estranged in the world around us?

On this question Levinas equivocates. In some instances he proceeds from "totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself,"[351] but not "in order to preach some way of salvation (which there would be no shame in seeking)."[352] Or

[349] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 159.
[350] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 300.
[351] Ibid., p. 24.
[352] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 59.

similarly that: "Our task is to show that the plot proper to saying does indeed lead it to the said, to the putting together of structures which make possible justice and the 'I think.' …essence then has its hour and its time."[353] A sentiment repeated again as he states that, since "clarity occurs, and thoughts aim at themes," his "task" is simply to establish the "articulation and signifyingess antecedent to ontology."[354] Levinas likens this movement to "the phenomenological reduction,"[355] which is somewhat damning since, several pages later, he makes a parenthetical comment that "phenomenology states concepts without ever destroying the scaffoldings that permit one to climb up to them."[356] One indeed might find it difficult to find a critical edge in an ethics that has, regardless of context, always already happened. From this perspective, Levinas' philosophy is either devoid of normative concerns or, to the degree that it expresses an ethics, is well suited for the conservative apologist.

On one level, such caution in affirming the "ethical relation" as a set of concrete social relations is to be expected, since Levinas is adamant that this "reduction" not become a "rectification of one ontology to another, the passage from some apparent world to a more real world."[357] This is sometimes referred to by Levians as a "methodological problem"[358] that he must necessarily represent the unrepresentable while paying tribute to its unrepresentable nature. However, to leave the relation as a "paradox" is not to critique totality but to leave it untouched. Thus by the time we arrive at the state, Levinas concludes, in proper Hegelian fashion: "It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and

[353] Ibid., p. 146.
[354] Ibid., p. 46.
[355] Ibid., p.53.
[356] Ibid., p. 128.
[357] Ibid., p. 45.
[358] Ibid., p. 7.

which is to be set up, and especially to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all."[359] But why is it important to know? Is the modern liberal state predicated on the "irreducible responsibility of the one for all" or, conversely, is it a revolutionary call to transcend our political horizon, in which members of society are forced to confront each other as if in a war of all against all? Is the state, to paraphrase the difference between Hegel and Marx, engendered by the social relation or superimposed upon it?

Our present task is to find the limits of such a reading. In doing so we will attempt to recover the moments in Levinas that gesture towards the possibility of a political community founded not on totalization and instrumentality but responsibility of the one-for-the-other. To this end we will return to Marx and the explore the "messianism"[360] that Levinas, himself, noted on occasion.

The Return to Marx

We can return to where we left off at the introduction of the third chapter. Here we noted Levinas' admiration for Marx's view of subjectivity—which contested the liberal subject by illuminating the "restless powers" that "seethe within" and push the subject "down a determined path"[361]—which amounted to no less than a theoretical revolution. While Levinas situates his thought within the wake of this event, the nature of the break also created the (apparent) distance between Levinas and Marx. The majority of philosophical work continued to explore the socio-

[359] Ibid., p. 159.
[360] Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, Love," in *Is it Righteous to Be?,* trans. Michael B. Smith, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 180.
[361] Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in *Critical Inquiry* 17:1. (Autumn, 1990), pp. 66.

historical topography that structures and mediates relations between humans, while Levinas (at times myopically) focused on the peculiar nature of this bond itself apart from the context in which it is inevitably bound up with. The question which we will now pursue is, can a return to Marx, after Levinas, be an integral part of the project to put the fragmented moments of subjectivity back together again, albeit in a new way.[362]

Our first step toward this goal is to make sense of Marx's theory of the subject, which is, admittedly, somewhat like attempting to untangle a box of old Christmas lights. It is without doubt that Marx's most impactful contribution to modern political theory is derived from his ability to think human relations in their totality. While several of his predecessors made significant headway in this direction, their attempts to map out the socio-political networks that bind humans together were still, according to Marx, too enamoured with an abstract conception of subjectivity as such. At the beginning of the analysis, philosophers already presuppose an idealized form of consciousness or pre-social perspective from which humans enter into history and society. By taking the "imagined activity of imagined subjects"[363] as their point of departure they are able to argue, at the end of their analysis, that the social process itself is guided by an ideational intention—either directly, in a self-conscious way, or indirectly, as the semi-unconscious collective result of the aggregate of human intentions. Regardless of what we make of the validity of Marx's critique, we must recognize his fundamental point, that if we are to

[362] While there has been a conspicuous absence of engagements between Levinas and Marx, there are a few notable exceptions: Asher Horowitz, "'All that Is Holy Is Profaned' Levinas and Marx on the Social Relation," in *Totality and Infinity at 50* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2012), pp. 57-78; Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Jacob Blumenfeld, "Egoism, Labour, and Possession: A reading of 'Interiority and Economy,' Section II of Lévinas' Totality & Infinity," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 45:2 (2014), pp 107-17; Serap A. Kayatekin & Jack Amariglio, "Reading Marx with Levinas," *Rethinking Marxism* 28 (2016), pp. 479-99; and, as we noted in the second chapter, much of Enrique Dussel's work is scattered with intermittent rapprochements between Levinas and Marx.
[363] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 1998), p. 43.

understand the human condition we cannot begin with the image of an "abstract being squatting outside the world" but with the concrete relations that organize humans into a "society" and a "state."[364]

This is not to suggest that for Marx human consciousness is unimportant or simply an illusion. From his earliest writings in 1843 to *Capital*, the "mental powers" of humans—which are contrasted with the best laid plans of "spiders" and "bees"[365]—are central to Marx's fundamental argument about the necessity to interrogate the specificity of how a given society is organized. It is thus surprising, if not ironic, that Althusser continued to approach Marx's ruminations on consciousness with such a timorous disposition, since, without such a capacity humanity would in fact be the very "abstract being squatting outside the world" that Marx critiques. While all non-human animals exist in a complex relationship with their environment the human world is qualitatively distinct. Marx is, relative to his time, acutely aware of the evolutionary biological features of the human (instincts, needs, etc.), however, his primary interest is in the unique capacity for humans to modify themselves in concert with their environment. Thus, when he famously claims that "being determines consciousness," the term "being" does not primarily refer to a set of biological impulses or instincts which are contained within the individual mind (though, for Marx, this is all certainly grist for the mill). Rather the "being" determining consciousness refers to the human created environment which is comprised of a constantly changing network of complex socio-historic relations. Human consciousness is thus vital because without it there would be no world proper—or, to translate it into Althusserian, no structures to interpellate the subject—only biological determination.

[364] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction," in *Early Writings* (Penguin Books, 1992), p. 244.
[365] Karl Marx, *Capital* (Penguin Books, 1990), p. 283-4.

Because consciousness is nothing other than the capacity for self-transformation, it cannot be perceived in an individual mind alone, or in abstraction (where it becomes a transcendental foundation); it can only be observed in the way a given society will organize, express, refract, sublimate and even create new human needs, abilities, and desires. This is what Marx means when he refers to the human as a "species-being" who is "universal and therefore free"; not that the human is free in the sense of no longer dependent on each other or the world but that it can, in concert with others, condition the environment that in turn conditions them, a situation where even "the whole of nature" becomes their "*inorganic* body."[366] On this point Marx is clear: "all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature."[367] Consciousness is thus vital to understanding the human condition, provided, that is, that it is not abstracted from its material expression, which is contained within a totality of economic, political, and symbolic relations.

While consciousness—where even the "worst architect" constructs her creation in her mind in a way that spiders and bees do not—is central to understand the importance of the "exclusively human"[368] form of labour, Marx is adamant that this need not, and, in fact, *should not*, lead to the conclusion that society (or any human creation) is the result of a free, unencumbered, deliberate, or self-conscious planning. Marx is just as quick to stress that this creative process typically takes place in response to the exigencies of necessity—necessities which are not only imposed by the natural environment (floods, droughts, predators, etc.) and our biological existence (need for food, shelter, etc.) but also reproduced in a variety of ways within the social word.

[366] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," *Early*, p. 328.
[367] Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), p. 135.
[368] Marx, *Capital*, p. 284.

This brings us to the matter at hand: how exactly does Marx comprehend the relationship between the self, others and society and, moreover, does this help us in our quest to rejoin Levinas in a political critique. Front and centre in this discussion is a certain ambiguity within his articulation of the relationship between consciousness and "being." On one hand, the very "species" character of humanity would seem to necessitate that consciousness (at least its particular articulation) lag behind its material social relations. The term "species-being" is often referenced as evidence of the young Marx's explicitly normative conception of human nature (either positively, as evidence of Marx's humanism or, negatively, as proof of Marx's "essentialist" and naive few of society); however, much of what Marx files under the concept is clearly meant in a descriptive register, where he typically is making the case that bourgeois, liberal and idealist thinkers simply misunderstand what it means to be a social and historical being (though some, like Feuerbach, get closer than others). While this description certainly contains a sense of normativity (in the sense that it shapes our understanding of who we are and therefore what possibilities lie before us), Marx's recurrent point is not these abstract or atomized conceptions of subjectivity are "bad" but that they mistakenly perceive the embedded and embodied nature of subjectivity as a secondary concern, or even a flaw of subjectivity, rather than its essential feature. That human consciousness is rooted in "being" is a fact and could no more be condemned than the fact that the mind requires food, oxygen and sleep.

It is thus telling that, immediately after the famous passage in *Capital* where he describes the marvel of human consciousness, Marx discusses the "complex of things" that mediate this relation (tools etc.) where he quotes a famous passage from Hegel's "Logic": "Cunning may be said to lie in the intermediate action which…[even though it] does not itself directly interfere in

the process, is nevertheless only working out its own aims."[369] Far from endorsing a pseudo-theological notion of providence, Marx is picking up from Hegel the (also very Heideggerian) point that when the worker constructs a project in their mind, the tools they use are not merely an inert substances mediating and ushering in a set of pre-formed ideas into reality. Workers only discovers themselves (their ideas and projects) by already comporting themselves within a world of equipment, already designed for specific ends and which thus already represent a specific congealment of social relations. Marx is well aware that, in this sense, the essence of labour is not found in the *individual idea* of what to construct but already contained within the "complex of things" which represent a horizon of imperatives and possibilities. This is simply to say that the architect described by Marx is not the (early) Fichtean ego floating in the abstract realm of infinite possibilities. In reality, the architect rides the elevator up to the 26th floor, enters her cubicle, sits at her desk, sighs as she thinks about her deadline before grabbing her pen and triangle to sketch out the 3rd floor of a new luxury water-front condo that she could never herself afford. Even this example is somewhat misleading to the extent that it already contains a sense that the circumstances *of* life are themselves an infringement *on* life. While this infringement becomes a distinct possibility, as we will see, at this level the implements, imperatives, norms and structures of all kinds are first necessary if one is to move within the world.

For this reason, this description, that simply states "tools," "norms," etc. determine behaviour, is still too abstract. If you are to understand anything meaningful about a given form of subjectivity you must say *which* tools, norms, practices, and structures. In the *Poverty of Philosophy,* Marx thus critiques Proudhon for building a kind of theoretical "scaffolding"[370] which purports to deliver abstract principles without respect for the historical circumstances in

[369] Marx, *Capital*, p. 285.
[370] Marx, *Poverty*, p. 106.

which it arose. He is thus able to, quite easily, selectively "preserve the good side" of historical events ("Napoleon,"[371] "slavery,"[372] etc.) because he operates from the illusion that such principles are intelligible apart from the concrete relations in which they were birthed. Thus, Marx concludes, if we want to "save" given "principles" it is imperative to "ask ourselves why a particular principle was manifested in the eleventh or in the eighteenth century rather than in any other" a question which compels one to "examine minutely what men were like in the eleventh century…what were their respective needs, their productive forces, their mode of production, the raw materials of their production—in short, what were the relations between man and man which resulted from all these contains of existence."[373] This is why Marx is adamant that, in the "drama" of existence, the subject be simultaneously depicted as both "author" and "actor."[374]

From the first flicker of thought consciousness is thus a social and active endeavour. Thinking is already a kind of doing, something *practiced* and *performed* within a horizon of themes, customs, institutions, problems and concerns. To translate it back into Fichtean terms, Marx is radicalizing and expounding upon Fichte's claim that "being" (or the *Anstoß*) "is the external prime mover," which is why one should not reify a form of consciousness as such. As Marx puts it:

> production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life…[t]he phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.[375]

[371] Ibid., p. 103.
[372] Ibid., p. 104.
[373] Ibid., p. 107.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Marx, *German*, p. 42.

