

FOR THE OTHER, BEYOND ETHICS
RESPONSIBILITY, CRITIQUE, AND PRAXIS IN LEVINAS AND ADORNO

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Abstract

This dissertation grows out of the conviction that Emmanuel Levinas' ethics and Theodor W. Adorno's negative dialectics could supplement each other in mutually beneficial ways. While Levinas could provide an articulation of the prophetic ethical drive that underlies Adorno's emancipatory project but lies beyond the reach of his dialectical approach, Adorno's negative dialectics could offer a historical critique that Levinas' (meta)phenomenological ethics calls for but fails to provide.

The first part of the dissertation, including Chapters I and II, presents my theoretical engagement with the problem of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas. The second part, including Chapters III and IV, is concerned with the possibility of a rapprochement between Adorno (and more generally Marx) and Levinas. The development of my analysis in the first two parts of the dissertation follows a spiral path, continuously returning to a tension, though each time in a more concrete form. It begins with the identification of this tension in its most abstract form as the relation between metaphysics and ontology, moves to a more concrete formulation of it in the relation between ethics and politics, and finally culminates in the articulation of the relation between critique and re-appropriation as the historically concrete form of the tension. My argument is that while this irresolvable tension is indispensable in all its forms, its most concrete form reveals a certain paradox that is the characteristic of our time.

However, the characterization of the tension between critique and re-appropriation does not itself amount to the concretization of ethics, but rather demonstrates the formal structure of the process of concretization. The actual content of this process is necessarily dependent on the contingencies of the historical reality of politics and can be arrived at only through an engagement with the specific details of each case. It is the task of the third part of the dissertation, i.e., Chapters V and VI, to examine the implications of the tension between critique and re-appropriation for the analysis of a specific historical case, i.e., the (re-)appropriation of sacrifice in Ali Shari'ati's revolutionary ideology.

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Notes on Transliteration and Translation

For Persian and Arabic words and names, I have used the Romanization Tables of the Library of Congress.¹ Exceptions have been made for concepts which, due to frequent use in academic English, have acquired a standard English transliteration (e.g., jihad), and for authors with Persian names whose works have originally been published in English (e.g., Mehrzad Boroujerdi).

All translations from Persian are mine.

¹ Randall K. Barry, *ALA-LC Romanization Tables: Transliteration Schemes for Non-Roman Scripts* (Washington: Cataloging Distribution Service, Library of Congress, 1997). The revised version of the Persian table (2012) is available in: <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/roman.html>.

Introduction

*To be or not to be – this is probably not the question par excellence.*¹

Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher of the Other whose thought was shaped by the memory of the Holocaust, wrote in 1974, “the true problem” for the West is the struggle against violence without recourse to the institution of new forms of violence.² In a similar vein, Theodor Adorno, the thinker of dialectical negativity whose critical encounter with late capitalism was also dominated by the experience of the Nazi terror, said in 1969, “I would have to disown my entire life ... if I did not refuse to participate in the eternal circle of using violence to fight violence. The only meaningfully transformative praxis that I could imagine would be a non-violent one.”³ Today, in the age of globalization and exclusion, at the time when the so-called War on Terror seems to have reached an impasse by incessantly engendering the violence it claims to fight against, this problem is even more pressing. It is no longer exclusively a problem for the West – if it ever was. In fact, considering the unbearable conditions of life in many regions of the world, the sanctification of non-violent praxis as the only viable response to violence might even seem rather too utopian. Perhaps, it is no longer even *the* true problem – if it ever was.

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 40.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 177.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno,” *Monatshefte* 94, no. 1 (2002), 17-8.

Despite the evident allure of pacifism, violence should not be abstractly demonized. The ethically-justified call for non-violence praxis would turn into a hollow promise if it is not properly situated within the historical and political context in which it is raised. For Adorno, this context is marked by the objective impossibility of true emancipatory praxis, that is, a non-violent praxis “that would matter.”⁴ In the totally administered society, where the mechanisms of control and repression have penetrated into the deepest layers of subjectivity, the subject is nothing but a reflection of the totality. Self-consciousness is not, as Hegel thought, “the native realm of truth”⁵ in which the uniqueness of the individual could be confirmed, but rather the consciousness of impotence against the system that ever more forcefully denies the autonomy of the I and reduces it to a mere instrument of self-preservation. Like the totality of which it is an image, the liquidated subject of late capitalism is allergic to otherness, fearful of whatever resists its totality, for it can only perceive the other as a potential threat to its self-preservation. Its interaction with the world, that is, both its labour and its relation with other human beings, is permeated by that fear and cannot but be violent.

Adorno does not, to be sure, altogether deny the possibility of non-violent emancipatory praxis. In the reconciled condition, in which the realm of necessity is reduced to a minimum, praxis would no longer need to be tied to self-preservation and the circle of violence could be avoided. For now, however, true transformative praxis remains all but absent. In the current situation, the only form of praxis that could potentially retain its emancipatory character is critical intellectual activity, whether in the form of art or theory. For, as a moment of the totality, critical thought has the capacity to maintain a degree of independence from the totality and, by incessantly renouncing its own violence through dialectical negation, resist its captivating spell. But

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 245.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 49.

that would amount to nothing more than a humble exception to the rule, for surely intellectual activity could not by itself bring about real social change.

Adorno's conviction that, for now, the possibility of transformative praxis is blocked is backed up by his rigorous analysis of the historically specific condition that the advancement of capitalism in twentieth century has led to. It is further reinforced by his experiences of fascism, whose return is in his view an ever present threat in liberal democracies, and of Stalinism, which he saw as the disastrous outcome of the naïve attempts to change the world. Nevertheless, as Adorno himself has taught us, the relation between theory and praxis is that of nonidentity, implying that theoretical analysis could never exhaust the possibilities of praxis. Theory, that is to say, can never with certainty determine what will come out of praxis and cannot, therefore, adopt a final position on whether and how it might fail or succeed. Whenever it appears to assume such a position – for instance in the case of Adorno's own rejection of the presently feasible forms of praxis as false and doomed to failure – there is always an extra element involved, one that is exterior to both theory and praxis and makes it possible for theory to traverse the inevitable space of ambiguity that separates it from praxis. In a few places in his writings, Adorno refers to this exteriority that underlies the operation of his negative dialectics as "morality,"⁶ "a standpoint removed ... from the scope of existence,"⁷ or "metaphysics."⁸ But his prophetic insights on this point hardly go beyond mere allusions. In practice, the metaphysical-ethical motive of negative dialectics manifests itself solely as its commitment to "the self-criticism of reason,"⁹ which is thought's way of yielding to the primacy of the object.

But morality is not the same as objectivity, and, accordingly, the demands it poses on critique would not necessarily be the same as the ones that arise out of the criterion of objectivity. As I shall argue in Chapter IV, one of the central implications of

⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁷ Ibid., 247.

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 126.

this recognition concerns negative dialectics' relation with existing praxis, for Adorno's idea of the impossibility of transformative praxis in late capitalist societies is directly derived from his commitment to the primacy of the object. Nevertheless, in the absence of an adequate articulation of morality and the way it relates to critique, Adorno is unable to fully register the implications that the significant distinction between morality and objectivity would have for negative dialectics. It is at this point that Levinas' view of ethics as first philosophy could be brought to Adorno's aid as it could demonstrate the structure of the ethical exteriority that both animates and conditions the latter's social critique.

Levinas agrees with Adorno that the human subject is vulnerable to "techniques of seduction, propaganda, and torture,"¹⁰ which continuously deform its composition and undermine its sovereignty. However, amidst this permanent fallibility, there remains an element of inviolability that is preserved in the uniqueness of the subject's interiority. This residual of autonomy – which for Adorno appears as the capacity of thought for critical negation – would, according to Levinas, have been lost if the subject were confined in its solitary being. That is to say, the uniqueness of the I does not originate in its being, but is rather confirmed in its relation to the otherwise than being, that is, the ethical relation. If, in spite of its degeneration, the subject can retain a critical attitude, it is because the human subject is a responsible subject before it is an egoism concerned with self-preservation. That is to say, if the totally administered society is unable to fully absorb thought into its totality, it is because, from the outset, it is responsibility for the other that individuates the I and awakens it as a subject capable of critical thinking.

However, if Levinas' ethics could supply negative dialectics with what the latter lacks, it itself falls short of an adequate formulation of the passage from ethics to politics.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 237.

For Levinas, the experience of the ethical relation is available only to the I in its *singularity*. It thus lies structurally beyond the reach of politics, the realm of the third person or the *particular* subject. Consequently, although the ethical, as the origin of subjectivity, is never absent from politics, it could also never become present and assert itself as a positive force. That is to say, in politics, the realm of war and violence, the ethical is always simultaneously presupposed and betrayed. At best, it could manifest itself in the form of an infinite accusation that permanently interrupts the smooth functioning of politics, reminding it of its betrayal.

This limitation results in too wide a gap between ethics and politics – which is where the political inadequacy of Levinas' ethics comes to fore. Insofar as the permanent interruption of politics by ethics is concerned with the inevitable betrayal of the ethical in politics, it is unable to adequately distinguish between the various historical forms that this betrayal could take. What Levinas' ethics calls for – but does not itself offer – is a historical critique that could make such distinctions possible. This lack could not simply be compensated by an extension of Levinas' own thought, for the formulation of such a critique would require social and political categories of the kind that, for instance, Adorno's Marxian social critique operates with – categories, that is, which phenomenology alone could not provide. In short, while Levinas' characterization of human subjectivity as primarily ethical rather than self-serving opens up new horizons for thinking the possibility of peace, absent a concrete socio-historical analysis, his ethics winds up portraying politics as eternally entrapped within the circle violence. His ethics thus comes to the verge of betraying its own promise.

This dissertation grows out of the conviction that Adorno's negative dialectics and Levinas' ethics could supplement each other in ways that could be mutually beneficial. On the one hand, Levinas could provide Adorno with an articulation of the prophetic ethical drive that underlies his emancipatory project but lies beyond the reach of its dialectical approach. On the other hand, Adorno's negative dialectics could offer to

Levinas a historical critique that his (meta)phenomenological ethics calls for but falls short of providing. The hope for such a mutually beneficial dialogue – a “fecund embrace,” as Asher Horowitz calls it¹¹ – could not, however, ignore the fundamental philosophical differences between the two thinkers. While it could be argued that both Adorno and Levinas transcend the boundaries of the traditions upon which they rely in such a way that not only open up the possibility of a dialogue but also call for it, their thoughts still operate at different levels of analysis. Their relation could not thus take the form a synthesis, resulting in an overarching theory that would include both. Rather, the promise of a dialogue aims at formulating the possibility of a co-existence, in which each could supply the other with what it lacks without thereby being absorbed in some sort of unity. However, their co-existence would not mean a simple addition, an innocent relation of supplementation, either – for, as we shall see, it would change both.

The main body of the dissertation consists of three parts. The first part, including Chapters I and II, presents my theoretical engagement with the problem of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas. Chapter I provides a philosophical exposition of Levinas’ ethics in terms of a tension between metaphysics and ontology. Chapter II examines the passage from ethics to politics in Levinas’ thought through the notion of the third party. The tension between ethics and politics, whose structure could be summarily described as “a perpetual duty of vigilance,”¹² is presented as the concretized form of the tension between metaphysics and ontology. In the first two chapters, the development of Levinas’ thought is formulated in terms of his lasting engagement with the disastrous racism of National Socialism. His response is examined at two levels, first in the idea of ethical subjectivity as one-for-the-other of substitution (Chapter I) and then in the critique of biologism through the notion of fraternity (Chapter II). Having demonstrated the strength of Levinas’ critique of racism, Chapter II then moves on to

¹¹ Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008), ix.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 30.

identify the limitations of the notion of the perpetual duty of vigilance through a critical analysis of Levinas' politics and his comments on the Palestinian – which his ethics seems to allow for.

The second part of the dissertation, Chapters III and IV, is concerned with the possibility of a rapprochement between Adorno (and more generally Marx) and Levinas. Chapter III continues the discussion by engaging with the works of some of the most well known readers of Levinas. I argue that Jacques Derrida's acknowledgement of a "hiatus"¹³ between ethics and politics, which represents a consensus among the majority of Levinas scholars, is not enough as it fails to offer a vision of peace, without which ethics would be vulnerable to being appropriated as ideology. Indicating the insufficiency of liberalism to provide such a vision of peace, I then engage with the work of four scholars who have attempted to move beyond liberalism and formulate a rapprochement between Levinas and Marx. While Robert Gibbs and John Drabinski have recognized the necessity and possibility of such a rapprochement, it is in the detailed analyses of Asher Horowitz and Enrique Dussel that this possibility is realized. I will examine the latter's works more closely and argue that Horowitz's mainly Adornian and Dussel's primarily Marxian approaches both complement and undermine each other, so that the two stand in yet another irresolvable tension.