Even a "pure" discipline such as "natural science," is, according to Marx, necessarily imbued with an "aim" "through trade and industry, through the sensuous activity of men."[376] Cutting to the one-sided nature of many of the debates surrounding "realism" versus "discourse," Marx is well aware that every object is perceived as the object of its consciousness only against a background referential totality, and, at the same time, aware that such objects are never exhausted by these discursive fields in which they inevitably find themselves (a point Adorno is also fond of pointing out).

To refer back to our guiding inquiry, even the passive side of subjectivity is, for Marx, a form of activity. Consciousness itself is a profoundly passive experience, where the subject only emerges through a complex of social relations. In this sense, Marx has no problem with exteriority and heteronomy, this is precisely what consciousness is, a (potentially) marvelous expression of the being with others and the outside world. At the same time this external world (and therefore the ego) is always in motion, it is pushing or pulling the subject in a pre-determined direction towards pre-determined ends. Consciousness is thus something like the surface of a rushing river about which very little can be said apart from the general flow of the water.

This is the crux of Marx's famous *Thesis*, where Marx is dubious of Feuerbach's attempt to combat "abstract thinking" by retreating to the sphere of "*contemplation*" because such an attempt to apprehend the concrete does not grasp the practical side of "sensuous activity"[377]. Marx is adamant that passivity cannot be abstractive from activity, and not just in the sense that, to use Mao's example, that if "you want to know the taste of a pear" you must actively pick it

[376] Ibid., p. 46.
[377] Karl Marx, "Concerning Feuerbach," *Early*, (p. 422)

from the tree and bite into it (thus changing both you and the pear).[378] Marx's point is that even this private sensory experience already presupposes an orchard, monoculture, factory farms, pesticides, exploited labour (often from immigrant or peasant populations), expropriated land, and so on as far and wide as one wishes to go. As Marx argues, sticking with the theme of fruit:

> Even the objects of the simplest 'sensuous certainty' are only given him through social development, industry and commercial inter-course. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become 'sensuous certainty' for Feuerbach.[379]

An obvious play on Hegel's critique of "sense-certainty," Marx's point is that even the most intimate sensory perception is mediated through a complex history.

This is significant for Marx because when the Young Hegelians believe themselves to be philosophizing about subjectivity qua subjectivity, they are unconsciously theorizing subjectivity qua "the German." As a result, Marx concludes, the "essence" of our human condition is not, and cannot, be contained within "each single individual" but rather only within the "ensemble of social relation."[380], or, as he elsewhere calls it, the "mode of life."[381] Labour—specifically the human form of labour—is thus central because it does not simply satisfy human needs but creates the very substance that fills consciousness.

What is clear is that the fundamental premise of Marx's dictum "being determines consciousness" is not something to be evaded, shirked or overcome. It is not so much that it is undesirable to bring the "essence" of subjectivity back under the purview of the "single individual" so much as such a desire represents a contradiction in terms: one cannot lose the social relations without losing the very substance of consciousness itself.

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[378] Mao Tse-Tung, *Four Essays on Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1996), p. 8.
[379] Marx, *German*, p. 45.
[380] Marx, *Concerning*, p. 423.
[381] Marx, *German*, p. 37.

Thus far Marx's philosophy of the subject presents us with an interesting set of challenges and considerations with which we can begin to confront Levinas' inability to concretely think through the problem of specific alienation. However, in order to do so we must continue to explore and grapple with crucial tensions that arise within Marx's theory of intersubjectivity.

The question of normativity

While social relations prove to be the very substance of consciousness, this does not mean that Marx relinquishes the authority to make normative claims about the world. On the contrary, this whole exercise is, for Marx, an attempt to demonstrate the normativity built into the fabric of everyday social relations. To quote Howard Zinn, one can't be neutral on a moving train. Nevertheless, even with a robust theory of intersubjectivity, one is hypothetically left with numerous options: Marx could still valourize the particular social and political horizons of his day; or similarly, root the "essence" of being within a fetishized lineage or mythical past; perhaps overwhelmed by the immense inertia of society he could have disavowed the utility of collective projects, preferring instead to focus on self-modification and care; in the absence of transcendental principles he could have either extolled the strong and the mighty (who are capable of setting the standards by which others live) or simply shrugged his shoulders with a relativist indifference; he could argue for a particular set of social relations capable of ceding itself to true self-conscious planning, thus finally establishing the self-conscious subject previously presupposed by idealism; or, alternatively, Marx could stress the need for new forms of subjectivity grounded in new forms of social organization predicated on responsibility for one-another.

While even a cursory review of the literature on Marx will reveal that there is a case to be made for many of these versions of Marx, it is noteworthy that Marx will hastily foreclose many of these options, especially those that skew towards individual solutions or those that fetishize a particular "mode of life," be it linguistic, cultural, religious or other. The task here, rather than fight for one particular Marx over another, will be to outline features both positively and negatively that advance the objective we have been pursuing. One could call this an instrumental reading but, as Marx has already demonstrated, all readings are in some sense instrumental, and thus there is always more to say.

Normativity and Passivity

Here we must return to the relationship between passivity and activity, particularly with respect to the inter-subject relation. For all the reasons mentioned above, Marx is understandably cautious when it comes to the kind of passivity articulated his philosophical predecessors. It would be wise to approach Marx's resistance to pure "passivity" with the same generosity previously extended to Levinas' purported eschewal of "activity." Just as Levinas' insistence on the instrumentality implicit within the activity of "ontology" was a response to the horrors of the 20th century, so too is Marx' skepticism of "passivity" derived from his contemporary's relative indifference to the suffering induced on a systemic level. Under such conditions it is to be expected that Marx would approach the abstract "social virtues" derived from a decontextualized interpersonal relation—such as "the feeling of natural human affinity and unity"—with a certain level of hostility, since those who espouse such platitudes seem to be blind to the fact that "feudal bondage, slavery and all the social inequalities of every age have also been based upon this 'natural affinity.'"[382] Far from leading to a "criticism of the present conditions of life,"

[382] Marx, *German*, p. 47.

Feuerbach is able to take "refuge" in his lofty ideals, sublimating his expressed desire to actually confront the reality of "overworked and consumptive starvelings."[383] To begin with such optimism is, for Marx, as useful as pointing a flashlight in one's own eyes: it may make the world a brighter place, but, it will also effectively blind you to the status and suffering of others. All things considered, there are many sound reasons behind Marx's enthusiasm to analyze the inter-human relation primarily in terms of the concrete socio-political relations that mediate all human interaction.

Given this predisposition it is actually somewhat surprising how much passivity Marx retains. Though his philosophy of intersubjectivity arrives as an "ensemble," Marx is clear that the significance of the bond established between subjects is not itself exhausted by the context in which it does so. There is no doubt something to the stereotype that the more philosophical and explicitly normative aspects (often associated with his "humanism") slowly wane over the course of Marx's writings (though I would argue are still present and important throughout), and even with the young Marx, there is a hesitancy (for all the reasons mentioned) to speak of inter-human signification apart from the concrete context of everyday existence. It is therefore interesting that his most abstract philosophical reference to the inter-subjective relation appears in *Capital*, a work purportedly sheltered from the capricious winds of humanism. (Though, to be fair, even this statement, which appears in a footnote, is used as a metaphor for political economy by Marx, to describe how value is a relation and not the inherent property of the autonomous commodity). As Marx writes:

> In a certain sense, a man is in the same situation as a commodity. As he neither enters into the world in possession of a mirror, nor as the Fichtean philosopher who can say 'I am I', a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his

[383] Ibid.

> likeness. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species man for Peter.[384]

When writing this passage Marx is well aware that, in reality, "Paul" and "Peter" are not solipsistic ego's existing in an abstract realm who just happen to discover the other—and thereby themselves—for the first time. Marx is obviously here vulnerable to the same critiques that he frequently levels against his contemporaries: in theorizing "man" he is mistakenly universalizing a particular German, masculine experience (evidenced, above all, by the designations "man," "Paul," and "Peter"). At the same time there is something to this decontextualized meeting that Marx is attempting to articulate; that the self is necessarily mediated through others (as Levinas puts it, "I am 'in myself' through the others"[385]) regardless of the designation ascribed to them by their context (where the other is "my child," "boss," or "fellow worker," etc.). Thus the specific context mediating this fateful meeting between Paul and Peter—the very substance of sociality that otherwise consumes Marx's thought—is here irrelevant. It makes no difference (in this highly *specific* sense) if Paul is wearing a suit, sarong, or priestly cassock; if they are meeting on the factory floor, a hotel bar or on a crowded bus; or even if their names were "Hannah" and "Aaradhya." Regardless of the specific overlapping, intertwined, co-extensive strata of being, this particular point remains the same: Hannah will experience the experience of Hannah as already a relation to Aaradhya and vice versa. This means the asymmetrical relation does not, strictly speaking, take place on the same plane as the context that mediates it.

This dimension of the inter-human relation is precisely what Levinas is aiming at when he describes intersubjectivity as a "relation without relation."[386] Simply put Hannah does not decide to become an intersubjective being entangled with Aaradhya based on a given context or

[384] Marx, *Capital*, p. 144.
[385] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 112.
[386] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 80.

attribute she may or may not possess, nor does "being" or "structure," hovering from on high, simply produce effects that we label "Hannah" and "Aaradhya"—where the only relation that exists between them is via a mediating third term. The "otherness" of the other, that is, my inability to extricate myself from the other, as Levinas suggests, "does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity."[387]

It is uncontroversial to say that Marx unequivocally affirms the *analytical* validity of Levinas' assertion that the relation to the other precedes the relation to the self (where the other is already "for me" or interpreted on the basis of the terms set forth from a given totality). Such a non-intentional relation is in fact the theoretical lynch pin of Marx's theory of alienation developed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.* This particular facet of alienation has (to the degree it is discussed at all[388]) been typically limited by Marx's many interpreters to a discussion of the fourth type of alienation described by Marx—the alienation of "man from man"—which is viewed as afterthought or consequence of the previous three, more primary, forms. Indeed, the progression of Marx's analysis gives this very impression, at least initially. Marx begins by discussing alienation from the perspective of the worker estranged from the product of their labour. He then takes a step back and describes the worker is simultaneously alienated from the creative activity itself. Zooming out even further Marx reaches the conclusion

[387] Ibid., p. 194.

[388] For example, in Gould's analysis of alienation, she avoids this dimension all together which enables her to reach the conclusion that alienation is a specific form of domination unique to the capitalist mode of production. So while pre-capitalist societies were rife with domination, there is "no alienation strictly speaking, since the presuppositions of alienated labor do not exist as characteristics of the society as a whole." (p. 185) Such a move is further permitted by her belief that Marx, following Aristotle (and contra Hegel, and interpreters like Ollman), conceives of the human individual as an "independent reality" that enters into social relations with each other. This perspective makes it easier to downplay the ontological and (to a degree) normative significance of the relation to the other. Carol C. Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Social Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978)

that if individual is alienated from the products and the processes that determine how and what is produced, then, they must also be alienated from society itself, that is the collective substance (or "species being") that, as we described above, determine the very horizons in which subjectivity can express itself. There is a logical flow to this analysis that proceeds from the particular to the universal aspects of alienation, a progression that is characteristic of Marx's preferred mode of presentation.

After examining the general implications Marx breaks off to explore alienation from the perspective of "man to man," which at first *appears* to be little more than an addendum, a kind of theoretical house cleaning to be addressed only after the particular/universal relation has been solved. Accordingly, Marx begins by describing the alienation of "man to man" as a necessary "consequence" of the first three forms because when "man" attempts to confront "himself" he necessarily "confronts other men." However, Marx goes on to note that this relation to the other may appear as a secondary (or more accurately quaternary) concern, as an interpersonal confrontation that happens long *after* the battle field of society has been constructed, but in reality the first three aspects (labour, activity, species being) cannot be extracted from the relation to the other. Because the self is already mediated through others the alienation of the individual from "species-being" must mean that not only is the self-estranged from itself but therefore must already presuppose that "man is estranged from the others and that all are estranged from" their collective "essence." Thus Marx concludes that, contrary to how it may appear, the alienation of "man to man" must be the initial expression of alienation through which all the other facets of alienation are experienced. As he states: "Man's estrangement, like *all* relationships of man to himself, is realized and expressed *only* in man's relationship to other

men."[389] The first three aspects of alienation are thus, strictly speaking, modalities of the fourth. Marx would seem here to abide by Levinas' insistence that the mediation of the self through society (language, norms, institutions, etc), retains its structure (at both the individual and universal poles) precisely because it is expressed through a relation to other concrete living humans. This is the social aspect that makes alienation indeed possible. For Marx, the worker experiences Levinas' point that one "disentangle [themselves] from society with the Other, even when [they] consider the Being of the existent he is,"[390] in a very real, albeit it negative, way. The worker cannot, after taking stock of the structures that mediate the relation to others, renounce their sociality and become the atomistic *homo economicus* (like Robinson Crusoe) that Marx otherwise uses as philosophical fodder. As a result, if the relation to the other is malformed so too is the relation that one has to themselves. While the necessity of human entanglement opens up the possibility of alienation it also presents us with the distinct possibility that the relation to others, and thereby our relation to ourself, could be expressed otherwise.

The question that we must now confront is, if Marx accepts the descriptive value of Levinas claim, what sense of normativity does he derive from it? Is it portrayed, as it is in Levinas, as "hospitality," "goodness," and "ethics." To guide us in this inquiry we can refer to a crucial "equivocation"[391] pointed to by Asher Horowitz within the "developmental imperative"[392] guiding Marx's social ontology. For reasons that we have already explored at length, Horowitz notes that, for Marx, the uniqueness of the human resides in its ability to develop its capacities in concert with others and their environment. However, the imperative

[389] Marx, *Economic*, p. 330. Emphasis added
[390] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 47.
[391] Asher Horowitz, "'All that Is Holy," p. 75.
[392] Ibid., p. 66.

guiding the imperative to develop human capacities, according to Horowitz, is itself ambiguous, oscillating between two different perspectives: the "human-to-human" relation and the relation of the "human-to-itself."[393] While Horowitz is careful to note that these perspective are not necessarily in conflict with one another, and, moreover, that the "noble" goal of self-development "does not *eo ipso* undermine the human-to-human,"[394] he indicates—at least as a theoretical possibility—how they might come into conflict. If the human-to-human is made subordinate to the development of human capacities within the framework of the "human-to-itself"—where labour represents the objectification and recuperation of my power—the other risks becoming simply another "region of objectification…as though the affirmation of the other occurs for the sake of my self-affirmation, my reality, and my power…This is the logic of totalization"[395]

This is, however, an "equivocation" within Marx. As Horowitz notes, within Marx's theory of "species-being" there is also a conception of self for-the-other without being against itself, where activity and labour is itself an affirmation of others. The possibility of a theory of objectified relations (labour, activity, language, politics) that does not unequivocally represent an instrumental totality is precisely what we are seeking in order to push Levinas beyond his inchoate view of alienation and politics. However, in order to place Marx in service of Levinas we must first address this lacuna within Marx.

Marx with Levinas: the human-to-human

We will begin by exploring the human-to-human side of the relation (or the Levinasian side) as it presents itself in Marx. Here Marx derives a great deal of normativity from the inter-

[393] Ibid., p. 68.
[394] Ibid., p. 66.
[395] Ibid., p. 67.

human relation. To return to the section of the *Manuscripts* on alienated labour, apart from the specific passage quoted above, the inter-human relation is mostly explored from the perspective of the human to itself. In such instances the other concerns Marx insofar as they are the phenomena through which the subject must experience their alienation, where the necessity of "bonded activity" places the worker "under the yoke of another man."[396] There are many exceptions however, the most notable of which is found in the sentence immediately following Marx's insight that "all" relations are first expressed in the relation to the other, where he therefore concludes, in proper Levinasian fashion, that the problem with alienated labour is that the "worker" is forced to "regard the other" according to the "situation in which [the] worker finds [themselves]."[397] Alienated labour thus forces me to assess, judge and value the other in accordance with their alienated circumstance. A similar sentiment is expressed, just prior, in Marx's concluding thoughts on the alienation of "species-being," where he states that the collective bond, described as the "spiritual" and "human essence," shared by the members of society has become nothing more than a "means" for their "individual existence."[398] While it is developed in greater detail elsewhere, the estrangement of one from the other is portrayed here as distinct form of alienation, not reducible to, or a modality of, the alienation of the self.

The fact that one must find themselves in, through, and for others is a fact often celebrated by Marx. This requires a much more nuanced conception of passivity than the one articulated by Fichte who, at his existentialist height, conceived of sensation as nothing other than objective resistance to the infinity of the subjective act, and thus no kind of passivity at all. By contrast, in Marx there is the recurrent sense that passivity does not indicate a deficiency of

[396] Marx, *Economic*, p. 331.
[397] Ibid., p. 330.
[398] Ibid.

being but, rather, furnishes it with its very substance. The external world is thus not immediately under the rubric of "consciousness of"; rather consciousness is "delayed" by Marx, now seen to be an expression of a primordial relation to the world. As Marx puts it in the *The German Ideology*, consciousness is "from the outset afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter" and is, "therefore, from the very beginning a social product."[399] "A being which does not have its nature outside itself" Marx writes "is not a natural being and plays no part in the system of nature…A non-objective being is a *non-being*."[400]

This non-allergic relation to the realm of the "not-I" is a considerable departure from Fichte's view of sensation (which itself contains notable exceptions) or the liberal view that the social world is composed of an aggregate of individuals externally related to one another. This primordial openess to the world is one of the attributes the young Levinas finds attractive in Marx:

> Marxism no longer sees the human spirit as pure freedom, or a soul floating above any attachment. The spirit is no longer a pure reason that partakes in a realm of ends. It is prey to material needs. But as it is at the mercy of a matter and a society that no longer obey the magic wand of reason, its concrete and servile existence has more weight and importance than does impotent reason. The struggle that preexists intelligence imposes decisions on the latter which it had not taken.[401]

Levinas would go on to expound upon Marx's theory of embodiment in *Totality and Infinity*, where, against Heidegger, he would describe sensation as marking a non-intentional openess to the world, or "living from," where the contents of the world have not yet assumed their "ready-to-hand" function and disappeared within the instrumental totality of implements and projects, where "existence is not exhausted by the utilitarian schematism that delineates them as having

[399] Marx, *German*, pp. 49-50.
[400] Marx, *Economic*, p. 390.
[401] Levinas, "Reflections," p. 66-7.

the existence of hammers, needles, or machines."[402] This is not to deny that the world is already in motion and every sensation is bound with an activity and history of activities, but, as Marx is also aware, this reprieve from activity is necessary so that the activity of consciousness does not itself become a fetishized activity, the sole index by which all else is judged (as Levinas puts it, where the "I think" quickly becomes the "I can," or the "exploitation of reality"[403]). In this same vein Marx will embrace the vulnerability of existence, stating: "To be *sensuous*, i.e. to be real, is to be an object of sense, a *sensuous* object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself…To be sensuous is to *suffer* (to be subjected to the actions of another)." He continues, that it is only because the human is a "*suffering* being" that they can, in turn, become "a *passionate* being."[404]

Marx's appreciation for the embodied nature of existence becomes crucial in how he regards the human-to-human relation. Not beginning from a fetishized view of primordial autonomy or self-unity, Marx is less prone to gifting the subject a "metaphysical passport" through which it can justify itself—at the most fundamental level—in the face of the other. It then follows that identity, consciousness, and freedom, are therefore not conceived of as independent from or antithetical to the human-to-human relation. In these moments Marx breaks from the identity principle, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, as the other is not only perceived from the recovered gaze of consciousness, where it is little more than the raw materials of the Subject which is-already and yet-to-be. And thus, Marx does in fact approach the question of alienation in the manner demanded by Levinas:

> In order to describe the passivity of the subject, one should not start with its opposition to a matter which resists it outside of it...nor should one start with the opposition between a man and a society that binds him to labor, while depriving him of the

[402] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 110.
[403] Ibid., p. 46.
[404] Marx, *Economic*, p. 390.

> products of his labor. This passivity is, to be sure, an exposedness of the subject to another, but the passivity of the subject is more passive still than that which the oppressed one determined to struggle undergoes. ..the subjectivity…of the subject, is due to my being obsessed with responsibility for the oppressed who is other than myself…"[405].

What I am suggesting here is that the "ensemble of social relations" is comprised of two qualitatively distinct *kinds* of social relations in both Marx and Levinas, something approximating the two strands of a double helix. The first strand represents the immediate human-to-human relation while the second delineates the actual social, symbolic, and political content of the relation. At every moment these two strands spiral together to create the texture of experience. Something close to this metaphor is suggested by Marx in the German Ideology, where he states that society itself "presupposes the *intercourse* of individuals with one another" but that the "form of this intercourse is…determined by production."[406] That there are two strands of the social relation which are irreducible to each other is precisely what enables both Marx and Levinas speak of human sociality in terms of alienation and non-alienation. If the "ensemble" was expressed not as two strands but as a monolithic movement (that is, if the social relation was context and nothing more), then one would forfeit the right to make normative judgments about society: for better or worse, we would define ourselves and others only through the terms that society happened to provide for us (which is the common critique of Heideggerian relativism). As we have noted, for Levinas these strands remain (with some important exceptions which we will discuss) relatively equidistant, as the human-to-human is indiscriminately betrayed by its material manifestation. While *slightly* less enthusiastic about the sanctity of the human-to-human (which isn't really saying much), this tempered optimism paradoxically enables Marx to conceive of a reduction in the betrayal. Marx thus views the social bond from

[405] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 54
[406] Marx, *German*, p. 37.

both of these perspectives in order to critique and indicate an alternative relation between the two.

The two sided nature of the social relation is most apparent in *Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy.* Along the lines we have drawn, Marx begins by distinguishing between two forms of mediation: the subjects "relation to others" and the "alien mediator" the intercedes between the humans on behalf of the "relation between things." The problem, as Marx describes it, is that network of "independent" relations has fulfilled the mediatory function "instead of man himself being the mediator for man."[407] Crucial is that here mediation is not simply an analytical category (things are always mediated by their relation to other things) for Marx, but a normative distinction which privileges the human-to-human while eschewing forms of human mediation where the self only relates to the other a "third term." This allusion to the Levinasian term is appropriate since Marx goes on describe mediation in terms that mirror Levinas' critique of Heideggerian Being: "It is obvious that this mediator must become a veritable God since the mediator is the real power over that with which he mediates me. His cult becomes an end in itself. Separated from this mediator, objects lose their worth. Thus they have value only in so far as they represent him."[408] This mediating totality consists of two "movements": The "social, human movement" which is counterposed to the "mediating movement" of "exchange," that is described as the "abstract relation" of private property and the money form—abstract because "in the process of exchange men do not relate to each other as men, things lose the meaning of personal, human property."[409]

[407] Karl Marx, "Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy," *Writings*, p. 260.
[408] Ibid.
[409] Ibid., p. 262.

This gives Marx occasion to critique the Hegelian view that the exchange relation, predicated on private property and embodied in the money form, represents the objectification and return to self, and thus the overcoming of estrangement. According to Marx, this movement of mediation has only increased "dehumanization" because the "element" of exchange is not in fact commodities themselves but the very "moral existence, the social existence, the very heart of man."[410] In such a society the terms of exchange become the basis of the social relation itself, where the economic relation becomes the measure of the other, an "economic judgement on the morality of man"[411]:

> This means, then, that the totality of the poor man's social virtues, the content of his life's activity, his very existence, represent for the rich man the repayment of his capital together with the usual interest. For the creditor the death of the poor man is the very worst thing that can happen. It means the death of his capital together with the interest. We should reflect on the immorality implicit in the evaluation of a man in terms of money…"[412]

This gives clarity and substance to Marx's later claim from the *Manuscripts*, where, in discussing the alienation of "man to man," Marx briefly notes that alienated labour requires one to see the other in accordance to the standard and situation in which the worker finds himself. The exchange relation, according to Marx, necessitates that one perceives in the other only those discreet attributes which can be translated into "value" according to the instrumental terms of the totality.

Through this bifurcation of the social experience, where the human-to-human relation is simultaneously expressed and revoked within social relations, Marx is able to claim that the dominant mode of life expressed by market relations represents the "very antithesis of a social

[410] Ibid., p. 263.
[411] Ibid., p. 264.
[412] Ibid., p. 263.

relationship."[413] By this Marx does not of course mean to suggest that the market is not firmly embedded within society, rather, he is claiming that the very social processes that interpellate the subject already represent a perversion of sociality. As Marx describes, in "social activity," and "social enjoyment" the "essential bond joining him to other men appears inessential, in fact separation from other men appears to be his true existence."[414] The market thus represents the atomization of humanity in and through society.