Finally, in Chapter IV, I present my own (re)formulation of the relation between Adorno and Levinas, which builds upon Horowitz's view, but also departs from it. The absence of a historical-dialectical critique does not compromise Levinas' analysis of the ethical relation per se. Rather, it shows its negative effects in his passage from ethics to politics, that is, from responsibility to justice, where it results in an abstract notion of justice in which the absoluteness of the ethical is conflated with the contingency of the political. Adorno's negative dialectics is, I argue, a form of social critique that is

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 116.

particularly fitting for Levinas' ethics as it is able to critically engage with the historical reality of politics without eliminating the radical distance between ethics and politics. Nevertheless, an incessant critique of the unjust order of politics would not by itself exhaust the requirements of responsibility. Beyond a social critique, ethics calls for an ethical politics that attends to the material needs of the other and partakes in the attempts to repair the world. This recognition leads me to critically engage with negative dialectics' position on the pragmatism of Marx's Thesis Eleven,¹⁴ which, I argue, is an ethical pragmatism.

As is well known, Adorno was harshly critical of the notion of the priority of praxis that Thesis Eleven entails – and for good reasons. I examine Adorno's arguments against actionism in order to show that negative dialectics' refusal to engage with the existing forms of (non-intellectual) praxis was, in his view, both theoretically grounded and morally justified. However, I argue that the view of morality upon which Adorno's criticism of praxis is founded is pre-Levinasian. In short, Adorno's notion of subjectivity is primarily ontological and only secondarily ethical, which is why his negative dialectics (mis)takes the primacy of the object – rather than responsibility for the other – as its goal. As we shall see, the correction of Adorno's view of morality would require negative dialectics to modify its relation with praxis in such a way that would correspond to the primacy of responsibility over objectivity.

If responsibility for the other awakens the subject and grants it the capacity for critical thinking, it also condemns thought for its limitations and prevents it from retreating to the tranquility of its negativity. The need to change the world would not go away with a theoretical justification of the objective impossibility of transformative praxis, for it originates in ethical responsibility whose truth is both prior to and fundamentally different from the ontological truth of objectivity. From the standpoint of

¹⁴ "The Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173).

ethics as first philosophy, a responsible critical thought could never be content with the recognition of the impossibility of praxis. Rather, without compromising its autonomy, it must continuously engage with the existing forms of praxis, despite their limitations and dangers, and reexamine its own concepts accordingly. In practice, this position is exemplified by Herbert Marcuse in his debate with Adorno on the subject of the student movement of the 1960s. The examination of this debate leads me to characterize ethical politics as a critical-practical politics that is situated within an irresolvable tension between negative dialectics and practical politics, that is, between the *critique* of the existing forms of praxis and the attempt for the *re-appropriation* of praxis for the sake of the other.

The development of my argument in the first two parts of the dissertation follows a spiral path, continuously returning to a tension, though each time in a more concrete form. It begins with the identification of this tension in its most abstract form as the relation between metaphysics and ontology (Chapter I), moves to a more concrete formulation of it in the relation between ethics and politics (Chapter II), and finally culminates in the articulation of the relation between critique and re-appropriation as the most concrete form of the tension (Chapter IV). What I hope to have shown is that while this irresolvable tension is indispensable in all its forms, it is in its most concrete form that it could reveal a certain paradox that is the characteristic of our time¹⁵ – the age of “the globalization of Modernity,” in Dussel’s words.¹⁶

However, the characterization of the tension between critique and re-appropriation as the historically concrete form of the relation between ethics and politics does not itself amount to the process of the concretization of ethics. Rather, it

¹⁵ Beside its subject matter, every piece of writing is also a psycho-analysis of its author. The tension that I speak of reveals not only what it intends to but also something about me. But psycho-analysis is, as Marcuse taught us, at the same time social theory. Every analysis of the psyche and the tensions that are kept alive in it is also an analysis of a specific historical subjectivity and the challenges it faces. It is my conviction, and my hope, that the incessant return of my thought to what appears as an irresolvable tension does not merely signify a circular movement, bringing me back, time and again, to a certain personal obsession, but rather a spiral movement that brings the social dimension of what is personal to the fore.

¹⁶ Enrique D. Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 232.

demonstrates the formal structure of that process. The actual content of this process could not be determined by further pursuing the analysis in general philosophical terms, for it is necessarily dependent on the contingencies of the historical reality of politics and could be arrived at only through an engagement with the specific details of each case. It is the task of the third part of the dissertation, that is, Chapters V and VI, to examine the implications of the tension between critique and re-appropriation for the analysis of a specific historical case, that is, the (re-)appropriation of sacrifice in Ali Shariʿatī's revolutionary ideology.

Writing in the tumultuous years preceding the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Shariʿatī is generally regarded as one of the most influential Iranian contemporary intellectuals, sometimes referred to as *the* ideologue of the revolution.¹⁷ For the construction of his conceptual apparatus, Shariʿatī appealed to a variety of resources, from Marxism and French Existentialism to the Quran and Islamic mysticism, philosophy, and history. In his writings, these texts are rather arbitrarily invoked, and often conflated, in such a way as to serve his revolutionary agenda. Nevertheless, despite its artificiality and lack of depth – or perhaps because of that – Shariʿatī's provocative writings and fiery speeches were able to attract a huge range of audiences and facilitate the much-needed dialogue between opposing revolutionary camps. One could hardly exaggerate on his crucial role in mobilizing and unifying the Iranian youth against the Shah's regime.

Motivated, in part, by the experience of the disastrous outcomes of a revolution gone wrong, the reception of Shariʿatī's thought in academia seems to have reached a consensus in characterizing his thought as a prime example of ideology, and thus not worthy of rigorous analysis.¹⁸ This consensus is indeed justified in its own terms.

¹⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 102, Islam and Politics (January 1982), 25; see also, Mangol Bayat, "Iran's Real Revolutionary Leader," *Christian Science Monitor*, 1977; Mansour Farhang, "Resisting the Pharaohs: Ali Shariati on Oppression," *Race & Class* 21, no. 1 (1979), 31.

¹⁸ See Chapter VI, note 119.

Nevertheless, it has often resulted in a hasty rejection of Sharī'atī's thought from the outset, failing to distinguish between the emancipatory-ethical substance of his ideological construction and the strategic manipulation of that substance according to the practical needs of the revolution.

In response to this dominant trend, in Chapter VI, I characterize Sharī'atī's endeavor as a *failed* re-appropriation of sacrifice and attempt to clarify where and how his political agenda betrays the genuine ethical content of his thought. This characterization relies on my analysis of sacrifice in Chapter V, in which, based on a Levinasian analysis of the notion of pure giving and the question of death, I demonstrate the peculiar ethical status of sacrifice as remembrance. Levinas, in whose thought sacrifice, as dying for the future of the other(s), acquires a sense of ethical ultimacy, is nonetheless emphatic on the unethicity of preaching sacrifice. He thus refuses to celebrate sacrifice as an act that should be done by the I for the other, but instead carefully defines it as "the norm and criterion"¹⁹ of the proper approach to the infinity of the face.

Examining the political implications of this Levinasian reading of sacrifice at the end of Chapter V, I turn to Sharī'atī in Chapter VI. I argue that it is the ethical content of sacrifice that leads him to formulate one of his central ideas, that is, the principle of martyrdom,²⁰ according to which sacrifice becomes a necessary political act at the time of the impossibility of emancipatory praxis. Sharī'atī's formulation of this principle derives from his interpretation of the epic martyrdom of Husayn, the third Shi'a imam, on the day of Āshūrā, October 10th, 680 AD, when he and seventy-two of his comrades were murdered in the desert of Karbalā by the army of Yazīd, the second Umayyad caliph. According to Sharī'atī's, Husayn embarked on his journey to martyrdom fully aware of the utter impossibility of victory. He offered his life in a battle against the oppressive

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 76.

²⁰ Āli Sharī'atī, "Shahādat," in *Husayn Vāris-i Adam*, vol. 19, Majmu'-i Āsār (Tehran: Qalam and Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Āli Sharī'atī, 2016), 136-7.

rule of the caliph in order to testify to the truth of his infinite responsibility toward the oppressed, which nothing, even death, could eradicate.

For Sharī'atī, Husayn's martyrdom is the highest manifestation of the eternal struggle of the oppressed against the injustice of the status quo, which is the essential message that all emancipatory movements – whether religious (e.g., Shi'ism) or non-religious (e.g., Marxism) – share. He thus announces that the catastrophe of Karbalā imposes a responsibility upon everyone, at all times and in all places, to follow Husayn's path, that is, to partake in the battle of their time and, if necessary, be martyred in it. In this way, he directly translates ethical responsibility into political duty.

In short, my argument is that the betrayal of the ethical in Sharī'atī's thought occurs in this jump from ethics to politics, that is, in the dehistoricization of ethical politics in which the eschatological time of sacrifice is conflated with the historical time of politics. In other words, if his re-appropriation of sacrifice fails, it is not because of his principle of martyrdom – the articulation of which is in fact the strength of his thought, as it confronts the conformism of political consciousness with reminding it of the infinity of ethical responsibility. Rather, his failure stems from the lack of a historical-dialectical critique that is indispensable for the passage from ethics to politics.

Chapter I

Metaphysics and Ontology

It is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror.¹

The Paradox of the Embodied Spirit

In 1934, the twenty-eight year old Levinas wrote on the frightening danger of National Socialism in a short essay titled “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.”² This essay was indeed one of the very first attempts to understand the experience and intuition that lied behind the appeal of National Socialism. The sheer power of Levinas’ insights and the depth of his analysis are extraordinary, particularly considering the date of its publication when the phenomenon he called Hitlerism was just in the early stages of its disastrous development. Long before Levinas’s formulation of the notion of responsibility for the other, “Hitlerism” was a brilliant example of the responsibility of a thought. It makes a powerful case for the ability of philosophical thinking to come down from its lofty abstract position and positively contribute to the understanding of a political menace in its concrete immediacy. What makes this essay even more astonishing is that it offers a unique opening to Levinas’ mature thought, for, in his long

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Signature,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 291.

² Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 62–71. Henceforth “Hitlerism.”

journey, Levinas remained faithful to the problems he identified in the face of the Nazi horror – before it became a memory.

In the beginning of the essay, Levinas writes, “Hitlerism is more than a contagion or a madness; it is an awakening of elementary feelings.”³ This dangerous phenomenon, he continues, is philosophically significant because these elementary feelings now “harbor a philosophy.”⁴ For Levinas, the philosophy of Hitlerism “goes beyond the philosophy of Hitlerians” as it puts into question “the very principles of a civilization”⁵ and “the very humanity of man.”⁶

He begins by engaging with the idea of the free spirit as it runs through the tradition of Western thought. According to Levinas, the idea of the free spirit relies on a conception of human destiny according to which “man is absolutely free in his relations with the world.”⁷ Absolute freedom in relation to the world requires first and foremost the possibility of overcoming history as human being’s “most profound limitation.”⁸ Time, as a condition of human existence, is irreversible. The present is always the present of a past that is irrevocable. The present, that is to say, is always haunted by an inescapable past. The radical powerlessness of man in the face of the absolute sovereignty of the past is manifested in the inevitable suffering of the hero of the Greek tragedy. For absolute freedom to be thinkable, a true present is required in which the relation between the past and the present is reversed, in which, that is, the subordination of the past to the present is made possible.

Judaism, Levinas suggests, offers such a possibility. Through remorse – that is, “the painful expression of a radical powerlessness to redeem the irreparable” which nevertheless “heralds the repentance that generates the pardon that redeems”⁹ –

³ Ibid., 64.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 65.

Judaism offers the possibility of a present in which man can change or even efface the past. Christianity's great rebellion against the absolute powerlessness of the Greek in the face of the past consists in the idea of sin and the possibility of redemption. To break through the sovereignty of the past is not, however, an easy task. Absolute freedom requires nothing less than "tearing up the bedrock of natural existence."¹⁰ Against the irreversibility of time, Christianity wages a war on nature and puts forward a promise of victory whose fulfillment calls for effort and seriousness on the side of man. The power of renewal that lies at the basis of the Christian notion of the soul gives it a "noumenal nature"¹¹ that does not abide by the rules of the world in which it is placed. But this noumenal nature is not merely an abstract state – a mere illusion as Nietzsche thought; rather, "it is the concrete and positive power to become detached [from the world] and [thus] abstract."¹²

Liberalism inherits this view of freedom from Christianity, though it evades the dramatic side of Christian liberation that was fundamental to it. In liberalism the overcoming of time and the world is accomplished in the idea of the freedom of reason. Reason "exorcises physical, psychological, and social matter."¹³ The brutal and blind reality of the world is replaced by the spiritual world of idealist philosophy which stands outside and above the reach of the categories of concrete existence. Liberalism is thus founded upon an unbridgeable gap between the spirit and the world.