This very sentiment is scattered throughout Marx's writings, for example, in the *Manuscripts* Marx writes that the "human essence" only exists within "a *bond*" where the "existence for others and their existence for [them]" is described as the "vital element of human reality."[415] In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx similarly states that "the bond" that now binds the members of society is no longer "species-life" but that of "natural necessity, need and private interest, the conservation of their property and their egoistic persons," and thus each sees the other not as the "*realization* but the *limitation* of [their] own freedom."[416] This is immediately followed by one of Marx's most interesting (and curiously seldom theorized) statements, where Marx is somewhat perplexed by the squandered emancipatory potential of the French revolution:

> It is a curious thing that a people which is just beginning to free itself, to tear down all the barriers between the different sections of the people and to found a political community, that such a people should solemnly proclaim the rights of egoistic man, separated from his fellow men and from the community.[417]

What is essential here is that Marx's vision of a political community is founded, not a "third term" (such as a shared language, lineage, customs, beliefs, nor on the rights of the atomized individual), but on the *destruction* of every barrier erected to separate the human from the

[413] Ibid., p. 267.
[414] Ibid., p. 266.
[415] Marx, *Economic*, p. 394.
[416] Marx, "On the Jewish Jewish Question," *Writings*, p. 230.
[417] Ibid.

human. The "essence" of the relation with others is the relation qua relation (or, in Levinas' terms the "relation without relation") and thus Marx does not (contra Fichte) seek to *establish* a community based on this or that predicate (although any society will inevitably contain a multiplicity of predicates). This example points to the possibility that a community can be founded upon a rootless orientation vis-a-vis the other, even if it must necessarily entail a complex network of mediations (language, institutions, etc.). Marx describes such a possibility as the "real community" where individual does not obtain their freedom in their obedience to Being (or any of its manifestations) but only "in and through their association."[418]

To return to the *Excerpts*, this sentiment is once again confirmed in Marx's attitude toward the advancement of the productive forces within market relations. A society predicated on the exchange relation (founded upon private property) has dramatically increased the developmental capacities of society, and yet, Marx states, this expansion of human powers, while impressive, has made humanity more "egoistic" and "un-social" and thus (at least here) it represents the antithesis of social advancement: it has transformed the subject into "an abstract being, a lathe…a spiritual and physical abortion."[419] The development of productive capacities have thus impeded human liberation by further entrenching the priority of the mediating totality as a bond of the social over and above the social bond.

At this point Marx again begins to ponder what society might look like if the human-to-human relation were affirmed rather than suffocated within society. Marx, here, gives a much more detailed view of his later statement, which describes freedom as only obtained in and through association with others. Beginning from the perspective of production guided by market

[418] Marx, *German*, p. 87.
[419] Marx, *Excepts*, p. 269.

exchange, Marx claims that the products of labour are nothing but "objectified self-interest,"[420] and thus humans only relate to the needs and desires of each other externally, as if they were nothing more than the requisite region of my self-satisfaction. To elaborate the depravity of this relation, Marx utilizes a metaphor that becomes the central analogy of *Capital*, where the commodity, animated by spirit of capitalism, takes on an independent life of its own.

> As a human being, then, you have no relation to my product because I myself have no human relation to it. But the means is the true power over an object and hence we each regard our own products as the power each has over the other and over himself, i.e. our own product has stood up on its hind legs against us: it had seemed to be our property, but in reality we are its property. We find ourselves excluded from true property because our property excludes other human beings.[421]

What is so fascinating about this passage is that it is clear that the autonomy of the object is not only posited in reference to the first three forms of alienation, where the subject becomes estranged from its products, activity and relation to being-as-such. The autonomy of the product is attributed primarily to the fact that it "*excludes*" the other, and thus remains within the private domain, even though it is socially produced and available for purchase by others. To again put it in Levinasian terms, Marx is stating that even though the production and sale of commodities occurs with the social arena, its movement is within the domain of the "same," that is, does not extend beyond the reach of expanded egoism.

At this point Marx, once again, foreshadows his reference to the "language of commodities" in *Capital*, as Marx states that, in such a situation, the "only comprehensible language we have is the language our possessions use together."[422] In the same way he disarticulates the social bond into two movements, Marx now proposes a rigid demarcation between the language spoken by the market and the "human language" which "[w]e would not

[420] Ibid., p.275.
[421] Ibid., p.276.
[422] Ibid., p.276.

understand…and it would remain ineffectual" from the perspective of the former. Marx continues:

> From the one side, such a language would be felt to be begging, imploring and hence humiliating. It could be used only with feelings of shame or debasement. From the other side, it would be received as impertinence or insanity and so rejected. We are so estranged from our human essence that the direct language of man strikes us as an offence against the dignity of man.[423]

According to the former, the value of the human is "worthless" in itself. The only value the other has for me and vice versa is through "the value of our mutual objects."[424]

In works like *Capital*, as we will momentarily investigate, Marx explores the contours of this totality in great detail, however, in the *Excerpts*, unlike in many of his subsequent works, Marx provides us with an image of the "human language." "Let us suppose that we had produced as human beings," Marx begins, in such an "event each of us would have doubly affirmed himself and his neighbour in his production." The human is "doubly affirmed" because they not only enjoy the creative act of objectifying their individuality within the sensory experience of unlamented labour but also would find "enjoyment" in the "knowledge that in my labour I had…procured an object corresponding to the needs of another human being." Marx then concludes, in the most Levinasian fashion that, in such a circumstance:

> I would have acted for you as the mediator between you and the species, thus I would be acknowledged by you as the complement of your own being, as an essential part of yourself. I would thus know myself to be confirmed both in your thoughts and your love. In the individual expression of my own life I would have brought about the immediate expression of your life, and so in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realized my authentic nature, my human, communal nature. Our productions would be as many mirrors from which our natures would shine forth.[425]

[423] Marx, *Excerpts*, p. 276
[424] Ibid.
[425] Ibid., p.77-8.

With this Marx has not only transcended the closed loop of same at the level of the subject/other relation (the first strand of the double helix), but, has expressed labour, activity and objectification (the second strand) in terms that continue to confirm subjectivity as responsibility.

Rootlessness, language and universality redux

It is remarkable how close Marx's distinction between the "human language" and the "language of commodities" is to Levinas' famous distinction between the "saying" and the "said." The first significant thing to note is that both cases mark a significant departure from the obsession with language within philosophy. The focus on language, like that of subjectivity in general, is marked by the break with empiricism, where words and concepts were considered inert conduits which express ideas already given to the mind (Locke, etc.). Thinkers such as Condillac, Herder and Von Humboldt increasingly understood language as more than just pre-manufactured tools, concepts themselves took an active role in shaping the subjective experience of the world. Language was now considered to be, as Von Humboldt claimed, "a formative organ of thought." The history and structure of language becomes a focal point for a variety of thinkers such as Fichte, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Arendt, Gramsci, Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva.

The relative indifference of Marx and Levinas to social and semiotic dimensions of language is often considered to be, for a variety of reasons, a detriment. While this may indeed be the case, it does help illuminate one of their common strengths. This dimension of language does not seem to interest them because they are both concerned with language as an expression, or activity, which, like all expressions, is directed toward other humans. This aspect is precisely what is obscured when one focuses on the stable features of language such as etymology, syntax, grammar, semiotics, interpretation, culture, etc. This is, in no small way, a by-product of their

commitment to a variant of rootless subjectivity, even universalism, one that refuses to subordinate the human-to-human to a mediating third term, and therefore wary of any attempts to ground a community within a tradition, lineage, way of being-in-the-world, or particular "mode-of-life" (which is also not to say that they would not benefit for an analysis of language as a social force, etc.).

What is fascinating is that, for both Marx and Levinas, language is conveyed as an all or nothing proposition that either expresses the one-for-the-other or represents the perversion or frustration of that desire. Consequently, what is resisted is the temptation to misapprehend this signification, a situation where the hermeneutical horizon itself becomes the repository of being-for-others. The emphasis on language as expression, thus, elides the possibility that this moment would become sublimated or fully consummated within sphere of meaning. Where, as Marx so eloquently puts it, "I would have acted for you as the mediator between you and the species."

But, as Marx is well aware, this is only one aspect of the social experience, which cannot remain abstracted from history, economics and politics. In our age of neoliberalism, austerity, nationalism, and imperialism we certainly continue to exist in and through each other. This means that, on the one hand, the experience of the world is often coupled with expression of hope, solidarity, love, and kindness. However, on the other hand, it also means that such moments are too often fleeting, malformed, and suppressed by the particular species-form society has assumed. The question that lies at the intersection of Marx and Levinas is therefore, can we conceive of new forms of universality and "species-being" that affirm, rather than distorts, our being for and with others. We will momentarily return to this question; however we will be in a better position to do so after we have sufficiently explored both sides of the equivocation in Marx.

Beyond labour as freedom and freedom as egoism: a critique of Jaeggi and Gould

To remain on this side of the social relation for just a moment longer, it is important to note how this aspect of Marx, which emphases subjectivity as a radical break from egoism (defined intimately or socially), is dramatically under-theorized. Marx's theory of labour, and subjectivity more generally, is typically understood only as the objectification of the contents of the mind, which, though their re-appropriation makes the subject, as Hegel puts it, into a "substance." The relationship of the subject to their labour becomes the axis around which the self can either be recovered, and thereby developed at a higher pitch (where the external world becomes, quite literally, its inorganic body) or alienated (where self fails to recognize itself in the world around it). From this perspective, others are an important aspect of self-development (or return to self), to be sure, however, the other is only significant in their generic function (other-as-society, or "being-with," to use the Heideggerian phrase), and even then only secondary characters necessarily dragged into the plot by the movement of the ego.

Such a view provides the basis for many contemporary critiques (and some applications) of Marx. From Althusser to contemporary critical theory, the common refrain is that concepts such as "species-being" and alienation, can only appear as "objectivist," "essentialist," and "Promethian" when held up to modern philosophical standards. According to Honneth, perhaps the most prominent of these, Marx's theory of alienation is antiquated because it refers (even if negatively) to an idealized and very specific "relation of labour" which has been "lost."[426] Honneth, therefore, remains puzzled that Adorno in particular, would have retained Marx's

[426] Axel Honneth, "Foreward," in *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. ix.

(relatively unaltered) category of "alienation" despite his otherwise strong distaste for "generalizations and hypostatizations."[427]

In her attempt to rescue the concept of alienation from Marx's "Promethean-expressivist twist,"[428] Rahel Jaeggi treads a similar path. According to Jaeggi Marx's pathology stems from the fact that his normative foundation is rooted in human labour as an end-in-itself. Highlighting Marx's "Aristotelian" impulses, she states that what is "alienating about alienated labor" is that it is "instrumental" and therefore without "intrinsic purpose, that it is not (at least also) performed for its own sake."[429] Marx is considered by Jaeggi to be the quintessential example of the development imperative from the perspective of the self-relation, where the "human being produces herself and her world in a single act. In producing her world the human being produces herself and vice versa."[430] Labor, according to her reading of Marx, enables the subject to "recognize" itself and its capacities and thus find itself "through this relation," which is why *only* "unlamented labor…counts for Marx as the human being's essential characteristic."[431] Labour is thus crucial for Marx because the subject must first build a mirror for itself so that it can recognize itself as a free being—a situation where, according to Jaeggi, there is "perfect correspondence between the image reflected in the mirror and the source of that reflection."

This interpretation enables Jaeggi to quickly dismiss Marx's theory of alienation out of hand: to posit labour as an "reappropriation of something that already exists,"[432] necessarily leads Marx down the path of essentialism, perfectionism and objectivism. Instead of already assuming a perfect relation that has been lost, Jaeggi charts a new course for the theory of

[427] Ibid., p. vi.
[428] Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)., p. 12.
[429] Ibid., p. 13-14.
[430] Ibid., p. 14.
[431] Ibid.
[432] Ibid., p. 15.

alienation by retreading familiar territory where the individual is something to be constructed from the social rather than discovered (and thus she does not presuppose a specific relation to labour per se).