A lot is happening in these beginning passages of this short essay. Levinas touches upon some important and complex ideas in a summary manner without giving each issue its deserved due. As a result, his analysis is not quite clear on some crucial points. He mentions Judaism only in passing and quickly moves to discuss Christianity's position, without elaborating on the differences between Judaism and Christianity on this point. He then argues that liberalism's idea of the sovereign freedom of reason is

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 66.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

founded upon the Christian notion of the soul in a manner that ignores “the depths of the effort”¹⁴ that Christian salvation demands. Liberalism thus abstracts from what is “concrete and positive”¹⁵ in the Christian notion of the soul and thereby construes the duality of body and spirit in an abstract manner. In the absence of any explicit comment on the relation between Judaism and Christianity on this particular point, Levinas’ exposition of the argument has prompted some scholars to suggest that the problem lies in liberalism’s naïve appropriation of Christianity.¹⁶ However, a closer look could show that at the heart of Levinas’ argument in this essay lies his critique of the idea of universalism – which liberalism and Christianity have in common – as the source of the duality of body and spirit. This is why Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz warn that “it is important to the structure of the 1934 essay that Judaism stands before and outside the Christian-liberal ... duality of body and spirit.”¹⁷

In any case, having identified liberalism’s abstract construal of the duality of the spirit and the world, Levinas turns to Marxism. Marxism’s critique of idealism, he argues, constitutes the first challenge to the view of the human spirit as pure freedom. If being determines consciousness, then reason is not autonomous, but rather entangled with the contingencies of the material world. In this sense, Levinas writes, Marxism “breaks the harmonious curvature” of the development of European culture and stands opposed to both Christianity and idealist liberalism.¹⁸ Marxism’s break with idealism is not, however, definitive, for its turn to matter does not adequately capture the passivity and impotency of consciousness. In Marxism, consciousness still retains the power to not only become aware of its situation in the world, but also liberate itself from the bondage imposed by that situation. That is to say, Marxism ultimately succumbs to the power of

¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶ See, for example, Robert Bernasconi, “No Exit: Levinas’ Aporetic Account of Transcendence,” *Research in Phenomenology* 35, no. 1 (2005), 105.

¹⁷ Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz, “Is Liberalism All We Need? Prelude via Fascism,” in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 20.

¹⁸ Levinas, “Hitlerism,” 67.

the idealist subject because it *begins* by this subject and *adds* the situation in which the subject is placed only afterwards. A true break with idealism, Levinas argues, requires a total reversal of the notion of man, where the world is not merely added to the subject but rather forms the very foundation of human existence. "This paradoxical requirement," he writes, "is one that the experience of our bodies seems to fulfill."¹⁹

The total reversal that Levinas demands is not, however, the immediate identification of the self with the body – the view that he associates with what he calls "popular materialism."²⁰ Popular materialism's turn to matter amounts to nothing but the confusion of the self with the body that stems from "the pure and simple negation" of the idealist spirit.²¹ According to the traditional interpretations, the body is an object of the external world that tends to drag the spirit back to its material condition, thus limiting its free flight. Consequently, the body, when acknowledged in the tradition, is treated as an obstacle belonging to the inferior world of matter that needs to be overcome. This view of the body has, according to Levinas, nurtured both Christianity and modern liberalism. Popular materialism counters this view, but only by an abstract negation of the spirit. It thus confuses the self with the body, dragging the self down to the material world. The self, identified with the body, is placed in nature, accorded with "no exceptional standing in the Universe."²²

The reversal that Levinas is after is distinguished from popular materialism in that it is phenomenological. It is not simply that the body is closer to the self than any other object of the external world. There is indeed a feeling of identity between the self and the body: "do we not affirm ourselves in the unique warmth of our bodies long

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Throughout the essay, Levinas mostly uses the term "materialism" without qualification (except once, where he mentions "popular materialism," p. 68). It is, however, clear in the context of the essay that in presenting the immediate identification of body and self as the view of "materialism," he has in mind a form of vulgar materialism that is distinct from Marxism's dialectical materialism. To avoid confusion, I have used the qualification "popular," wherever necessary.

²¹ Ibid., 68.

²² Ibid.

before any blossoming of the Self that claims to be separate from the body?"²³ But this identity does not have the form an immediate identity that outright denies the spirit, as in popular materialism, because, in the identity of the spirit with the body, there also lies the spirit's opposition to remaining within the body. In order to explicate the phenomenological paradox that defines the relation of the self with the body, Levinas alludes to the experience of physical pain: "can we not say that analysis reveals in pain the spirit's opposition to this pain, a rebellion or refusal to remain within it and consequently an attempt to go beyond it?"²⁴

The proper point of departure for Levinas is this sense of duality within identity that he refers to as the paradox of the embodied spirit, that is, the situation of the self who is in its essence an embodied spirit but strives to go beyond itself. Idealism's betrayal of the concrete originality of this duality-in-identity constitutes its dangerous weakness. Losing connection with the concrete reality of the world, idealist thought enjoys its abstract freedom at the cost of becoming vulnerable to skepticism. Man's "power to doubt" is thus transformed into "a lack of conviction" that weakens the spirit, paving the way for popular materialism's abstract negation of the spirit and the notion of biological inevitability that it entails.²⁵ According to Levinas, it is to a society in such a condition that the particularist racism of National Socialism is able to offer the promise of sincerity and authenticity, founded upon the concrete relations of blood.

Particularism cannot, however, completely do away with the universal nature of truth. A new process of universalization is required whereby the truth of my race becomes *the* truth. The Christian-liberal notion of universality, which was based on the propagation of an idea, must thus be replaced by a new engine of universalization that is based on the expansion of a force.²⁶ But while the former is "a process of equalization" through justification and reasoning that ultimately aims at creating a community of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁶ Ibid., 70.

peers (if one submits to an idea, one becomes equally its master), the latter functions based on the logic of subordination, constituting a world of masters and slaves.²⁷ Levinas writes, “Nietzsche’s will to power, which modern Germany is rediscovering and glorifying, is not only a new ideal; it is an ideal that simultaneously brings with it its own form of universalization: war and conquest.”²⁸

For the young Levinas, the emerging racism of the National Socialists was not a mere opportunistic and grotesque political maneuver. Neither was it a return of an ancient brutal force run amok at a time when Europe had begun to lose its glory and become vulnerable to prehistoric forms of violence. Rather, the evil that emerged in the form of National Socialism was the actualization of a possibility embedded at the heart of Western civilization. It was not simply the achievement of some Hitlerians, representing a deviation from the European reason, but rather the result of the awakening of elemental feelings that harbored a philosophy – a philosophy that had accompanied Western thought, as a latent possibility, since its dawn. In the Prefatory Note that Levinas wrote for the (re)publication of “Hitlerism” in 1990, he elaborates on this possibility: “this article expresses the conviction that this source [i.e., the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism] stems from the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself.”²⁹

²⁷ The distinction between the propagation of an idea and the expansion of a force is, I think, a rather simplistic, and liberal, distinction, prone to Marxist as well as anti-colonial critiques. Considering the capitalistic-imperialistic drive at the heart of the Christian-liberal notion of universalization and the violence that ensued from its colonial expansion, one is obliged to question such a clear-cut distinction between the two processes of universalization, as they both did indeed function based on war and conquest. In *Ethics at a Standstill*, Horowitz argues that it is possible to read Levinas in a more nuanced and defensible manner: “I believe Levinas is implying, despite his obvious relative preference for liberalism over fascism, that liberalism could be much better at forgetting, hiding, veiling, rationalizing, and institutionalizing the violence upon which it depends for its propagation, but that it does depend upon a continuous violence” (Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008), 300). I think it would be hard to defend such a reading based solely on the text of “Hitlerism,” though it does seem to be a possibility if one appeals to Levinas’ later writings, in which his analysis of the totality and its violence does not leave any room for such a simplistic distinction between the propagation of an idea and the expansion of a force.

²⁸ Levinas, “Hitlerism,” 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

Levinas' 1934 essay was indeed one of the very first attempts to understand the phenomenon of National Socialism. It serves, in the words of Arnold I. Davidson, "to remind us concretely of the capabilities of the human mind and its responsibilities – capabilities and responsibilities that even the most severe political circumstances need not overwhelm."³⁰ In praise of Levinas' insightful analysis of National Socialism, Howard Caygill goes to the extent to write that "in retrospect, Levinas' judgment was uncannily accurate; it may be claimed that he, alone among his philosophical contemporaries, understood the philosophy of Hitlerism and the intentions of National Socialist politics, even if he underestimated its murderous potential."³¹

Moreover, despite the fact that in 1934 Levinas' own original contribution to philosophy had not yet taken shape, "Hitlerism" opens a gateway into his mature thought in which he remained astonishingly faithful to the problems first identified there. In a sense, Levinas' whole philosophical endeavor could be seen as an attempt to find a response to the crucial weakness of Western thought that rendered it paralyzed in the face of the power of the philosophy of Hitlerism.³² As he puts it in the 1990's Prefatory Note, the possibility of elemental evil "is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being."³³ Such a possibility was not once and for all exhausted in the actualization of the philosophy of Hitlerism. It is rather still a real, alive possibility that continues to threaten insofar as the subject is understood within the framework of ontology, that is, insofar as the subject is conceived as "correlative with being as gathering together and as dominating" and is concerned before all else with its own freedom.³⁴ The question thus becomes whether or not "liberalism is all we need" and whether or not "the subject arrive[s] at the human condition prior to assuming

³⁰ Arnold I. Davidson, "Introduction to Musil and Levinas," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 36.

³¹ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40.

³² Annabel Herzog refers to "Hitlerism" as an essay in which Levinas "sums up his entire philosophy in a few words" (Annabel Herzog, "Is Liberalism 'All We Need'? Levinas's Politics of Surplus," *Political Theory* 30, no. 2 (2002), 205). Similarly, Horowitz writes, "the trajectory of all [Levinas'] later thinking departs from the problems unfolded in 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'" (Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, 290). See also, Bernasconi, "No Exit," 101-117.

³³ Levinas, "Hitlerism," 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

responsibility for the other man.”³⁵ Levinas returns to this view when, in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, he portrays his view of *ethics as first philosophy* as ultimately “a defense of subjectivity,” emphasizing that such a defense must come out of a critique of the primacy of ontology, both in its Heideggerian and transcendental idealistic forms.³⁶ Levinas’ reformulation of subjectivity in his second *magnum opus*, *Otherwise than Being* as one-for-the-other of substitution breaks the subject free from the imperialism of being in order precisely to provide thought with means necessary to face the possibility of elemental evil.

“Hitlerism” is a significant piece amongst Levinas’ writings also because of the structure of its argument, which begins with an immediate political urgency in order to unfold the problems that philosophy must confront. As such, it provides an invaluable insight into Levinas’ view of the relation between philosophy and politics. As we shall see, in characterizing the primacy of the other, mature Levinas purifies the ethical relation from all the contingencies of being – from, that is, the realities of the realm of politics – which leads him to constitute a gap between ethics and politics. The ethical relation must be so characterized as independent of and prior to the truth of being so that the absolute sense of responsibility for the other is not compromised by the other’s social and political specificities. In Levinas’ ethics, it is upon the entry of *the third* – which strictly speaking is not an entry since it is always already present in my relation with the other – that the question of justice takes shape and the reality of politics enforces itself back into the picture. In this sense, it could be said that the *exposition* (and only its exposition) of Levinas’ mature philosophy almost always begins by the characterization of the ethical relation such that the question of politics becomes an issue only afterwards. “Hitlerism,” in contrast, begins by Levinas’ analysis of an immediate political danger and formulates the need to move beyond ontology as a response to the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 26.

fundamental weakness of Western philosophy that lies at the heart of this political danger. If – as I will argue in the last section of this Chapter – it is true that Levinas' mature philosophy developed in continuity with the problems unfolded in "Hitlerism," this essay is then significant as it gives us an insight into the young Levinas' view of what philosophy must be able to do for politics. That is to say, "Hitlerism" presents, in simple terms, not yet complicated by the terminology of Levinas' mature philosophy, the political concerns that led him to develop such a philosophy.

Ethics as First Philosophy

According to the young Levinas of "Hitlerism," Idealism's abstract construal of the duality of body and spirit renders it impotent against the appeal of the philosophy of Hitlerism. Marxist materialism constitutes a break with the idealist tradition, but this break is not definitive as Marxism ultimately succumbs to the power of the idealist subject. Thirty years later and after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas repeats the same critique in "Transcendence and Height," this time raised in an extended form that targets both Marxism and transcendental ontology: "the realism with which both Marxism and transcendental ontology are satisfied is not sufficiently realist to overcome idealism."³⁷ A genuine break with idealism requires a radical reinterpretation of the relation between the body and the spirit which can account for the paradox of the embodied spirit, that is, which can reveal the world as the very basis of the spirit's existence – rather than being merely added on to it – without thereby reverting to an immediate identification of the body and the spirit. For Levinas, such an account cannot come out of a mere acknowledgement of the dialectical relation between the spirit and the world; nor is it enough to locate the conditions of beings in the Being of beings. A true break with idealism requires a true realism, which amounts to nothing

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15.

less than the recognition of radical alterity, that is, what is absolutely other than the I. Both Marxian dialectical materialism and transcendental ontology, Levinas contends, fall short of articulating such a notion of alterity for they cannot ultimately construe the alterity as anything but an element of being and thus revert to the totality of the Same. Absolute alterity, Levinas writes, can only manifest itself in the face of the other person: “the absolutely Other is,” that is to say, “the human Other (*Autrui*).”³⁸ True realism must thus begin with the human other, that is, with the relation of the I to the other human being, that is, with the ethical relation.

But in what sense does the human other constitute absolute alterity? How can the I come into a relation with what is absolutely other than itself without absorbing it or being absorbed in it? How can there be any relation without the elimination of the distance that is necessary for the preservation of the radical separation of the I from the other? These are questions that lead us to the core of Levinas’ philosophical endeavor, with which we have to concern ourselves now.

According to Levinas, human being is not a being for-oneself and self-sufficient in its identity. It is not the same with itself, as it is always already interrupted by the other. *Always already* because the human subject is, from its very beginning, awakened by the alterity of the other. It is an awakening by the infinity that originates in the face of the other, the infinity that is produced in the form of an undeniable, infinite responsibility for the other.

The order of language is incapable of truly appreciating the anterior posteriority of the relation with the other. It tends to push the self-identical subject back to the center of its world, stubbornly insisting on its grammatically active role in the sentence. Strictly speaking, however, it is not the human subject that is awakened by his responsibility for the other. Rather, more precisely put, it is the responsibility for the other, this very awakening, that *is* the human subject. But even this formulation is not satisfying, since

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

responsibility for the other individuates *me* in my singularity, not the *subject* in its particularity. It individuates me as one who is not substitutable with anyone else in its responsibility. *I* myself am responsible, infinitely, for the other, and no one else can take my place and lighten my burden. Thus, we should be very cautious when using a general concept such as the human subject in this context. Pushing in the direction of precision, we may say that it is the responsibility for the other that *is me*.

The difficulty associated with expressing the anterior posteriority of the relation with the other is not superficial. In fact, Levinas' radical proposition, i.e., the primacy of ethics over ontology, requires a radical break with the official language of philosophy that tends to succumb to the primacy of ontology. It is only in light of understanding ethics as first philosophy, that is, as metaphysics, that the relation with the other could lead to what Levinas refers to as true realism. It is therefore necessary to understand the transcendence of the other in the context of Levinas' critique of ontology, and, in particular, in light of his critique of Heidegger, the philosopher who pushed ontology to its limits.

In "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger explicitly rejects the possibility of thinking ethics metaphysically by locating *ethos* in ontology. According to Heidegger, the discipline of ethics, alongside logic and physics, appeared in the school of Plato, "at a time when thinking was becoming 'philosophy'."³⁹ Ethics, as a branch of metaphysics concerned with directives and rules of conduct, did not exist in pre-Socratic thought. Yet the tragedies of Sophocles and the fragments of Heraclitus did, according to Heidegger, engage in thinking *ethos* in a depth and breadth that surpassed all subsequent philosophical works on ethics.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 256.

Heraclitus' 119th fragment, which originally reads as *ethos anthropoi daimon*, is commonly translated as "[a] man's character is his daimon."⁴⁰ According to Heidegger, this translation relies on a modern conception of ethics and is thus a misreading of the Greek text. *Ethos*, he writes, "means abode, dwelling place" and 'ethics,' in its original meaning derived from *ethos*, refers to the thought that ponders the abode of man.⁴¹ Heraclitus' fragment does not define the essence of man as *daimon*, but rather reveals that the abode of man allows what pertains to man's essence, that is *daimon*, the god, to appear. Heidegger's revised translation goes as follows: "The (familiar) abode for man is the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar)."⁴² The god, the unfamiliar, is, for Heidegger, the truth of Being. Therefore, if 'ethics' is the thinking of the abode of man, then it is originally and fundamentally nothing but the thinking that "thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man."⁴³ Consequently, insofar as the history of metaphysics is the history of the oblivion of the truth of Being, ethics cannot be thought of as a branch of metaphysics.

Now, the question is, how should we understand Levinas' ethics as first philosophy, i.e., as metaphysics, when Heidegger has already announced the impossibility of thinking ethics metaphysically? Jacques Derrida responds to this question by arguing that ethics in the hands of Levinas undergoes a radical transformation of meaning such that it transcends Heidegger's charges against traditional metaphysics. According to Derrida, Levinas' ethics is wholly other; yet it is wholly other without completely losing its connection with what the term ethics commonly signifies. Derrida writes, "Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine a morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general. But as this determination does not offer itself as a *theory* of ethics, in question

⁴⁰ Heraclitus, quoted in *ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 256-258.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

then, is an Ethics of Ethics ... [which] can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself."⁴⁴

In a debate held at Centre Sevres in Paris, Levinas explicitly endorses Derrida's view on what the term ethics means and emphasizes that "for me, the term ethics always signifies the fact of the encounter, of the relation of myself with the Other: a scission of Being in the encounter."⁴⁵ Such an ethics of ethics, concerned with the singularity of the ethical relation, does not belong to the commonly understood domain of moral philosophy.

In 1947, in a series of lectures published in English under the title *Time and the Other*, Levinas argues, against Heidegger, that the thought of Being is inherently incapable of envisaging a relation with the radical alterity of the other. The relation between Being and beings, or existing and existents,⁴⁶ is ultimately a relation of interiority and merges everything into a unity.⁴⁷ For Levinas, the thought that is limited to the relation between existing and existents does not have room for genuine pluralism as it concerns the existent in its solitude. Consequently, Heidegger's analyses are limited to either "the impersonality of everyday life" or "solitary *Dasein*."⁴⁸ Although Heidegger describes the relation with other persons as a basic structure of *Dasein* in his concept of *miteinandersein*, his notion of sociality always originates "in the subject alone"⁴⁹ and cannot take any other form but communion. Against the symmetric collectivity of communion, Levinas proposes the asymmetric collectivity of the I-you which aims "toward a pluralism that does not merge into unity."⁵⁰ For such a pluralism to be possible, a relation with radical alterity has to first become thinkable. Therefore, ethics,

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 111.

⁴⁵ Levinas, quoted in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1999), 17.

⁴⁶ The terms *Sein* and *Seindes* are commonly translated as Being and beings. But in *Time and the Other* Levinas prefers – "for reasons of euphony," as he puts it – to render these terms as existing and existents (Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 44).

⁴⁷ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 42.

insofar as it is concerned with the irreducible singularity of the other, needs to move beyond the thought of Being and, not only break with Plato, but also overcome “the Eleatic notion of Being” inherited from Parmenides, with whom neither Plato nor Heidegger were able to break.⁵¹

Could such an ethics, born from its break with the Greco-Eleatic logos, still bear the name of philosophy? That is to say, could the language and logic of philosophy allow for such a break with Parmenides? This question was famously raised by Derrida three years after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, in the same essay that he portrayed Levinas’ ethics as an ethics of ethics rather than a branch of moral philosophy. There he also defends Levinas against simplistic accusations that aim to downgrade the philosophical significance of Levinas by overemphasizing the role of Hebraic inspirations in his thought. According to Derrida, Levinas’ thought does not base its disruptive authority on Hebraic theses: “it is developed in its discourse neither as theology, nor a Jewish mysticism ... neither as a dogma, nor as a religion, nor as a morality.”⁵² It makes philosophy, understood as the thought of Being, tremble at its roots by remaining incessantly faithful to “the immediate, but buried nudity of experience” and insists “to be understood from within a *recourse to experience itself*.”⁵³

Nevertheless, in spite of his sympathetic treatment of Levinas’ thought, Derrida ultimately argues that this ethics of ethics is not, strictly speaking, philosophy. For, the analysis of the face of the other and the infinity it produces fails to meet the criterion of theoretical coherence, which is a basic requirement of the Greco-Eleatic notion of reason upon which philosophy is founded. In other words, if the face of the other belongs to a realm beyond Being and does not reveal itself as a phenomenon, then Levinas’ analysis can neither be ontological nor phenomenological. Derrida thus limits the philosophical significance of Levinas’ ethics to its capacity to disrupt the language and logic of being.

⁵¹ Ibid., 43 and 92. This is what Derrida refers to as “a second parricide” (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 89).

⁵² Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 83.

⁵³ Ibid., 82-3.

Derrida's well-known construal of Levinas' ethics as pure disruption has – as we shall see – significant bearings on the central question of this dissertation, that is, the question of the relation between ethics and politics, for, after all, the logic of being is the only logic that politics can comprehend. It is thus necessary to examine this matter in further details.

Levinas' indirect response to Derrida's charge could already be found in *Totality and Infinity* in the idea that philosophy is ethical before it is theoretical. However, it is in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, that Levinas attends to this matter directly by examining the movement between the (ethical) Saying and the (ontological) Said. In order to situate Levinas' thought in relation to philosophy, understood as either ontology or phenomenology, we have to examine the statements of his claim to philosophy in these two books.

In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, after warmly acknowledging the influence of the Jewish theologian and philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, Levinas highlights his debt to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method:

The presentation and the development of the notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thought aiming at objects! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives.⁵⁴

This move from the objective certitude of objectifying thought back to the condition of possibility of objectivity is what Levinas calls “the transcendental method.”⁵⁵ For Husserl, the transcendental conditions that make objectifying thought possible still have the form of intuiting evidence. That is to say, the concrete horizons

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

that underlie each and every phenomenon are still themselves phenomena that can be grasped by consciousness if it gives up its 'natural attitude.' For Levinas, in contrast, the condition of possibility of experience cannot itself be presented in terms of experience. According to Levinas, the transcendental condition of possibility of objectifying thought and the notion of experience that lies at its basis is the face of the other that does not manifest itself in a phenomenal disclosure. In this sense, Levinas' understanding of the transcendental method is perhaps closer to Kant than Husserl.

The demand that Husserl poses to consciousness – i.e., to suspend its natural attitude in order to be able to comprehend its transcendental condition of possibility – presupposes the primacy of critique over dogmatism since it relies on the assumption that there is in consciousness an inherent and unconditional love for truth that motivates it to criticize dogmatism. But whence does the love of truth originate? Why should consciousness be willing to suspend its natural view of the world to reach the truth of what lies behind it and makes it possible? According to Levinas, in an egological world, where the I is not interrupted by the face of the other, consciousness would not out of itself find the impulse necessary to criticize its natural attitude and yield to the authority of truth. If it were not for the other, there would even be no objectivity. It is the other's disruption of the egoism of the I that awakens critical consciousness. It is the "gleam of exteriority or transcendence in the face of the Other," expressed by the term infinity, that ignites the love of truth.⁵⁶ That is to say, it is as responsibility for the other, as ethics, that the critical essence of knowledge is accomplished. The primacy of critique over dogmatism owes to the primacy of metaphysics, i.e., ethics, over ontology.⁵⁷

The transcendence of the other, the infinite, is not produced as a phenomenon, as presence, but as "the calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

Other,"⁵⁸ as an infinite responsibility that reveals itself as pure questioning, as disruption. The relation with infinity presents itself as the disruption of the Same by the face of the Other. It cannot take the form of experience since its very infinity is produced as the overflowing of the thought that thinks it. "The relation with infinity," Levinas writes, "will have to be stated in terms other than those of objective experience."⁵⁹ Therefore, neither phenomenology nor ontology is adequate to state the transcendence of the other.