This reading of Marx is interesting on a number of levels. The first is that Jaeggi's own normative/analytical standpoint, which advocates a kind of intersubjective egoism. As I have detailed elsewhere,[433] Jaeggi is able to circumvent crucial ethical, political and historical questions because she adopts, for social reasons (namely, this is already the normative orientation of our present "form of life," and, since there is no "archimedean point," it remains a fact of our social existence), a myopic view of alienation, which simply describes the inability of one to find oneself within their own actions. This sleight of hand enables Jaeggi to seamlessly drop the analytical scope of Marx's analysis (history, capitalism, in sum, the totality of social relations) because her view of the "non-essentialist" subject does not concern itself with the plight of others (except to the degree that they represent the social material from which I craft my being). Thus the narrative that labour is an end-in-itself qua the recovery of the self, enables her to justify the narrow scope of her analysis. Accordingly, for Jaeggi, the non-alienated life refers to the feeling of having a stake in one's life, or "a way of carrying out one's own life and a certain way of appropriating oneself - that is, a way of establishing relations to oneself and the relationships in which one lives."[434] Because, putatively unlike Marx, she sets no predetermined end for the subject, she need not concern herself with the "perfect" or "Promethean" labour relation. The only imperative Jaeggi leaves us with is to transform the "inner void" of subjectivity into a "true self," or else risk the prospect that we might, literally, remain a

[433] See, Robert Froese, "Review of Rahel Jaeggi's 'Alienation,'" *Journal of Social and Political Thought - Special Issue: Pathologies of Recognition* 25 (2015): 44-53.
[434] Ibid., p. 33.

nobody.[435] This imperative, she states, avoids metaphysical claims because it is derived from the horizons of the "form of life" in which she resides. Devoid of a relation to the other qua other, alienation simply describes "relationlessness between the human being and the world."[436]

This sentiment is not only present in critiques of Marx. Gould's (overall interesting) study on Marx's "social ontology," for example, stakes out a similar position with some crucial modifications. According to Gould, Marx's view of freedom differs from Hegel and Aristotle only in one key respect, it rejects "the idea of a pre-given or fixed nature or essence that becomes actualized." Gould thus concludes that, for Marx, freedom is "the process of creating this nature itself…a freedom to realize oneself in which an individual creates him or herself through projecting possibilities that become guides for his or her actions, where the realization of these possibilities leads to the projection of new possibilities to be realized."[437] In almost identical terms to Jaeggi's "non-Marxist" definition of freedom, Gould states that, for Marx freedom and labour work together to the end of "self-transcendence through transforming the world."[438] What is immediately apparent is that, while Gould provides a convincing counterpoint to Jaeggi's "essentialist" accusations, she does so by positioning Marx in a way that perfectly mirrors Jaeggi's purported corrective, where the story of subjectivity is once again about self-mastery without limit or end. At this level Gould's Marx is virtually indistinguishable from Jaeggi's espoused position:

> Furthermore, since this transformation is carried out by individuals in social relations and this is a social activity, the conditions for this individual self-transcendence are themselves social conditions. Thus for Marx, freedom as the process of self-realization is the origination of novel possibilities, acting on which the social individual creates and recreates him or herself constantly as a self-transcendent being.[439]

[435] Ibid., p. 95.
[436] Ibid., p. 12.
[437] Gould, *Marx's*, p. 108-9.
[438] Ibid., p. 109.
[439] Ibid., p. 109.

Gould therefore concludes that, "[f]reedom has no ground as a value outside of itself and all other values are grounded in it. It is value itself as the end in itself." The only "qualification" Gould puts on this process of "pure self-creation" is that "freedom is achieved only in and through this process of working on nature in a given form of society."[440] What is fascinating about the comparison between Gould and Jaeggi is that latter admits that her values for self-mastery are engendered by her historical and spatial particularly (which she calls "mode of life" and we might qualify with the more particular "neoliberal"), and thus represents a kind of soft relativist historical materialist (individualist by convention), while Gould hypostatizes the imperative for self-mastery and thus risks reifying neoliberal values in the name of Marx.

This notion of non-alienated labour as an end in itself is of course not absent in Marx, as we briefly noted earlier, however, before turning to this tension in Marx, it is important to note that Marx's theory of subjectivity and alienation is presented in both Gould and Jaeggi without a hint of tension, as if the matter is solved for both Marx and us.

No doubt freedom, conceived of in terms of individuality, mastery, self-transformation, is an integral parts of the human experience and can go a great distance to describe any project of liberation. The questions remain, however, if left to themselves (conceived of as untethered or self-grounded values, as Gould states), do such concepts adequately capture the concrete experience of sociality, and, moreover, can they articulate a normative orientation equal to that very experience? I think Marx precedes Levinas by answering in the negative. As we have shown, Marx's conception of the human bond, and freedom in, through and for others, goes well beyond the scope of freedom defined above. To accept such a definition of freedom, one has a hard time explaining the difference between Marx's call for universal revolution and Jaeggi's

[440] Ibid., p. 119.

anti-historical individualism. The easiest way to parse the difference would be to represent it as an analytical quibble about how deep and wide one need to churn and alter their social relations for it to count as "authentic" self-transformation. From such a perspective, Jaeggi's position would seem far more reasonable, as Marx's dive into the deep structures of capitalism, where his immodest attempt to master more than one could ever, would appear as another symptom of his perfectionism.

If Marx's theory of intersubjectivity were indeed predicated upon self-mastery as the ultimate value, it would appear that Marx only arrived at the depths of the "mode of production"—which function as his theoretical "ground zero"—because he wanted to fashion himself into a truly transcendent (and thereby perfect) being. And thus, because he cannot possibly live up to his own lofty standards of what constitutes true freedom (which would appear to require be mastery on a universal scale), he was bound to lose the very thing he sought to find. Such a position would also presuppose that Marx's universalism is grounded in analytical necessity. Namely that, as a happy coincidence, his task of self-mastery just so happens to require the collaboration (and hence forth liberation) of those who were lucky enough to share his particular mode of being—and presumably his concern need extend no further. This concern thus reaches a universal scope only as a consequence of the global reach of capitalism, which now requires universal liberation as the positive condition of his own private odyssey. Thus Marx's proclamation that "[l]abour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin"[441] is simply describing an analytical necessity, a concern for the others that could otherwise be avoided if the conditions for self-transformation were favourable enough to narrow his scope of concern.

[441] Marx, *Capital*, p. 414.

While Jaeggi's potential answer to these questions is unclear, Gould attempts to address these issues by smuggling her ethics through the back door, via an examination of Marx's theory of "justice." She attempts to square the circle by expanding the scope of freedom as a robust notion of "positive freedom," which allows her to sweep up everything that escapes the narrow logic of self-mastery. Here she very briefly notes Marx's affinity for "non-instrumental relations" that goes beyond "formal reciprocity" and "recognition" but even this becomes a modality of self-mastery, rooted in the rational "respect" for how others are also free beings on their own journey of self-development.[442] Not only does this reading leave some of the most interesting aspects of Marx unexplored, but it fails to name, let alone address, the potential tension within Marx's theory of freedom, which oscillates between freedom as (self) development and freedom as in-for-and-through others. It is to this tension that we will now turn.

Levinas for Marx

We can now explore the other side of the equivocation found within Marx, where the human-to-human is in danger of becoming subordinated to the human-to-self. It is without question that Marx's work is frequently animated by his disgust for the suffering and subjugation of workers, children, slaves, and women—as Levinas himself suggests, in "Marxism" we find the "recognition of the other."[443] At the same time, it is imperative that we raise the tensions, exceptions and contradictions, in an attempt to avoid simply repeating them.

By raising his normative concerns to the systemic level, which are ultimately grounded in the "mode of production," Marx has given himself a problem which is nearly impossible to solve. By the necessities of his social ontology Marx is forced to not only confront the particular

[442] Gould, *Marx's*, p. 175-8.
[443] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 119.

instances of cruelty and barbarism—as Marx notes, even liberals are particularly good at this—but the social logic that incentivizes and demands such malice and sacrifice.

To confront systemic relations is a daunting task in-itself, no doubt. However, such a task verges on absurd because, as Marx is wont to show, the consciousness of individuals is necessarily entrenched within, and is an expression of, the "mode of life" in question. This sentiment often sounds needlessly crude and deterministic (sometimes because it is articulated as such, by Marx and others). Nevertheless, Marx's fundamental point is that because consciousness is an embodied, circumscribed, and determined phenomena, it is necessarily a tapestry woven together from socio-linguistic norms and practices, religious and ethical rituals and beliefs, as well as legal and political frameworks—all of which must exist within a fairly stable relationship with respect to *how* a society produces and distributes the means necessary to sustain this physical, spiritual and symbolic life. This being the case, the irony (or better, tragedy) of Marx's insight is that domination and misery become routinely naturalized (seen to be either unavoidable or justified), and, as a side effect, liberation becomes nearly unintelligible (a point noted earlier with respect to the unintelligibility of the "human language").

The term "unintelligible" here seems to be preferable over a more pejorative term (like undesirable, etc.) to the degree that it implies the materiality and depth of a given ideology. It is not simply that the abolishment of hierarchical relationships are undesirable from the perspective of capitalism (or feudalism, caste system, etc.), but within such co-ordinates, this egalitarian impulse can only appear as an upheaval of the natural order of things. Thus, as Marx laments, those that suffer the most "are even forced to recognize and acknowledge the fact that they are *dominated, ruled* and *possessed* as a *privilege from heaven*!"[444] When one considers the

[444] Marx, *Critique*, p. 246.

popularity of Hoffman's 1896 "extinction thesis" (which posited that the rates of poverty, disease and death in American "Negro" populations were an indication of biological inferiority and an ill-suited disposition to modern society, which, consequently, predicted their extinction within generations) or the way contemporary debates on race, gender, immigration and neoliberalism still pivot on factors that naturalize hierarchy (genetics, IQ, personality, culture, etc.), it is clear that ideology is deeply entrenched within a mutually reinforcing network of material and symbolic relations. Any "mode of life" that runs counter to such a society simply has little or no symbolic or material space within the existing universe, and can only appear as, at best, utopian.

It is thus for very good reason that Marx finds himself painted into a corner. On the one hand, Marx observes the dynamism and variability of human society. On the other hand, he also observes that radical transformations do not usually result from democratic deliberation and conscious planning. Rather, such ruptures unfold when there is a significant and unplanned shift in the foundation of social relations (which typically relate to the structure of how production is organized) that causes consequences and contradictions that cannot be contained within the existing paradigm or totality of relations. For reasons we will go into, Marx prefers to theorize the internal contradictions that evolve out of a given mode of production (or the tension produced between forces and relations of production), but he also notes that such social transformations can occur through war, colonization, or even dramatic changes in one's natural environment. At any rate, Marx seems convinced that, on account of the peculiar form of social beings that humans are, revolutions tend to lag behind the necessities that follow from a crack in the socio-economic edifice, so to speak. (In some ways this is reminiscent of the Heideggerian "breakdown" situation, where it is only when the smooth functioning of the life-world is brought to a standstill by the exigencies of the situation that it can be confronted and radically

transformed—a sentiment Heidegger himself seems to echo positively in his famous statement that "only a God can save us"—although, for Marx, such a process is still less conscious than even this analogy with Heidegger would imply.)

All of this adds up to the fact that Marx appears to find it difficult to reconcile, or even articulate, the relationship between these two planes of existence. Marx seems equally compelled to show us both the systemic causes of violence and how little we can do about it. Marx, whose consciousness is itself woven out of the tapestry of 19th Century German life, proceeds by examining one of these planes and (largely) neglecting the other. More often than not Marx will quarantine (even if he presupposes) specific questions that relate to ethics and inter-human relation, preferring instead to focus on the meta-subjective concerns such as the succession of modes of production, revolutions and history. Of course such a move does not typically, as we have already noted with respect to Levinas, have the desired effect and continues to haunt the thinker after they have considered the issue long solved.

This is where we can come back to the looming ambiguity in Marx between freedom as self-transformation in and through development and the as the expression of the human-to-human relation. Rather than dividing the "young" from the "mature" Marx, this oscillation is better thought of as a vertical movement that Marx continues to wrestle with throughout his works. It is thus already present in the account of alienated labour that was evidence of Marx's convergence with Levinas. There are moments when Marx speaks about alienated labour that he does not *only* express a desire for a different kind of social bond. In these places it sounds much closer to the desire to be free from the fetters of exteriority or "otherness" as such, as if the intersubjective relation—that is the *necessity* of being mediated through the not-I—was itself was a form alienation. Thus, when Marx describes that, in alienated labour, the product confronts

the worker as "alien, hostile and…independent," he often gives the knife of alienation an extra twist by emphasizing that it is evidence of "another man" and "master" having possession over what is rightfully his.[445] Of course, as we noted several times, political subservience is neither desirable nor does it relate to the specific matter at hand. If responsibility is nothing more than the apologetics for oppression (a new form of "slave morality") it would not be an issue that Marx raises the problem of alienation as he does. What is noteworthy about this description is that it appears as though Marx is doubling down on counterposing freedom to alienation, where it is not just the *distorted* social relation that is being contrasted with freedom but the social relation itself, a dependence which is brought into view by the exaggerated dependence of the alienated relation. In such moments Marx sounds much closer to Fichte, who (at times) begrudgingly accepts the necessity of others which, in turn, also makes him all the more diligent to re-instate the reign of the self-proper (the antipode of Levinas' dictum, which Marx elsewhere embodies: "I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired"). Marx thus follows up his description of alienated labour with the dictum:

> A *being* sees himself as independent only when he stands on his own feet, and he only stands on his own feet when he owes his *existence* to himself. A man who lives by the grace of another regards himself as a dependent being. But I live completely by the grace of another if I owe him not only the maintenance of my life but also its *creation*, if he is the *source* of my life. My life is necessarily grounded outside itself if it is not my own creation. The *creation* is therefore an idea which is very hard to exorcize from the popular consciousness.[446]

It is as if any power or relation of mutual dependence is already here a form of alienation, the subject is thus in an existential fight against alienation and the journey of subjectivity and self-development is thus one of mastery and overcoming the external character of the other.