Insofar as Levinas' analysis consists in a moving back from objective experience to a forgotten experience from which it lives, his method could be called transcendental. However, transcendentalism by itself is not adequate for characterizing Levinas' thought as it leaves out what distinguishes him from other transcendentalist philosophers, such as Husserl and Kant. Charles William Reed proposes the term "diachronic transcendentalism" to refer to Levinas' method.⁶⁰ Levinas himself welcomes "ethical transcendentalism" as an appropriate characterization of his thought: "I agree absolutely to the formula [i.e., ethical transcendentalism] in that transcendental means a certain priority – that ethics is prior to ontology ... it is therefore a transcendentalism which starts with ethics."⁶¹

However, insofar as ethical transcendence is vaguely defined as "a certain priority," the mere acknowledgement of the affinities between Levinas' method and the transcendental method is not enough to demonstrate the claim of his thought to philosophy. In order to adequately respond to Derrida's charge, we must be able to characterize the relation between Levinas' ethical metaphysics and the Greco-Eleatic notion of reason. The problem is that, on the one hand, Levinas' propositions such as the priority of ethics over ontology or the priority of justice over truth imply that ethical transcendence has the form of nonadequation and cannot be known as truth. On the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁰ Charles Williams Reed, "Levinas's Question," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 74.

⁶¹ Theodore De Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 109.

other hand, however, these propositions are themselves put forward in the form of philosophical theses that do seem to have a claim to truth. This is the paradox at the heart of Levinas' thought: his truth cannot be the theoretical truth of ontology, but it needs to be expressed through the medium of the language of ontology.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas' indications go so far as to show that his propositions must be understood as ethical events in themselves rather than referring to an ontological truth about ethics. The development of Levinas' thought in this book does not aim to justify, in an ordinary philosophical manner, the transcendental role of ethics, but rather is guided by ethics itself. Ethics does not proceed from the vision of the possibility of, or the need for, the breach of the totality, by the vision of "the possibility of a *signification without context*."⁶² "Ethics," he writes, is of itself "an optics;"⁶³ that is to say, "it *consummates* this vision."⁶⁴ In other words, it is not the knowledge of the possibility of the breach of the totality that leads us to the transcendence of the other as its source; quite the contrary, such a knowledge is itself a reference to the transcendence of the other that has already called the totality into question. Ethics is prior to ontology.

According to Steven G. Smith, Levinas' proposition that "ethics is an optics" amounts to nothing less than revising the very notion of philosophical reason: "the necessity motivating the formulations of the idea of the other or infinite is directly related to the necessity by which men listen to each other and feed and clothe each other."⁶⁵ In Levinas' words, the "positive act of the one justifying himself in his freedom before the other [i.e., apology] ... is the primordial phenomenon of reason."⁶⁶ Knowledge is but the articulation of that justifying: "the essence of reason consists not in

⁶² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ Steven G. Smith, "Reason as One for Another: Moral and Theoretical Argument," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 56-57.

⁶⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 252.

securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him into question and in inviting him to justice."⁶⁷

In light of *Totality and Infinity's* revised notion of rationality, philosophy is first and foremost ethics. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether or not Levinas' 'philosophy as ethics' is able to provide the connection we are after to the traditional notion of philosophy. Is not the rendition of philosophy as ethics a confirmation that what Levinas is doing is in fact not philosophy in its Greco-Eleatic sense? To find a definite answer to this question we have to turn to *Otherwise than Being*, in which he directly engages with an analysis of the capacity of philosophical language to say more than it can contain. It is, that is to say, in this book that Levinas sets himself the task of examining the limitations of, and possibilities inherent in, the language of ontology to speak the otherwise than being.

If in the earlier work Levinas' analysis was centered around the relation between the totality and the infinite, in *Otherwise than Being* the problematic is formulated in terms of the relation between the ontological Said, the structurally coherent utterance of language, and the ethical Saying as "exposure to another," the anarchical, pre-original language which is antecedent to all verbal signs⁶⁸ and conditions all communication.⁶⁹ The pre-original saying "does move into a language," but as soon as it is thematized in the said, it is betrayed.⁷⁰ The dilemma of the possibility of saying the otherwise than being through the language of ontology is now formulated as the problem of the 'reduction' of the said to saying, that is to say, the possibility of unsaying the betrayal of saying in the said. In Levinas' words, "a methodological problem arises here, whether the pre-original element of saying ... can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme ... and whether this betrayal can be reduced; whether one can at the same time

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

know and free the known of the marks which thematization leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology."⁷¹

Otherwise than Being can indeed be seen as a forceful restatement of what *Totality and Infinity* has already shown, that is, the thesis that philosophy is ethics before it is theory and the revised notion of reason that this entails. Nevertheless, as Richard A Cohen put it, Levinas' focus has shifted from radical alterity in *Totality and Infinity* to ethical subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being*.⁷² It is this crucial shift that allows Levinas to reformulate the relation between totality and infinity, between being and its other, in terms of the relation between said and saying.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the relation with the other already has the structure of discourse, as Levinas makes clear in his characterization of the term face:

The presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation [*discours*]. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.⁷³

But, despite Levinas' reference to the discursive structure of the ethical relation, the characterization of alterity as pure exteriority in *Totality and Infinity* precludes the possibility of – to use Smith's words – “a significant talk” about the other.⁷⁴ According to Alphonso Lingis, the impossibility of finding a satisfactory formulation of the discursive structure of the ethical relation in the earlier work corresponds to the limitation of the notion of subjectivity it employs.⁷⁵ In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas addresses this limitation by reformulating subjectivity as one-for-the-other of substitution, which allows for the characterization of subjectivity as “the locus where alterity makes contact,”

⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

⁷² Richard A. Cohen, “Foreword,” in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, by Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), xii.

⁷³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

⁷⁴ Smith, “Reason as One for Another,” 69.

⁷⁵ Alphonso Lingis, “Translator's Introduction,” in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, by Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), xxii.

because, as substitution, subjectivity is “created by this movement of alterity” and is always already in conversation with the other.⁷⁶

Levinas’ reformulation of the notion of subjectivity consists in showing that the subject is awakened by the other as a responsible subject before it becomes a knowing subject. Subjectivity as knowing, i.e., as consciousness, is caught up in the subject-object correlation; it is therefore subordinated to the sense of objectivity, which is revealed in or as truth and forms the essence of being. Being absorbs any sense of subjectivity that is correlative with the object and thus triumphs over both the primacy of the subject and the subject-object correlation. In other words, the thinking subject, who seeks intelligibility, is caught up in being because truth is merely a detour that being’s essence takes to disclose itself. Intelligibility, that is to say, is a part of the very exercise of being. As intelligibility, the subject always sees itself at the service of the very clearing of being, and remains on the side of being. Subject as consciousness is thus absorbed by being.

The same is also true for subjectivity understood as self-consciousness. The role the subject plays in the manifestation of being makes it part of the way being carries on. It participates in the event of being and manifests itself as being. In Levinas’s terms: “the function of disclosing being is disclosed in its turn.”⁷⁷ In subjectivity as self-consciousness, the subject shows itself to itself; it presents itself to itself as an object: it is a moment of being.

The responsible subject is the subject that truly escapes the imperialism of being, for the one-for-the-other of substitution moves beyond being, and beyond merely being otherwise, by signifying the otherwise than being. The one-for-the-other cannot be depicted by the models of being or by modes of being. Neither does it belong to any form of subject-object correlation. This one-for-the-other, this responsibility, is a plot without a beginning, anarchic and prior to freedom. Responsibility for the other is prior

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 134.

to any commitment undertaken in a present. Subjectivity as substitution is, that is to say, prior to committed subjectivity.

The subject arises as responsibility in the proximity of the I to the other. The notion of proximity does not refer to a spatial narrowing of distance. Nor does it refer to any sense of meeting, for meeting presupposes co-presence or synchrony. Proximity does not privilege the subject with the power and possibility of action that the notion of meeting entails. In the contact of proximity, the I receives, or is affected by, the call of responsibility in its vulnerability, that is, in absolute passivity. Proximity refers to a sense of immediacy that suppresses the distance and disrupts the possibility of co-presence that the notion of “consciousness of ...” involves.⁷⁸ The temporality of proximity is not that of presence or synchrony. It is rather a diachronic temporality that evades, and thus interrupts, the subject’s presence. Proximity occurs “in two times”⁷⁹ and already has the form of transcendence as it “opens the distance of a diachrony without a common present.”⁸⁰

“Signification as proximity,” Levinas writes, “is the latent birth of the subject.”⁸¹ But the signification of proximity does not belong to the movement of cognition. It does not function through “the correlation of terms in the simultaneity of a linguistic system.”⁸² The one-for-the-other of proximity is rather “the very signifyingness of signification, which signifies in saying before showing itself in the said.”⁸³ The subject born in proximity is not the knowing subject, but rather the responsible subject born in the endlessness of obligation. Such a subjectivity, claimed by the other at its birth or rather born as claimed-by-the-other, constitutes a break with being and essence.

It is in this subjectivity, in the absoluteness of its responsibility, that the voice of the infinite as the transcendence of the other is enigmatically heard. But hearing here

⁷⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁸¹ Ibid., 139.

⁸² Ibid., 70.

⁸³ Ibid., 100.

does not mean appearing. The glory of the infinite could not appear to the subject, as it never becomes co-present with it. Appearance and presence require thematization, a beginning in the present of representation. But infinity is not thematizable. It is without a beginning as though it comes from an immemorial past that can never be re-presented in a present. The glory of the infinite could not become a phenomenon except by becoming finite. The glory of the infinite is only glorified in and as responsibility, in the subject's passivity and in its substitution for the other. What bears witness to the glory is the saying which is prior to anything said. The 'truth' of this witness is irreducible to the truth of the said, i.e., the truth of thematization, of ontology. This witness could not become a narration of anything that shows itself as truth in the said. There thus arises the problem of the witness and language.

The I, extracted from the concept of the ego that ignores its uniqueness, is the witness of the infinite in its singularity. What I witness could not be thematized. It is not an evidence that could be communicated as a theme. Its truth is not the truth of representation. However, through this witness, the exteriority of the infinite becomes a form of inwardness, an inwardness that is distinct from psychological experience. The glory of the infinite is glorified in my saying and *affects* me without thereby becoming co-present with me. It is as if it commands me by my own voice. This inwardness is that reverting in which the radically exterior addresses me and orders me.

Infinity passes in a saying that is without a said. It could not be reduced to an act or to a thought. It would not be added on as information, or expression, or as a kind of experience. Infinity could not be experienced; it is always already passed. There could only be this glorification, which is responsibility for the other. Infinity is glorified only through subjectivity, through the substitution for the other. As Levinas put it,

“glorification is saying, that is, a sign given to the other, peace announced to the other, responsibility for the other, to the extent of substitution.”⁸⁴

Insofar as philosophical language “is a thematizing, a synchronizing of terms, a recourse to systematic language, a constant use of the verb being,”⁸⁵ it is the language of being and presence. The problem of the possibility of saying otherwise than being through the language of philosophy concerns the capacity of the language of being to bear witness to the signifyingness of the saying on which it lives. In other words, if saying could not enter the propositional form of the said unless it is betrayed, then we must ask whether the philosophical said has the capacity to unsay itself, or be reduced, in order to bear witness to the pre-original saying on which it relies, considering that this ‘reduction’ too will have to unfold in stated propositions.⁸⁶

According to Levinas there is inherent in language, be it poetic, prophetic, or philosophical, a possibility for exceeding the limits of the essence it bears. As he puts it, “what shows itself thematically in the synchrony of the said in fact lets itself be unsaid as a difference of what cannot be assembled, signifying as the-one-for-the-other, from me to the other.”⁸⁷ This is evidenced in “the insurmountable equivocation” of the said and provided by the capacity of language for “suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems of the logical definitions of concepts.”⁸⁸ This capacity is manifested in the poetic said in its invitation for never-ending interpretations, in the prophetic said in the self-disruptiveness of its equivocal reference to an enigmatic beyond, and in the philosophical said in the persistent return of skepticism.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 43-45.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 169-170.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 170.

Philosophy has a capacity for saying saying “by an abuse [of language] that justifies proximity itself in which the Infinite comes to pass.”⁹⁰ From the perspective of theoretical coherence, such a capacity for saying what is non-thematizable is tainted with contradictions. But the objections based on contradiction are “facile,”⁹¹ as are the ones raised against skepticism. Skepticism is inseparable from philosophy. It cannot once and for all be refuted. It is insensitive to the charge of contradiction and always returns with a new force. Although the last word could be said to belong to philosophy which utters ‘truth,’ skepticism’s periodical return is not insignificant as it makes philosophy tremble perpetually. Skepticism cannot be refuted by the charge of contradiction because the affirmation and the negation of skepticism belong to two temporalities. As Adrian Peperzak put it, “we need time to realize, *first*, what the skeptical thesis states, *second*, that the stating of the thesis entails another thesis, *third*, that the two theses are incompatible and cannot be maintained at the same time.”⁹² The possibility of skepticism thus reveals the diachronic structure of the philosophical said that can never be reduced to a purely synchronic form of signification.

Levinas’ reference to skepticism is not, to be sure, a defense of skepticism as a doctrine. As a doctrine, skepticism fails. Neither does he intend to suggest that philosophy as ethics should, or could, take the form of skepticism. As “a bastard”⁹³ child of ontology, skepticism is nothing beyond a negation of the ultimacy of ontology. The perpetual return of skepticism is for Levinas a reminder that the said as the language of ontology is never the statement of being alone, that it is never reducible to the essence it bears and always carries with itself more than itself. According to Levinas, “skepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in

⁹⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁹¹ Ibid., 155.

⁹² Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 96.

⁹³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 183.

the said.”⁹⁴ The insensitivity of skepticism to the charge of contradiction – and to refutation in general – is the mark of a higher sensitivity, that is, a sensitivity to the difference between the signifyingness of proximity and the signification of the said, “to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice.”⁹⁵ What the invincibility of skepticism reveals is that while philosophy, in its said, betrays the call of responsibility from which it lives, it still, as a saying, conveys responsibility and proximity.

The structure of the relation between skepticism and philosophy suggests that the abuse of language through which philosophy can unsay its said must also have a successive and diachronic structure. As soon as saying enters the said, it is thematized and thus betrayed. This betrayal must in turn be unsaid through critique and denial. Yet, the unsaying is not saying itself, as every denial transforms the transcendence it conveys into a new said and becomes a new betrayal. The succession of the said and its unsaying is an indication of the impossibility of pure synchrony. This is not, however, a mere negation of the ultimacy of ontology, as in the case of skepticism, for it conveys the message that the synchronic structure of the ontological said relies on the diachronic signification of the ethical saying. The book, *Otherwise than Being*, is in its entirety the best example of a philosophical said that is tirelessly engaged in such an act of thematization and unsaying. In the beginning of the book Levinas writes, “at this moment language is serving a research conducted in view of disengaging the *otherwise than being* or *being’s other* outside of the themes in which they already show themselves, unfaithfully, as *being’s essence* – but in which they do show themselves. Language

⁹⁴ Ibid., 167.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 168.

permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being, as though being's other were an event of being."⁹⁶

Substitution, Transcendence, and Materiality

In "Hitlerism," Levinas linked the appeal of National Socialism to an essential weakness of the Christian-liberal thought, that is, the abstract duality of the body and the self that rendered it ineffective in the face of the concrete racism of National Socialism. He then proposed that, in order to respond to this weakness, philosophy needs to concern itself with what he formulated as the problem, or rather the paradox, of the embodied spirit. The question with which I would like to engage now is whether or not Levinas's ethics as first philosophy, culminating in one-for-the-other of substitution, could offer a convincing response to this problem. Following Bernasconi on this matter,⁹⁷ my conviction is that it does. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will demonstrate this point by examining the development of Levinas' thought from "Hitlerism" (1934) and "On Escape" (1935) to *Otherwise than Being* (1974).

One year after the publication of "Hitlerism," in an essay titled "On Escape," Levinas once again engages with the problem of the separation of the spirit from the world, this time directly linking it to the limitations of the thought of being. "The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being," Levinas writes in the beginning of the essay, "originates in the discord between human freedom and the brutal fact of being that assaults this freedom. The conflict from which the revolt arises opposes man to the world, not man to himself."⁹⁸ According to Levinas, the opposition of the spirit to the world rests upon the assumption of the self-sufficiency of the I, that is, the assumption that the I would be in peace with itself if only it could free itself from the foreign reality of the world. "Yet," he reminds us, "this category of sufficiency is

⁹⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁷ Bernasconi, "No Exit," 101-117.

⁹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "On Escape," in *On Escape: De L'évasion*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 49.

conceived in the image of *being* such as things offer it to us.”⁹⁹ That is to say, the idea of the self-sufficiency of the I is an extension of the notion of the self-sufficiency of being: being is; it does not refer to anything else and is absolutely sufficient in its existence.

For Levinas, the idea that being is self-sufficient and does not refer to anything beyond itself is a dangerous conviction for it succumbs to the brutality of the facts of being. The incompetency of Western philosophy, he argues, lies in that it has never gone beyond this thought of being. In response, Levinas recognizes the need to “escape” from the sovereignty of being, which corresponds to the need to break the self-sameness of the I. It is for this reason that the traditional notion of transcendence, which has always been thought from within the framework of the sufficiency of being, strikes the young Levinas as inadequate. In order to distinguish his view of “escape” from transcendence, he proposes a neologism: *excendence*.¹⁰⁰

With the introduction of *excendence*, Levinas at once distinguishes his notion of escape from both transcendental idealism and from Heidegger. As he puts it, “to the need for escape, being appears not only as an obstacle that free thought would have to surmount, nor even as the rigidity that, by inviting us to routine, demands an effort toward originality; rather it appears as an imprisonment from which one must get out.”¹⁰¹ According to Levinas, the desire to flee from being corresponds to breaking “the chain of the I to the self.”¹⁰² Insofar as the identity of the I with itself has not been put into question, being reveals itself as enchainment from which one cannot escape. At the same time, insofar as one begins with the assumption of the self-sufficiency of being, one cannot recognize the duality of the I and the self. Heidegger joined the tradition of the idealist thought in overlooking this duality precisely because he too was unable to envisage the possibility of fleeing being – not beings and their limitations, but being as such, being itself or rather being oneself.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁰² Ibid., 55.

Insofar as one remains within the terrain of being, fleeing would amount to not only getting out, but also taking refuge somewhere. Escape, on the contrary, signifies the aspiration of getting out only. The need for escape thus poses a dilemma: it is the urge to get out of oneself without the possibility of taking refuge somewhere, or, put differently, the impossibility to remain oneself at the same time that one is chained to oneself. This dilemma is not unfamiliar to us as it is a reformulation of the paradox of the embodied spirit that Levinas had already identified in "Hitlerism." In opposition to popular materialism's immediate identification of the spirit with the body, Levinas had argued that in the depth of the feeling of identity between self and body there is "the duality of a free spirit that struggles against the body in which it is chained."¹⁰³ In "Hitlerism," he elucidated the paradox of the embodied spirit by appealing to the unbearable but inescapable experience of pain. In a methodologically analogous manner, in "On Escape," he describes the dilemma of escape in the experience of nausea: "in nausea – which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is – we are at the same time riveted to ourselves."¹⁰⁴

The dilemma announced as the paradox of the embodied spirit in "Hitlerism" and as the problem of excedence in "On Escape" was to be, in a sense, the guiding principle of Levinas' thought during the years to come,¹⁰⁵ though in the 1930s it had not yet been integrated with ethics. When in *Existence and Existents* – published in 1947 – Levinas adopts Plato's phrase, the Good beyond Being, he still uses the term excedence to explain its sense of beyond. If transcendence is understood as a movement toward a higher existence, an infinite being, or toward Heidegger's Being beyond beings, then the Good beyond Being must be understood in terms of excedence. Excedence signifies the desire to exit being without the possibility of doing so; that is, a movement that starts

¹⁰³ Levinas, "Hitlerism," 68.

¹⁰⁴ Levinas, "On Escape," 66.

¹⁰⁵ Bernasconi suggests that this dilemma may have its source in the formal structure of Jewish identity which "is marked by persecution for being Jewish" (Bernasconi, "No Exit," 105-6). Jewish identity consists in a protest against a reduction to being: "its vocation is to be itself by reaching out beyond itself" (Ibid., 106).

from being to go beyond it at the same time that it is riveted to being. In Levinas' words, the movement of the Good beyond Being is "a departure from Being and the categories which describes it ... [b]ut excedence and the Good necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why Being is better than non-being."¹⁰⁶

In the same year, in *Time and the Other*, Levinas decides to drop the term excedence, and instead use the familiar term transcendence, albeit in a revised form that corresponds to the dilemma of excedence. Now he is concerned with the possibility of a relation that is an event of transcendence not "wrapped in immanence."¹⁰⁷ In *Time and the Other*, Levinas returns to the duality of the I and the self in his phenomenological analysis of pain and physical suffering, which immediately leads to the relation with death. Suffering entails both the ego's desire to depart from the presence of the self and "the impossibility of fleeing or retreating."¹⁰⁸ The impossibility of retreat that is exposed in suffering is a reminder of "the impossibility of nothingness."¹⁰⁹ In suffering, death approaches beyond the alternatives of being and nothingness. The proximity of death in suffering is not simply a feeling or a knowledge that death could be added on to the experience of pain. Rather, "pain of itself includes [death] like a paroxysm, as if something is about to be produced which is more rending than suffering."¹¹⁰

The relation with death, to which suffering refers, takes away the illusion of possibility altogether. If in suffering, despite the overwhelming sense of an absence of withdrawal, the subject still retained an illusion of possibility, in the face of death it is taken beyond the whole realm of possibilities. That is to say, the subject comes into relation with death in absolute passivity. This is because the unknown of death does not lend itself to the simplicity of nothingness but rather is "correlative to an experience of

¹⁰⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), 15.

¹⁰⁷ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the impossibility of nothingness.”¹¹¹ Unlike Heidegger for whom death is the possibility of impossibility,¹¹² for Levinas the absolute unknowability of death eliminates every assumption of possibility. “Death is in this sense the limit of idealism.”¹¹³

Death is not simply unknown but absolutely unknowable because it can never be a present; it is ever future. In the face of death, my present is broken by a temporal transcendence that is opened up by “the eternal futurity of death.”¹¹⁴ The approach of death thus indicates a relation with absolute alterity in terms of a futurity that forever escapes my grasp. However, death cannot concretely produce a relation with absolute alterity because I can never enter into a relation with death without being annihilated by it. Such concretization, Levinas suggests, is accomplished in our relation with other human beings. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas does not yet depict the relation with the other person as primarily ethical. Instead, he proposes that the relation with absolute alterity finds its prototype in eros and is finally culminated in the concrete phenomenon of paternity.¹¹⁵

The erotic relation to which Levinas refers is not a relation of possession and power. Neither does it signify a struggle or a fusion. Its essence is best captured by the concept of love: “love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiatives, is without reason; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the *I* survives in it.”¹¹⁶ But if the face to face relation with the other is to constitute a response to the question “how can the ego that I am remain myself in a you, without being nonetheless the ego that I am in my

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 307.

¹¹³ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 71.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Levinas’ use of a gendered language (paternity, fraternity, father, son, etc.) and his analysis of the feminine have been interpreted and criticized by scholars in various ways (see, for example, Tina Chanter, “Hands That Give and Hands That Take: The Politics of the Feminine in Levinas,” in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 48–62; and Tina Chanter, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). This topic is beyond the scope of my project. Nevertheless, I would like to mention that, considering these criticisms, the issue of sexism in Levinas does not seem to be merely a matter of terminology. Therefore, I think, one should not simply replace Levinas’ terms with genderless ones, lest it conceals this important matter. I have followed this insight in my discussion of paternity in this chapter and fraternity in the next.

¹¹⁶ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 88–89.

present?"¹¹⁷ then the concrete situation which fully corresponds to it is not the erotic relation of love between two strangers, but paternity as the prime relation of eros. Paternity refers to a relation with one who is at the same time myself and entirely other. It somehow makes possible for me to be my child and live my child's future while remaining myself in my being.

Levinas thereby appears to succeed in finding a relation to beyond being through the futurity that the face of the other opens up in the relation of paternity, while keeping a foothold in being. However, even though Levinas' notion of paternity is not limited to the biological relation of parenthood,¹¹⁸ this solution seems to betray his aspirations of the 1930s. For, as Bernasconi points out, ultimately "the idea of fecundity would lead to a philosophy of kinship [biological or otherwise], and thus remain too close to Nazism's idea of a society based on consanguinity."¹¹⁹ To this crucial objection Levinas responds in *Totality and Infinity*, where, although the discussions of eros and paternity are not dropped, the site of transcendence is found in another, more original, kind of face to face relation, that is, the ethical relation:¹²⁰ "metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the other by me, is concretely produced as calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge."¹²¹

Nevertheless, it is with his turn to ethical subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* that one can find the ultimate formulation of Levinas' response to the dilemma of escape. The movement to beyond being without leaving being, which Levinas persistently described as the duality of the I and the self, is accomplished in one-for-the-other of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹¹⁸ See, Chapter II, note 50.