[445] Marx, *Economic*, p. 331.
[446] Ibid., p.356.

Again, to stress the unevenness of Marx's though in this regard, this passage is immediately following one where he denounces poverty because it is the "passive bond which makes man experience his greatest wealth - the other man - as need."[447] This is significant of course because one of Levinas' complaint, in *Totality and Infinity*, is that containing the human-to-human relation under the rubric of need does not get to the root of the relation because expressed as a "need" the other is still only considered retroactively from the standpoint of already consciousness, that is, "for me." Marx here seems to acknowledge this very point and, moreover, condemns the "for me" structure of capitalism itself for reducing the other-as-wealth to mere "need" (the very same sentiment expressed in *Excerpts*).

This oscillation between subjectivity in-for-and-through others and as a return-to-self is especially relevant where Marx considers the meta-subjective plane of existence, where he does not only evaluate the specific relations *within* a mode of life but the worlds themselves and even the very movement *between* these worlds. It is too simple to say that here Marx reduces the succession of modes of production pure and simple to the developmental imperative, which is at best a form of theodicy. At the same time, it remains a distinct ambiguity throughout Marx's work. In the chapter "The Metaphysics of Political Economy" from the *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx attempts to distinguish his dialectical position from his contemporaries. He begins with a critique of the "fatalist economists" (Smith, Ricardo, etc.) and chastises them for their myopic focus on increasing the "productive forces" while ignoring the "accidental sufferings" of the proletariat. This leads Marx to an unequivocal denouncement: "Poverty is in their eyes merely the pang which accompanies every childbirth in nature as in industry."[448] However, as Marx continues he also equally admonishes the "Romantics," those "blasé

[447] Ibid.
[448] Marx, *Poverty*, p. 115.

fatalists," that see only poverty and misery in this new stage of development. Marx's dialectical solution, of course, is to find liberation within the immiseration. However, this often seems less like making the best out of a bad situation (or, to paraphrase Marx, we make history but not in the conditions that we choose) and more like a teleological understanding of development that risks fetishizing development as a necessary dialectical unfolding, as Marx concludes:

> So long as the proletariat is not yet sufficiently developed to constitute itself as a class…and the productive forces are not yet sufficiently developed in the bosom of the bourgeoisie itself to enable us to catch a glimpse of the material conditions necessary for the emancipation of the proletariat and for the formation of a new society, these theoreticians are merely utopians…the measure of history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines…they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society.[449]

To complicate the matter further, this sentiment is filled with ambiguity. It initially appears as a fairly clear example of Marx taking refuge in the meta-subjective movement, where the suffering of others is instrumentalized (and perhaps even encouraged) in order to achieve the necessary level of productive forces to achieve freedom as the final return-to-self. At the same time, even within this chapter Marx's expressed concern is to turn the critics of poverty from "doctrinaires" to "revolutionaries," that is, to actualize their morality within a set of concrete economic and political conditions, and thus escape, rather than reproduce, the very cycle of poverty. At still at other times, in Marx's writings his revolutionary spirit feels much more ambivalent than either of these moments would suggest. Given his pessimism about the potential of self-consciously systemic change, he seems to leave us with no other alternative other than to hope and pray that the continual evolution of productive forces will eventually produce a set of relations which can no longer be contained within the existing co-ordinates, making liberation both necessary and possible.

[449] Ibid., p. 117.

There are many dimensions of this quandary for which Levinas would be of no use. When it comes to questions of history, economics and political strategy, one can find libraries of better places to turn. The one place Levinas proves to be a crucial ally is in clarifying exactly is it that Marx is hoping to attain. That is, to what end should our developmental capacities be implemented? What exactly do we mean by freedom and how does this relate to our relationship to labour and to others?

One of the crucial distinctions Marx consistently utilized to answer these questions is the relationship between "freedom" and "necessity." Of course, like everything else this division turns out to be itself ambiguous. As Kandiyali notes, in exploring their relation Marx "oscillates" between two distinct logics of freedom which leads him to consistently articulate two different answers to this question: sometimes for Marx true freedom is found *within* the necessity of labour and at other times the "realm of freedom" is found only within leisure which lies beyond labour and necessity. Interestingly, Kandiyali attributes the first sense of freedom to Marx's Hegelian lineage (where freedom is found in the social aspect of labour, in satisfying the needs of others) and the second to his Aristotelian influence (where freedom lies not in the instrumental activity of labour but in contemplation which is for its own sake).[450] Kandiyali's reading is interesting in that it not only explores the intersubjectivity of labour from a normative perspective (a sentiment notably absent in Jaeggi and Gould), but this impulse is traced back to Hegel, who is often seen as the source of Marx's egoistic view of labour (as externalization and return to self). As important (and related) as these questions are, we will pursue this oscillation from our overarching concern, which is tangential to Kandiyali specific aim.

[450] Jan Kandiyali, "Freedom and Necessity in Marx's Account of Communism," in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22:1 (2014): 104-33.

Here we can return to the earlier reading of Marx with Levinas. In the first sense of freedom, Marx finds freedom *in* necessity because freedom is only found within activity as an expression for others. One can find enjoyment in necessity, not because they are masochistic but because freedom in this sense is no longer synonymous with the expansion of my individual capacities. From this perspective, as Marx approaches the development of collective capacities, he is more concerned with how society is organized in production rather than the immensity of productive capacities per se. When Marx conceives of freedom as opposed to necessity, he seems to assume that a certain threshold of development is necessary for freedom to count as true freedom. Viewed from this perspective, other "forms of life" are viewed in terms of how advanced their productive capacities are, with little attention paid to how those capacities are organized. While an analysis of the productive capacities does not, obviously, imply a normative judgement, it is often the case with Marx that it does. If freedom requires a certain threshold of developmental capacities, then true freedom is still lurking over the horizon.

Simply put, when freedom is viewed as antagonistic to necessity, Marx seem much more prone to subordinating the human-to-human to the developmental imperative. Here the history of human society is told, much like Hegel, as the teleological maturation of the Subject. For example, when discussing the evolution of human capacities, Marx has a proclivity to define less developed forms of society as "herd"[451] "sheep" or "tribal" consciousness, a form where the substance of consciousness is "purely animal" because it has yet been "hardly altered by history."[452] Marx goes on to describe how consciousness, still "sheep-like or tribal" at this point, can only differentiate itself and grasp its own development through self-transformation and

[451] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin Books, 1993), p. 496; Marx, *German*, p. 50.
[452] Marx, *German*, p. 50.

labour. A sentiment repeated in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx states that the original form of "species-being" is a "clan being" or "herd animal" and this "herd-like" existence is transformed into a "*zoon politikon*" *through* the process of exchange.[453]

As suggested above, Marx seems to care far more about the productive capacities than what may be gleaned from the social and political forms of organization contained therein. This can, at least partially, be explained as Marx's conviction that the dialectical unfolding would necessarily lead to contradictions between the productive forces and relations, and, moreover, that this path of development, already underway, was linear without a hope of return. As a result the communal structure of the "hunting peoples," is thus largely dismissed because, in such a society, the "individual has as little torn himself free from the umbilical cord of his tribe or community as a bee has from his hive."[454]

The category of "necessity," as it is articulated in these passages, does not thus simply refer to the reduction of the "working day" as it appears in the famous passage from *Capital Volume III*. Necessity here also refers to the necessity of *instincts* and *drives* that define non-human animals. What Marx seems to imply is that only those societies that have substantially transformed their environment (that is made their subjectivity into substance) have freed themselves from their animal exigencies (only if partially, or as Marx likes to put it, "one-sidedly"). There is here a connection between self-mastery and complex forms of consciousness. Consciousness begins as an immediate unity (communal property) and only begins to differentiate itself through the development of its capacities which, Marx notes several places, must first take place through one-sided development, such as the division of labour (which rips the individual from the womb of unity) before it can return to itself as a realized differentiated

[453] Ibid., p. 496.
[454] Marx, *Capital*, p. 452.

totality. We are thus back to the problem raised by Hegel in chapter three, whether or not other societies are developed and differentiated enough to be bestowed with the title of "self-consciousness." To the degree that this narrative holds for Marx, it does indeed subordinate the human to totalizing movement that he otherwise appeared to disdained.

Thus with Marx we consistently find ourselves in a bind. While he typically reserves his harshest epithets for those who would instrumentalize the suffering of others (for example the way he describes child labour and slavery), he consistently struggles to navigate the relationship between these diverging normative impulses (which is not to suggest that there is an easy answer). Marx's otherwise vehement prohibition against any mediating movement that would intercede and dominate the human-to-human relation (be it God, the Idea, the State or the market) proves to be too luring, a deus ex machina of sorts, dropped from above to bring closure to the drama of human existence. For example, in *On the Jewish Question* Marx affirms that the mediating movement of religion was a necessary stage in the maturation of the consciousness just as political liberation can only be accomplished "in a *devious* way, through a medium, even though the medium is a *necessary* one."[455] In the appendix to Capital Marx later repeats and elaborates this sentiment, which I will quote in full:

> Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer….Thus at the level of material production, of the life-process in the realm of the social - for that is what the process of production is - we find the *same* situation that we find in *religion* at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*. Viewed historically this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such, i.e. the relentless productive forces of social labour, which alone can form the material base of a free human society, could not possibly be created by force at the expense of the majority. This antagonistic stage cannot be avoided, any more than it is possible for man to avoid the stage in which his spiritual energies are given a religious definition as powers independent of himself. What we are confronted by here is the *alienation* of man from his own labour. To that extent the worker stands on a higher plane than the capitalist from the outset, since the latter has his roots in the process of alienation and

[455] Marx, *Jewish*, p. 218.

> finds absolute satisfaction in it whereas right from the start the worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel and experiences it as enslavement….the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationship of capitalism as is his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in a quite different manner.[456]

The rootless subjectivity of Marx cannot thus be praised unequivocally. In Marx we find the presentation of humanity as an open-ended project, one that does not find-itself at home with itself—where the primacy of the relations that mediate the relation to others (the state, the market, a Fatherland, home, or any other site) would already imply the ontological separation of the human-to-human (class, race, culture, language, tradition)—but is instead defined by its restlessness and critical spirit, which seeks to exhume the significance of a world offered to the other. At other moments, however, this anti-nostalgic impulse will become fetishized and self-referential, deployed in service of development as an end in itself no longer tethered to the meaning that it has for me as an expression for the other.

It is precisely this ambiguity which the young Levinas has in mind when, after affirming Marx's grasp of the social, states that this "break with liberalism is not a definitive one." Levinas remains skeptical that Marx's perspective is "not sufficiently impotent not to retain, at least in principle, the power to shake off the social bewitchment that then appears foreign to its essence. To become conscious of one's social situation is, even for Marx, to free oneself of the fatalism entailed by that situation."[457] Thus Levinas states, as "paradoxical" as it might appear, the pathos of liberalism (as well as fascism) can be overcome "if the situation to which he was bound was not added to him but formed the very foundation of his being."[458] As he would later put it, the "detour" of subjectivity that inevitably lead back "coinciding with oneself, that is, to certainty,

[456] Marx, *Capital*, p. 990.
[457] Levinas, "Reflections," p. 67.
[458] Ibid.

which remains the guide and guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of being" is precisely why "this adventure is no adventure."[459] In such a moment, to quote Horowitz once again, is "the egoism of the exchange relation—which is raised by several levels of magnitude under the commodity fetish—actually transcended?"[460]

To be clear, this critique does not imply there is a simple or straightforward moral solution to the complex problem of human history. By now it is patently obvious that all ethical questions are also political and economic questions. I take no issue with Marx's efforts to ponder the emancipatory potential contained within historical forms of organization. To paraphrase Marx, one's ethics can only be as lofty as those values permitted by the organizational form of their society. By addressing this tension in Marx I hope to simply help clarify the impossible question of what needs to be done, that is, what counts and what does not count as human emancipation? If the guiding pursuit of humanity is to develop "self-consciousness," defined as a transformation of the subject-as-predicate back into the subject proper, then we must first ask what is the guiding orientation of consciousness? With Levinas we must reply, it is nothing other than the universal manifested within the particular offered—at every moment—as a gift to the other and all others. It would thus seem to be significant if self-consciousness is the movement of self-mastery through the social or, alternatively, if it is living with, for and through each-other.