¹¹⁹ Bernasconi, "No Exit," 108.

¹²⁰ As we shall see in Chapter II, unlike the relations of love and friendship, the face to face relation does not refer to a private relation between the I and the Other. Levinas' notion of the third party shows that in the ethical relation, "the Other appears in solidarity with all the others" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 280), thus representing the whole humanity. The correction Levinas introduces to the erotic relation and paternity in *Totality and Infinity* is expressed by the term fraternity, which highlights the social aspect of the face to face relation.

¹²¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

substitution. "To transcend oneself ... is to substitute oneself for another."¹²² At the same time, substitution consists also in a return to oneself as it requires "my bearing of myself, not [in order] to conduct myself well, but ... [to be able] to expiate for the other."¹²³ In substitution one leaves oneself toward the other, but must also return to oneself for the other. I leave my needs in favor of the needs of the other, but I am also returned to my being in order to be able provide for the other. Responsibility for the other demands a return to materiality and economy; it demands nourishing, clothing, and housing the other. To give to the other is to give "even the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulder."¹²⁴ It is, Levinas writes, through the one-for-the-other of substitution that "matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality."¹²⁵ In Bernasconi's words, "[ethical] transcendence occurs across materiality."¹²⁶

Substitution thus meets the requirements of the dilemma of excedence and provides a philosophical response to the paradox of the embodied spirit. In this way, Levinas succeeds in undermining the basis of the philosophy of Hitlerism at a theoretical level. Nevertheless, it is yet an indirect response to the particularist racism of National Socialism as a political phenomenon. In order to formulate a concrete and direct response to National Socialism, we need to move beyond the realm of philosophy and confront racism at the level of politics. That is to say, we must inquire into the problem of the relation between philosophy (i.e., ethics) and politics. In Chapter II, I will engage with this challenging problem and argue that Levinas' concrete response to National Socialism can be found in his notion of fraternity. I will then move on to show the limitations of Levinas' view of the relation between ethics and politics through an examination of his own politics and his question begging comments on the Palestinian.

¹²² Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 182.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹²⁶ Bernasconi, "No Exit," 112.

Chapter II

Ethics and Politics

*Politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself.*¹

*Torah demands, in opposition to the natural perseverance of each being in his or her own being (a fundamental ontological law), concern for the stranger, the widow and the orphan, a preoccupation with the other person.*²

The Greek and the Bible

At the heart of the question of whether or not Levinas' ethics as first philosophy can bear the name of philosophy, there lies the question of the relation between his two sources of inspiration, Athens and Jerusalem. In an interview with François Poirié, Levinas says of Europe that it is "the Bible and the Greek."³ He elaborates on the relation between the two traditions by highlighting the ethical significance of the biblical tradition: "Europe has many things to be reproached for, its history has been a history of blood and war, but it is also the place where this blood and war have been regretted and constitute[d] a bad conscience, a bad conscience of Europe which is also the return of Europe, not toward Greece, but toward the Bible. Old or New Testament – but it is in the Old Testament that everything, in my opinion, is borne."⁴

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 300.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 61.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*

In another interview with Richard Kearny, while acknowledging Athens and Jerusalem as his two sources of inspiration, he points out that in writing one has to make a clear distinction as the two have “two distinct methods of exegesis, two separate languages.”⁵ According to Levinas, in opposition to “confessional texts,” the language of philosophy is essentially Greek as it relies on a particular definition of truth as “an intelligibility of presence.”⁶ Nevertheless, he continues, philosophy need not remain exclusively Greek as it has the capacity for incorporating the non-Greek wisdom of Jerusalem into its language. In clarifying the role of the two traditions in the formation of his thought, Levinas says, “biblical thought has, to some extent, influenced my ethical reading of the interhuman, whereas Greek thought determined its philosophical expression in language. So that I would maintain, against Heidegger, that philosophy can be ethical as well as ontological, can be at once Greek and non-Greek in its inspiration.”⁷ But the translation of the biblical wisdom into philosophy is not an easy task. As we saw in the previous chapter, it amounts to nothing less than what could be called a revolution in the language of philosophy – a revolution of which the book *Otherwise than Being* is an exemplar.

But if the ethical message of the Bible can enter the language of ontology only through such a revolution, the question we have to face is in what sense it comes into a relation with politics whose consciousness is bound up in the language of being. That is to say, even if philosophy could be stretched, through an abuse of its language, to the extent that it could incorporate the metaphysical truth of ethics within its ontological language, would politics, with its overwhelming entanglement with immediate practical problems, lend itself to hearing the message of the ethical? Is the role of the ethical wisdom of the Bible limited to the formation of a “bad conscience,” as Levinas seems to imply? That is to say, in light of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem, between

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Greek ontology and non-Greek ethics, what paths are open for the articulation of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas' thought? This is the central question of this chapter, with which we engage through the intermediary of yet another analysis of Levinas' relation to the tradition of philosophy – one that has important bearings for our discussion.

Instead of directly discussing the biblical roots of Levinas' thought, Theodore De Boer locates the originality of Levinas' ethics in his integration of "the transcendental-phenomenological method of Husserl and the dialogical method of Buber and Rosenzweig" into a unity that manages to move beyond both.⁸ As we saw in the previous chapter, for Levinas the great achievement of Husserl's method of intentional analysis was its reference to the concrete horizons that are forgotten in objectifying consciousness but condition cognitive knowledge. In this sense, insofar as idealism means dissolving the world into contents of consciousness, Husserl's intentional analysis refutes idealism by relating consciousness to its other. But the other of consciousness in Husserl is not other enough as these concrete horizons are in turn identified by Husserl in terms of thoughts aiming at objects – that is, intuitions that retain an intentional structure – which are themselves the "product of the constituting, or sense-giving, capacity of the ego."⁹ In Levinas' words, in Husserl, "the exteriority of the objects results from absolute respect for the interiority of their constitution."¹⁰

Merleau-Ponty and early Heidegger depart from Husserl's intuitionism by replacing the transcendental ego with the lived body and human existence. Nevertheless, their notion of exteriority is still entrapped within an ontological circle in which the I continues to be the sense-giving center. Late Heidegger's reformulation of the relation between Being and Dasein does seem to bear some affinities with Levinas, nonetheless it too falls short of producing the genuine exteriority that Levinas is after. According to De

⁸ Theodore De Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰ Levinas, quoted in *ibid.*

Boer, there is a “formal similarity” between the role of the face in Levinas and the function of Being in late Heidegger’s thought as “both these thinkers take their point of departure in a dimension that, while not experienced itself, is the foundation of experience.”¹¹ Moreover, Heidegger’s move from Being-in-the-world in *Being and Time* to the a priori appropriation of Dasein by Being in his later writings renders Dasein passive in its relation with Being, thus indicating a further decentralization of Dasein as the source of meaning: “man is no longer the master of being but its shepherd or guardian.”¹² But, despite all these changes, Heidegger’s thought remained purely ontological, unable to conceive of the sort of metaphysical transcendence that the absolute exteriority of the face produces. The exteriority of the face reveals itself as calling into question of the I by the other. Being, in contrast, is strictly impersonal, ethically indifferent. It is unable to recognize the injustice of the exercise of freedom. It does not, that is to say, call into question Dasein’s central place in the openness of Being. Ultimately, therefore, in Heidegger, early as well as late, exteriority remains ontological, unable to produce a relation with the otherwise than being.

Like Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, for Levinas absolute exteriority originates in the interhuman relation. But unlike the dialogical thinkers, he does not locate the interhuman in a higher realm above ontology, but rather places it beneath ontology. De Boer summarizes the distinctions between Levinas and dialogical thinkers in three points.¹³ First, in Levinas the proper approach to the other does not have the spiritual form of friendship, but rather consists in responding to the call of responsibility in the reality of economic life. “No human or interhuman relationship,” Levinas writes, “can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home.”¹⁴ Secondly, Levinas accuses the I-Thou relationship of formalism inasmuch as its ethical dimension is not emphasized in dialogical philosophy. Unlike

¹¹ Ibid., 107.

¹² Ibid., 108.

¹³ Ibid., 109-110.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172.

Buber's I-Thou, in the relation with the other there is no reciprocity. The ethical relation is asymmetric for the other approaches from the dimension of height. Thirdly, Levinas criticizes the dialogical thinkers for their conflation of the interhuman and ontology. The becoming oneself of the I through the you in the I-Thou relation hits a paradox insofar as becoming is understood ontologically. The confrontation of the I with the you presupposes the existence of the I, who is supposed to owe its existence to this confrontation. But for Levinas, becoming does not signify the constitution of the I by the you, but rather an investiture, a calling to a new existence. As De Boer puts it, "what happens in the confrontation is that there is a transformation from egoism to being-for-the-other, to goodness and hospitality."¹⁵ For Levinas, the becoming of the I through the you signifies the liberation of the I from the confinement of its solitary existence through the one-for-the-other of responsibility. The other, the you, is "the eye-opener"¹⁶ of the I, while the existence of the I is the concrete ground of the relation with the other. De Boer summarizes the point: "ontology without metaphysics is blind; metaphysics without ontology is void."¹⁷

From Ethics to Politics: the Third Party

Oblivious to its debt to metaphysics, ontology is blind. Political thought, insofar as it is bound to the logic of being, that is, insofar as it strictly follows the language of politics, is dominated by this oblivion. It inherits ontology's blindness and becomes ethically indifferent. Such political thought would be incapable of adequately confronting the violence of totalizing politics. It would leave politics to itself, or, worse, function as its legitimizer. Dialogical philosophy cannot provide a solid response to this deficiency due to its spiritualism, formalism, and, ultimately, ontologism, which have rendered it politically passive. Levinas' integration of the transcendental-phenomenological

¹⁵ De Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," 110.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

tradition with the dialogical one moves beyond the two traditions by offering an ethics that is not only prior to ontology but also politically significant.

The political dimension of ethics is not a later add-on. From the beginning Levinas' project is conscious of the political aspect of ethics as first philosophy. This is forcefully brought forth in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas begins with a simple question: are we duped by morality or not, that is to say, are human beings ultimately, or originally, good or evil? Right after posing this question, however, Levinas discusses the relation between ethics and politics, between the ethical rationality of peace and the political logic of being – of war, that is – highlighting the fact that the question of morality is not to be taken as merely a philosophical question about how human beings are related to moral values. The question of morality is a political question in itself.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the relation between ethics and politics is formulated in terms of the relation between history and eschatology, in which the tension associated with the temporal structure of the ethical relation is brought forth. The other stands in a diachronic relation with regard to the I. It is the other who awakens the I as subject, but this awakening has to necessarily take place in the time of the subject. This means that the subject is simultaneously anterior and posterior with regard to its relation with the other. Levinas uses the term eschatology to refer to the temporality of the ethical relation and the term history to refer to the temporality of the totality. History is always in a diachronic relation with eschatology. The eschatological experience, having always already taken place in and as the ethical relation, evades the time of history. Levinas thus announces that his project is to “oppose to the objectivism of war a subjectivity born from the eschatological vision.”¹⁸ Limited to the experience of history, philosophy has always (re)produced various forms of the ontology of war. This is neither an

¹⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 25.

accident, nor a mistake, because, to ontological thought, “being reveals itself as war,”¹⁹ while “of peace there can only be an eschatology.”²⁰ Hence, the need for opposing to history an eschatology of peace and the need for ethics as first philosophy to liberate politics from its entrapment within the logic of war.

The significance of the primacy of ethics over ontology for politics is brought forth in the question whether the ideal of the egalitarian and just state proceeds from the war of all against all, i.e., from the logic of ontology, or from the responsibility of one-for-the-other. In Levinas’ words, “it is extremely important to know if society is a result of the limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another.”²¹ It is important to know this so that the violence of the just state is never glorified as necessitated by justice, “so that war does not become the institution of a war with a good conscience in the name of historical necessities.”²² Levinas must thus show that the direction is in fact from ethics to politics, that is to say, not from the logic of war to the need for order and law, but rather from the asymmetry of the one-for-the-other of ethical subjectivity to the symmetric structure of society, i.e., to human multiplicity living under a political structure with its institutions and reciprocal laws.