This leads us to a closely related second point. Viewed from a perspective that does not fetishize development as such, one can see that, for all of Marx's handwringing over the necessity of labour in order to free up time for distinctly human pleasures, hunter gatherers had largely solved the problem thousands of years ago, and typically had significantly more leisure time than any advanced capitalist nation (not that leisure time itself should become the index of

[459] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 99.
[460] Horowitz, *Holy*, p. 68.

value). To approach society from the perspective that Marx assumes in the *Excerpts* enables us to better perceive the potential richness and complexity of other forms of society, especially ones predicated on pre-capitalist social relations. If self-consciousness proper is, as Marx suggests in *Excerpts*, accomplished in the relations that affirm the other, then we must consider the distinct possibility that humans attained self-consciousness long before they became unconscious (or better still, resist the temptation to reify consciousness as a collective "form," even if one takes seriously the totality of relationships that mediate individual relations). Such is the contribution of thinkers such as Glen Coulthard,[461] Peter Kulchyski,[462] and Leanne Simpson,[463] who search for images of a future utopia in non-, pre-, and anti-capitalist forms of social organization. As Coulthard states, the developmentalist model falsely presupposes "primitive accumulation" and capitalist social relations as the "necessary condition for developing the forms of critical consciousness and associated modes of life that ought to inform the construction of alternatives to capitalism in settler colonial contexts."[464] Kulchyski similarly points out that the mode of production specific to hunter and gatherer societies, though typically overlooked by Marxists, is just as fruitful for theorizing alternative modes of life than the images of utopia offered in science fiction:

> gatherers and hunters thrived in sustainable communities for millennia in politically egalitarian and gender-egalitarian social forms where wealth differentials were relatively minimal, most property was owned in common, and where respect for personal autonomy was a fundamental base of the social order, we are then in a position to say that capitalism, rather than being an extension of some ancient and natural

[461] Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
[462] Peter Kulchyski, "Echo of an Impossible Return: An Essay Concerning Frederic Jameson's Utopian Thought And Gathering and Hunting Social Relations," in *The Politics of the (Im)Possible* (Sage Publications, 2012)
[463] Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[464] Coulthard, Red, p. 152.

> impulse, is rather a historical anomaly and probably an unsustainable mode of production.[465]

To again muddy the waters, Anderson's worthy study *Marx at the Margins* indicates that, in his later years, Marx himself continued to think and rethink through these very complex issues and, in some respects, came to similar conclusions.[466] The object here is not to demonize or deify either Marx or Levinas (who held many of Marx's own prejudices), but to collect and animate the scattered moments of liberation that have existed, and continue to exist, embedded within various forms of life, thought, and experience. That is, to hear within history and society, what Kulchyski has called, the "echo of an impossible return."[467]

Marx for Levinas

Having clarified how Levinas can help navigate the tensions within Marx we can now return to the problem with which we began. Here Marx presents a unique challenge to Levinas. Marx's skepticism with dwelling upon abstract ethical imperatives, such as "the feeling of natural human affinity and unity" is not so much that they are unimportant as they cannot account for what is to be done, since feudal bondage, slavery and all the social inequalities of every age have also been accommodated by this "natural affinity." Key here is that this is not simply Marx replacing these platitudes with an imperative of his own, which he views as more concrete—which is often how the famous "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it"[468] is interpreted. Marx's primary point—equally normative, even if less explicitly so—is that to actually institute a particular normative

[465] Kulchyski, *Echo*, p. 58.
[466] Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 199-208. This point is also acknowledged by Coulthard, *Red*, p. 186.
[467] Kulchyski, *Echo,* p. 47.
[468] Marx, *Concerning*, p. 423.

framework or aspiration one must actually change the very substance of society. Thus, it is not that Feuerbach (or whomever) does not possess valuable insights on consciousness, intersubjectivity or ethics; rather that they misapprehend the relation between their goals and the conditions which such aspirations requires. As a result, Marx states, they simply "produce a correct consciousness about an *existing* fact" rather than "overthrowing the existing state of things." It is not that one cannot theorize about such matters—as noted above Marx has some lofty ideals of his own—it simply means that if ethics is to mean anything more than the moral scaffolding of a given "mode of life," it must also be a politics. That is, both an analysis of the current state of the situation and a gesture towards what an alternative organization of the polis might look like.

This led us to two questions: what *exactly* is Levinas describing in his critique of "ontology," and, is Levinas capable of re-think totality as a mode of being that affirms the other (even if the "ethical relation" will never be fully expressed within the terms of totality)? Regarding the first question, in his explication of the logic which seeks the "reduction of the other to the same," Levinas offers countless examples. The vast majority of these are drawn from the philosophical tradition (where Heidegger holds a special place of distinction), however Levinas sporadically refers to other examples that capture the way in which "ontology" is manifested in concrete and specific material ways, such as "war," "propaganda," "rhetoric," and, more suited for our purposes, the "tyranny of the state," "industrial city," "wage-earner," and even "economic life." The example of war is cited by Levinas as the apotheosis of ontology, a "visage of being" that delivers the general formula that becomes replicated within "the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy." Thus whether we are talking about war or Heidegger, "ontology" represents an instrumental "totality" that imposes "an order" where the:

> meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning. For the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changes beings into themselves. They are what they will appear to be in the already plastic forms of the epic.[469]

Part of the reason that Levinas is unable to develop his theory of alienation is that, although he invokes a potential relationship between these forms, he fails to probe the matter is a *systematic* way. It is thus left to us to speculate what the relationship between political and philosophical ontology might be. Because Levinas does not interrogate this relationship, it remains unclear if ontology, in its most pathological forms, is a consequence (perhaps necessary) of consciousness itself, or, perhaps, it is that bad philosophy encourages bad politics, or alternatively, that the whole process is already somehow rooted in the complex of historical relations itself. As a result, while Levinas provides us with an important perspective of what it means to be a social being, his critique of alienation tends to skew towards the "I'll know it when I see it" variety.

There are a few interesting exceptions to this trend, which can be further illuminated with reference to Marx. The most striking is a seldom referenced passage in *Totality and Infinity* where Levinas is once again criticizing Heidegger's "Being," on account of its propensity to comprehend existents only in their relation to totality. According to Levinas, in Heidegger, existents become synonymous with their activity and function within the larger horizon of meaning (projects, imperatives, etc.). In strikingly Marxist terms, Levinas proclaims that to *only* see the "world as a set of implements forming a system" is to (regardless of explicit intention) already "[bear] witness to a particular organization of labor in which 'foods' take on the significant of fuel in the economic machinery." Levinas continues that it is no coincidence or

[469] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 22.

random omission that Heidegger can only see an instrumental relation to the world, where even the relation to food is "entirely masked the usage." That Heidegger does not consider human "enjoyment" and "satisfaction" as a possible embodied non-instrumental function is already a symptom of capitalist social relations and not some idiosyncratic oversight. It is thus no coincidence that Heidegger talks a great deal about mediation and relations but in a way that ultimately denies the profundity of the embodied experience, as Levinas notes, "*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry." "Food can be interpreted as an implement" Levinas proclaims, "only in a world of exploitation."[470] This sentiment is repeated a few pages later as Levinas, once again, suggests that, in privileging function over enjoyment, Heidegger is merely reifying capitalist social relations: "The limit case in which need prevails over enjoyment, the proletarian condition condemning to accursed labor in which the indigence of corporeal existence finds neither refuge nor leisure at home with itself, is the absurd world of *Geworfenheit*."[471]

There are many fascinating things about this passage. While it remains thoroughly underdeveloped, Levinas' critique of totality is similar to more traditional Marxist thinkers. Take, for example, Wendy Brown's definition of neoliberal rationality that "configures all aspects of existence in economic terms"[472] or David McNally's claim that the turn to "discourse" has erased, for precisely the same reason, "[s]ensible needs for food, love, sex, and shelter…The postmodern body is thus constituted by a radical disavowal of corporeal substance."[473]

More to the matter at hand, contrary to the many shortcomings we previously enumerated, in such instances Levinas does in fact seem to be attempting a repetition of Marx's

[470] Ibid., p.134.
[471] Ibid., p.146-147
[472] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolutions* (NY: Zone Books, 2015), p.17.
[473] David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies On Language, Labor, and Liberation* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press), p. 2.

critique of idealism, as he had previously claimed. Marx famously begins in 1843 by critiquing Hegel's abstract "Idea" that converts the "actual existent" into nothing more than a "predicate" of "universal domination."[474] The "object" is thus "constructed according to a system of thought" and is reduced to an "abstract sphere of logic." A sentiment very close to Levinas' admonishment of Heidegger's propensity to "subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents."[475] Just as Marx goes on to claim that, when Hegel thinks he is describing the universal mement of Spirit he is unwittingly chronicling the spread of market relations, so too is Levinas (although in a far less systematic way) attempting to ground Heideggerian ontology within society itself. Thus his earlier comment about the "absurd world of *Geworfenheit*" reifying the "proletarian condition" perfectly mirrors Marx's sentiment that the "dirty trick" pulled on society was not, as Hegel thought, the movement of "world spirit" but the workings of the "world market."[476]

It is thus not a stretch to superimpose Marx's description of capitalism onto Levinas' account of totality or ontology and, moreover, no coincidence both of these depictions deliver the same image of an alienated world, where the value of all existents is mediated through instrumental processes of exchange, leaving no remainder and or possible recourse to an alternative mode of existence. By way of a metaphor Levinas captures this image succinctly:

> The perception of individual things is the fact that they are not entirely absorbed in their form…breaking through, rendering their forms, are not resolved into the relations that link them up to the totality. They are always in some respect like those industrial cities where everything is adapted to a goal of production, but which, full of smoke, full of wastes and sadness, exist for themselves.[477]

[474] Marx, "Critique of Hegel's State Doctrine," *Early Writings*, p. 65.
[475] Ibid., p. 45.
[476] Marx, *German*, p. 59.
[477] Levinas, *Totality*, p.74.

That capitalism embodies the very ontological structure that Levinas identifies as the pathological sway defining history, is again expressed in another marginal comment from the essay "No Identity":

> It is interesting to note how among the most imperative 'sentiments' of May, 1968 the dominant one was the refusal of a humanity that would be defined not by its vulnerability more passive than all passivity, by its debt toward the other, but by its self-satisfaction, its acquisitions and its acquaintances. Over and beyond capitalism and exploitation what was contested were their conditions: the person understood as an accumulation of being, by merits, titles, professional competence - an ontological tumefaction weighing on others and crushing them, instituting a hierarchized society maintained beyond the necessities of consumption, which no religious breath any longer succeeds in rendering egalitarian. Behind the capital of *having* weighed a capital of *being*.[478]

This juxtaposition of Levinas' description of totality with Marx's depiction of capitalism, can be an important first step in outlining the parameters of a Levinasian politics. Perhaps Levinas' most relevant (and haunting) image of totality is found in his essay "The name of a Dog, or Natural Rights." Recounting his experiences as a prisoner of war, Levinas describes the horrific reality of existing as a subject articulated within a chain of referential meaning that seeks to eliminates every trace of humanity. In Levinas' words, they "stripped us of our human skin…We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language." In this respect Levinas claims that "anti-Semitism is the archetype of all internment" replicated in all "social aggression" that "shuts people away in a class, deprives them of expression and condemns them to being 'signifiers without a signified.'" Interestingly, Levinas notes, the only exception to this totalizing discourse was found in a dog that wandered into the

[478] Emmanuel Levinas, "No Identity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), p. 150.

camp. Levinas states that his dog was "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" because for him alone, "there was no doubt that we were men."[479]

The image of a "signifier without a signified," to be shut away in a class and deprived of all expression, cannot but recall Marx's depiction of the ontology of capitalism. In *Capital* Marx continues to develop his concern (previously discussed) of the mediating totality that reduces the all subjectivity—what he previously referred to as the "human language"—to the "language of commodities" at some length. As all "use-values" are transformed into "exchange-values" the the value of existents is only intelligible from the perspective of the profit imperative. "[C]ommodity-owners," Marx states, "think like Faust: 'In the beginning was the deed.' They have therefore already acted before thinking. The natural laws of the commodity have manifested themselves in the natural instinct of the owners of commodities."

It might be helpful here to borrow Marx's backhanded defence of Ricardo, where he states that, in accusing Ricardo for "abstracting from morality," Chevalier is obscuring the fact that Ricardo is simply allowing "political economy to speak its own language," and if "this language is not that of morality, it is not the fault of Ricardo."[480] In this vein Marx is unequivocally reducing the social bond to the structural relation that mediate the human-to-human relation, however, we should not blame Marx for allowing capitalism to "speak its own language." The capitalist, from this perspective, is thus aptly described as an empty shell, merely a host for the spirit of capital:

> As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour. Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like,

[479] Emmanuel Levinas, "The name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1990), p. 153.
[480] Marx, *Economic*, p. 362-3.

> lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.[481]

The workers are likewise reduced to their function within the totality. While the capitalist is described by Marx in parasitical terms like vampire, werewolf, and a rational miser, the worker is reduced to the appendages and organs of "demonic" machines, or similarly referred by the workforce to as "hands" and "part-timers," reduced to signifiers within Being-for-capital. The rationality of exchange permeates every dimension of experience, from how we measure time to the legal definition of signifiers such as "children."

The most haunting image of this alienated state is the inverted image of the "face," where the ethical stamp of humanity has withdrawn completely behind the facade of signification. No longer associated with the social bond, the face of the other is indistinguishable from the relations which mediate the interaction. No longer does Paul see, in Peter, the visage of the other qua other; nothing is perceived save for those phenomena which personify the inverted relations that have predestined their meeting:

> I therefore demand a working day of normal length, and I demand it without any appeal to your heart, for money matters sentiment is out of place. You may be a model citizen, perhaps a member of the R.S.P.C.A., and you may be in the odour of sanctity as well; but the thing you represent when you come face to face with me has no heart in its breast. What seems to throb there is my own heartbeat.[482]

This meeting of the "face to face," is the truth of Levinas' claim that "as a wage-earner, the worker himself may disappear."[483] Thus terms in which Marx and Levinas enumerate their vision of totality—at least in the form of totality with which we are presented in our modern epoch—

[481] Marx, *Capital*, p. 342.
[482] Ibid. p. 343.
[483] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 226.

are virtually identical. From *Spirit* to *Being* and *capitalism* to the s*tate*, we uncover a situation where:

> subjects, entities immediately, empirically, encountered, would proceed from this universal self-consciousness of the Mind: bits of dust collected by its movement or drops of sweat glistening on its forehead because of the labor of the negative it will have accomplished. They would be forgettable moments of which what counts is only their identities due to their positions in the system, which are reabsorbed into the whole of the system.[484]

To step back and take stock of the totality of relations that—at every moment—mediate, and in many ways predestine, the face to face relation, is an essential first step in establishing the parameters of a Levinasian politics. What is often clear in Levinas, and less clear within the general philosophical milieu, is that to attempt to think the totality of relations in which we create, live, love, suffer, and serve, is not itself to reduce the meaning and significance of the world to totality itself. It is nothing other than the for-the-other of subjectivity that implores us to interrogate the horizons in which we are situated, to be restless, critical and ruthless in our assessment of the structures and imperatives that structure the world and be less than satisfied with any politics that is not up to the task.

Philosophers have long expressed the death of the "meta-subject," however, as the continued onslaught of neoliberalism has shown us, the meta-subject is very much alive and well. If we seek to transcend subjectivity as either the expression of pure egoism or a movement of abstract universality ("meta-narratives," "totalizing movements" etc.), one of the most important tasks is to transcend the universal egoism of exchange relations (which is not to say the it is the *only* important task). Thus these two strands of subjectivity must be thought together, even if they are not reducible to one another. To translate it back into Levinas' ambiguous terms:

[484] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 104.

it is important to know the instances when "clarity" has not occurred, when "thoughts" have not aimed at their themes, when the "saying" does not indeed lead back to the said, when it is neither the "hour" or "time" for essence, and when the "scaffoldings" in fact need to be "destroyed." As the young Marx wrote in a letter to Arnold Ruge, to bear witness to the "despotism" of a society is already a form of "revolution":

> It is a truth which at the very least teaches us to see the hollowness of our patriotism, the perverted nature of our state and to hide our faces in shame. I can see you smile and say: what good will that do? Revolutions are not made by shame. And my answer is that shame is a revolution in itself; it really is the victory of the French Revolution over that German patriotism which defeated it in 1813. Shame is a kind of anger turned in on itself. And if a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring.[485]

Towards a Rootless Universality: Concluding Thoughts on Liberation

The question we are left with is, can we now re-think totality from the very standpoint of its (continual) interruption. "What can this relationship be," Levinas himself ponders, "since no conceptual bond preexists this multiplicity?" While Levinas does not provide many substantial answers, he does repeatedly testify to the theoretical possibility of a positive relationship between the two that does not seek to establish itself as a "conceptual bond" that would precede the "multiplicity." As Abensour notes, the "an-archy" that Levinas speaks of "disturbs politics to the point where we can speak of the disturbance of politics."[486] This negativity, which is more than just interruption (what both Abensour and Horowitz compare favourably to Adorno's "negative dialectic"[487]), is what Levinas already indicates when he states that it: "[i]t is important

[485] Karl Marx, "Letters from the Franco-German Yearbooks," *Early Writings*, p.199-200.
[486] Miguel Abensour, "An-archy between Metapolitics and Politics," *Parallax* 8:3 (2002), p. 15.
[487] Asher Horowtiz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2008); Abensour, *An-archy*, p. 17.

to recover all these forms beginning with proximity, in which being, totality, the State, politics, techniques, work are at every moment on the point of having their center of gravitation in themselves, and weighing on their own account."[488] It is extremely telling that, for Levinas, to resist the illusion that politics and collective struggle can contain their own "center of gravitation" is *not* to abandon the terrain of politics and struggle. On the contrary, it is to engage in "a struggle against violence which…could avoid the institution of violence out of this very struggle,"[489] which is the exact sentiment that Levinas attributes elsewhere to Marxism, which he claims represents a form of "messianism" because it strove to utilize political power in order to "make political power useless."[490]

Is it thus possible to think Marx and Levinas together, as thinkers that express a compatible image of utopia (as Levinas himself seems to suggest)? Can we trace a thread in Marx's thought that intersects with Levinas notion of a "utopian community," to again quote Abensour, that "keeps alive its quality of non-place which outreaches every place and anticipates simultaneously every attempt which intends to get settled over there, by melting into one the place of nowhere and the place where everything is fine."[491]

We can begin such a task with Levinas' essay "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," that establishes a very pertinent connection between this "non-place" and universality. Taking aim, once, at Heidegger, Levinas suggests that the emancipatory potential of technology lies in the very thing that caused Heidegger to hold it in such disdain; technology has the potential to relativize one's position with respect to the other vis-a-vis their "Place." "Technology," Levinas

[488] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 159.
[489] Ibid., p. 177.
[490] Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, Love," in *Is it Righteous to Be?,* trans. Michael B. Smith, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 180.
[491] Miguel Abensour, "Utopia: Future and/or Alterity?" in *(Im)Possible*, p. 46.

argues, "wrenches us out of the Heideggerian world and the superstitions surrounding *Place*. From this point on, an opportunity appears to us: to perceive men outside the situation in which they are placed, and let the human face shine in all its nudity." Throwing one last passing shot at Heidegger, Levinas adds, "Socrates preferred the town, in which one meets people, to the countryside and trees."[492] The Russian cosmonaut uprooted from all roots proves to be a fascinating figure for Levinas. Over and above the "new forms of knowledge" and "new technological possibilities," for Levinas, what "counts most of all is that he left the Place." As Levinas continues: "For one hour, man existed beyond any horizon - everything around him was sky or, more exactly, everything was geometrical space. A man existed in the absolute of homogeneous space."[493] It is from this non-place or non-site that one can, as he put is see "the nudity of [the] face."[494]

Levinas takes this even further in his essay "A Religion for Adults," where he states that, because the human is "not a tree, and humanity is not a forest" we must promote "more human forms…freer forms" that "allow us to glimpse a human society and horizons vaster than those of the village where we were born." Affirming his position that responsibility aspires to a certain kind of universality, he states that:

> At the moment when the political temptations of the light 'of others' is overcome, my responsibility is the more irreplaceable. The real light can shine. At this point the real universality, which is non-catholic, can affirm itself. It consists in serving the universe. It is called messianism.[495]

Universality, in this sense, is not depicted as a totality capable of comprehending every one of its moments. To the contrary, universality represents a breach, or break from the horizons in which

[492] Emmanuel Levinas, "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," in *Difficult*, p.232-3.
[493] Ibid., p. 233.
[494] Ibid., p. 234.
[495] Emmanuel Levinas, *A Religion for Adults*, *Difficult*, p.95.

we are situated; it cuts across, at a new angle, the borders, walls, fences, bars, gates, themes, traditions, signifiers, titles and differences that confine the interaction of humans to those expressions that are "appropriate" to their country, region, class, gender, race, sexual orientation, occupation, etc. Perhaps akin to a political expression of the phenomenological reduction, Levinas finds universality within the ability to see the world, and those *in* the world, free from the hermeneutic and political baggage contained within the "natural attitude."

Again, a word of caution that this should not be read as an inherently developmental process (and this is as much a reminder for Levinas as it is for Marx). Rootlessness, in this sense, is an *orientation*, one that can, and has, existed in many places and at many times, and is thus not synonymous with leaving one's home, town, or country. As the long history of colonization and imperialism have demonstrated, just because one finds themselves in a foreign land does not mean that they have left their Place. To colonize, occupy or conquer is to remain within the domain of the same, is not to leave one's home. At the same time, Levinas is also correct to note that to live, share and create, devoid of a conceptual bond that precedes the multiplicity, is to engage in a self-critical movement that strives toward founding newer and freer "human forms."

Does not this conception of universality, as a form of non-identity emerging from within the non-place, share the same spirit animating Marx's utopianism (with all of our previous reservations notwithstanding)? Within Marx do we not find—as was patently clear in *Excerpts*—this same utopian impulse of overcoming the barriers that insulate one from another? Is this not what Marx already expressed when he proclaimed that a true revolution must "let the dead bury their dead" so that it can create a new form of life where the "content goes beyond the words?"[496] Or, when freed from its leading role on the meta-subjective drama, is this not the essence of the

[496] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," in *Karl Marx Collected Works XI* (New York: International Publishers), p. 106.

proletariat—where its "universality" is not derived from a "*particular right*" but from its very exclusion. Where universality therefore expresses itself not as an identity proper (that would again separate the human from the human) but as the "negative result of society" and thus only finds its expression in the "dissolution" of "all classes." Without a Place to return to, the proletariat does not "lay claim to a *historical* title, but merely a *human* one."[497] And does not Levinas himself articulate this vision of solidarity and collectivity in "Useless Suffering,"[498] where he speaks about how the "intrinsically useless" phenomena of suffering can, in solidarity and overcoming, be given a new meaning (one that is thus utterly opposed to the meaning it may achieve as a theodicy)? And finally, can we thus not find within Marx a fidelity to a that politics preserves the "non-place" between "nowhere" and "everything is fine"? This, it would seem, is the yearning Marx expresses in his desire to rid the world of "the muck of ages" and "found society anew,"[499] as well as his distinction between the inherent dogmatism of the bourgeois revolutions and the proletarian ones, who

> criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, and recoil again and again from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible…[500]

Above all, this fidelity with Levinas would seem most obvious in Marx's desire to transcend the "horizon of bourgeois right," where, in a world defined by the asymmetry of the exchange relation (where the M-C-M′ always produces a surplus for the capitalist) Marx does not simply

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[497] Marx, *Critique*, p. 256.
[498] Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London and New York, 1988), p. 156,
[499] Marx, *German*, p. 60.
[500] Marx, *Eighteenth*, p. 106-7.

respond with a demand for reciprocity, a vision of the world where each would get what they rightfully deserve. Instead, Marx surprisingly inverts the asymmetry of market exchange and, in true Levinasian fashion, proclaims a new ethic fit for a new world: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"[501] While it is certainly not everything, it is a good place to start by realizing that, even if you have a long way to go—perhaps not unlike Hegel's "unhappy consciousness"—you at least have an idea of challenges that lie ahead and an "ought" with which you can begin.

[501] Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (Dodo Press, 2009), p. 10.

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