In Levinas’ thought, the passage from ethics to politics is achieved through the notion of the third party. My relation with the singularity of the other brings me face to face with my overwhelming responsibility for the other. Responsibility for the other obliges me beyond my capacity to respond. It is an infinite responsibility that is directed toward me alone and the more I respond to it the more it demands from me. But this is not the whole story. I am never alone with my immediate other. There is always a third, who represents the multiplicity of others. The notion of the third party highlights the

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 80.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 169.

fact that I am as well responsible, infinitely, to all the others beside my immediate other, so that if I devote myself completely to my neighbor, I would betray my responsibility for all other others. There enters upon the limitation of my capacity to respond to the overwhelming demand of the other and all other others the question of justice and the need for calculation and decision-making.

It is thus my infinite responsibility for the other that requires me to engage with the question of justice. But for Levinas the question of justice is not simply a question posed to consciousness. It is with justice that question as such begins. It is the very "birth of the question."²³ Consciousness itself consists in the exercise of justification and is called for by the question of justice. In other words, if proximity ordered me to my neighbor alone, there would be no need for any question, for any said; neither consciousness, nor self-consciousness would be born. But there is the third. And it is with the third party, who interrupts the one-for-the-other of saying, that the said is born. Similarly, rationality, thematization, systematization, and the State are all founded upon the need for assembling, comparison, calculation, and synchronization that the question of justice demands.

This sums up the function of the third party in Levinas' thought, as it is commonly understood. But there is an important caveat in this interpretation associated with the relation between the third party and the face to face relation that requires further scrutiny. In referring to the third party, Levinas sometimes uses words such as entry, introduction, and emergence.²⁴ This choice of wording could be misleading in that it might feed into the incorrect interpretation according to which the third party enters the picture subsequently, when the relation with the face of the other is already in place. This is a misreading with significant consequences for the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas. If the third party were a subsequent addition to the face, then politics

²³ Ibid., 168.

²⁴ For example, "the responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions ... it is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 157).

with all its categories of justice, reason, consciousness, etc. would be a mere derivative of the ethical relation. At the same time, it would further imply that the ethical relation, i.e., the relation of the I to the face of the other, could only take place in an abstract space detached from the reality of political life, for one always finds oneself already in society. Therefore, as Robert Bernasconi puts it, “if *de jure* politics was a supplement to ethics, *de facto* my ethical obligations are modified by reference to social and political exigencies.”²⁵ In other words, if politics were a mere modification of ethics through the belated entry of the third, then the consciousness of politics had every right to dismiss the call of responsibility on the basis of the latter’s abstraction. Ethics would thus lose its disruptive effect on politics and the idea of the primacy of ethics would lose its concrete content.

Fortunately, however, Levinas is quite clear that this is not what he intends by the notion of the third party: “it is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.”²⁶ Time and again Levinas reminds us that just as the singularity of the face is not equivalent with the singularity of another person, the thirdness of the third party does not refer to a third person for whom entry would have meant an empirical emergence. The third party ‘is’ already in the face of the other. In the singularity of the face of the other, all others beyond my immediate other oblige me. Unlike the exclusive and self-sufficient relation of love or an I-Thou relation of friendship, the ethical relation is not a private relation between two human beings pure and simple. Rather, from the beginning the face to face relation includes the third party who “looks at me in the eyes of the Other.”²⁷ “The face,” Levinas writes, “is both the neighbor and the face of faces”²⁸ and thus “appears in solidarity with all the others.”²⁹

²⁵ Robert Bernasconi, “The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30, no. 1 (1999), 77.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 160.

If the face already includes the third party, then politics is not a mere derivative of ethics and the question of justice is not a simple addition to the ethical relation. Rather, the notion of the third party and the exigency of justice that comes with it correct the relation with the face by superimposing an order upon the extravagant demand of the other.³⁰ But, for Levinas, this correction does not trivialize, or silence, the infiniteness of responsibility for the other. Rather, it brings me into relation with an infinite number of *singular* others who simultaneously demand infinite responsibility:

In no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility, a neutralization of the glory of the Infinite, a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reason the initial duo would become a trio. But the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of the two: justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest.³¹

Nor do I become the other's equal through "the incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity"³² by the third party. To be sure, it is thanks to the third party that I am given the status of an other among others. But I am not thereby placed in an equal plane with the other in the reciprocity of rights. I am not, that is to say, released of my *asymmetric* responsibility. The third party is the other of the other who calls the other to serve him. The other thus joins me in serving: "the *thou* is posited in front of a *we*."³³ However, in the pluralism of the *we*, the other does not join me as my equal, but as my master who "joins me to himself for service,"³⁴ who commands me to join him for service to the third. I can be commanded to service only if I am a master myself, but I am a master inasmuch as it is the other's command that commands me to command. Therefore, it is thanks to the other – to my ethical obligation to the other and to the

²⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 280.

³⁰ Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," 169.

³¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159.

³² *Ibid.*, 158.

³³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

asymmetry of my duty – that I am one among others who deserves to have rights. “The equality of all,” Levinas writes, “is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights.”³⁵

Insofar as the third refers to a structural part of the encounter rather than an empirical presence of a third person, it preserves the asymmetry of the ethical relation. The correction it accomplishes prevents the ethical dyad from lapsing into a private relation of love or friendship. The other and the third are both my neighbors, at the same time that they are the neighbors of one another. The third triangulates the dyadic distance of proximity: “the other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party.”³⁶ The distance between me and the other is thus narrowed but not eliminated since, in proximity, I remain on an unequal footing with the other. Justice, brought about in the triangle of proximity, is “not a legality regulating human masses”³⁷ in their symmetric numerical pluralism; rather, it is an obsession for humanity as a whole that is tied about the diachrony of the ethical relation.

The tension that the third introduces into the order of politics is highlighted in Levinas’ neologism *illeity*. Illeity signifies Levinas’ search for the He (*Il*), the third, in the You (*Tu*). To be sure, illeity is known to be the place of the divinity, of God, in Levinas’ work. Levinas’ God is not, however, the God of theology. Illeity refers to the way the non-phenomenal order that originates in the face commands me, unbeknownst to myself

³⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159. Simon Critchley offers a different reading and argues that justice “is the moment when I am no longer infinitely responsible for the Other, and consequently in an asymmetrical, unequal relation” (Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1999), 231). I think, however, this is not Levinas’ position, as Fred Alford too points out (C. Fred Alford, “Levinas and the Limits of Political Theory,” in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. Marinos Diamantides (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 116). This becomes evident when, a few sentences later, Critchley misreads Levinas’ text by saying that “if ethical responsibility is ‘the surplus of my duties over my rights,’ then the order of justice is one in which rights overrides duties” (Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 231-2). This is clearly a misreading because the phrase that Critchley refers to appears in Levinas’ text in a passage where he explicitly writes that justice is not “a limitation of anarchic responsibility” and that “the equality of all is borne by my inequality” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

and beyond representation and thematization.³⁸ It is the infinite that commands in the face of the other, without showing itself in my present as a phenomenon, a cause, or a theme. The trace of the infinite is enigmatic, and remains enigmatic, as it is “sketched out and effaced in a face in the equivocation of a saying.”³⁹ Illeity refers to the way the infinite both commands in the face and transcends the objectification of the face into a personal You. “The Infinite,” Levinas writes, “escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue, and signifies, as *illeity*, in the third person [whose] ‘thirdness’ is different from that of the third man.”⁴⁰

The relation with illeity is “personal and ethical”⁴¹ at the same that it is political, as Robert Bernasconi and Rebecca Comay have already pointed out.⁴² To go toward God is not to follow his trace, but “to go toward the others [not the other in singular] who stand in the trace of illeity.”⁴³ The non-theological God of Levinas, illeity, is the site where ethics meets politics as it “hold[s] together in a single term the conflict between the ethical and the political that [arises] from the location of the third party in the face of the Other.”⁴⁴

In illeity, the permanent tension between ethics and politics is preserved. For Levinas, the passage from ethics to politics does not lead to the tranquility of reciprocity, of the reciprocity of responsibilities distributed among equals. Far from being released from my *infinite* responsibility for the other, the third party complicates the situation by implying that I am commanded by a multiplicity of *singular* others at once. This is the impossible demand that ethics poses to politics: to do what cannot but nevertheless must be done, to always do more. But here the impossible in no way means absurd. It is an

³⁸ Ibid., 150.

³⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 150.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 61.

⁴² Bernasconi, “The Third,” 82; Rebecca Comay, “Facies Hippocratica,” in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 232.

⁴³ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” 64.

⁴⁴ Bernasconi, “The Third,” 82.

incessant interruption of politics by ethics which is very much required if politics is to be prevented from being occupied with its own order and exigencies. "Politics left to itself," Levinas writes, "bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, thus as in absentia."⁴⁵

If the need for the order of politics, for its laws and its institutions, proceeds from the limitation of the one-for-the-other of responsibility rather than the war of all against all, then the tension between ethics and politics will have no end. Ethics stands by politics in a state of permanent interruption. No matter how 'just' the society is, there is always more to be said and done. Of course, we must not ignore or devalue the important distinction between a politics that functions on the basis of reason with the goal of equality (i.e., a politics of rational peace) and one that operates on the basis of the brutality of its forces – a distinction that Levinas does not hesitate to acknowledge.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the consideration of the infinity of the demand of justice indicates that rational peace could never be enough. "The negative element, the element of violence in the State, in the hierarchy," Levinas says to Jean Wahl, "appears even when the hierarchy functions perfectly, when everyone submits to universal ideas. There are cruelties which are terrible because they proceed from the necessity of the reasonable order. There are, if you like, the tears that a civil servant cannot see: the tears of the Other."⁴⁷ It is the I alone – the I who is the site of individual conscience, the unique I who is irreducible to the citizen or to the free will from whom Hobbes, among others, derived the political order of the society of rational peace – who can see the tears of the other, who can bear witness to the trace of the infinite, who can hear the voice of the other. Insofar as the rationality of politics relies on an impersonal, universal order, it is incapable of incorporating the singularity of the ethical. As history repeatedly reminds us, logic can justify the worst of evils when it is broken free from the judgment of ethics. No matter how perfectly society

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 23.

functions on the basis of reason, an incessant interruption of politics by ethics is necessary to remind the order of politics of its wrongdoings and ignorance.

Levinas, Nazism, and the Palestinian

Fraternity is another of Levinas' terms that highlight the social dimension of the ethical relation. In his analysis of fraternity, Levinas is concerned with the tension between the existence of "the human race as a biological genus" and its ethical existence "instituted by language."⁴⁸ Levinas introduces the term fraternity in reference to the relation of paternity and as its necessary correction. According to Levinas, the child receives its "uniqueness" as a child through resuming "the unicity of the father."⁴⁹ What Levinas intends by this is that in the relation of paternity – even if it is taken as the phenomenon of "biological fecundity"⁵⁰ – the uniqueness of the child does not commence in the enjoyment of a self-sufficient ego, but in relation to the unicity of the father. Moreover, Levinas' notion of paternity does not have the structure of causality through which and as a result of some mysterious, perhaps evolutionary, force the child is equipped with a sense of biological solidarity toward its kin. For Levinas, paternity leads to fraternity in which the true sense of solidarity, that is, ethical solidarity, is brought forth.

While the child is rendered unique as a *child* in the relation of paternity, this uniqueness is not yet the uniqueness of the I who can bear witness to its ethical responsibility for the other. That is to say, the uniqueness of the I, who is also a child, at same time does and does not coincide with the unicity of the father. This non-coincidence is concretely produced in the relation of fraternity where "the I engendered exists at same time as unique in the world and as brother among brothers."⁵¹ Fraternity

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213-214 and 278-280.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁵⁰ Levinas' term "paternity" has a broader signification than the biological relation between the father and the child. "Biological fecundity is," he writes, "but one of the forms of paternity. Paternity, as a primordial effectuation of time, can, among men, be borne by the biological life, but be lived beyond that life" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 247).

⁵¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 279.

thus highlights Levinas' distance from a philosophy of kinship that the notion of paternity might entail by opening the relation of paternity unto a social life constituted by the face to face relation: "the relation with the face in fraternity, where in his turn the Other appears in solidarity with all the others, constitutes the social order, the reference of every dialogue to the third party by which the *We* ... encompasses the face to face opposition."⁵²

Levinas does not deny the biological fact of the human race. Rather, his argument is that since biologism defines unity on the basis of resemblance or a common genus, it in effect loses sight of "the essence of society,"⁵³ which consists in the togetherness of separated individuals who are nevertheless bound together by a sense of solidarity. Taken as members of a genus, the uniqueness of the individuals is ultimately overridden by the existence of the species. Moreover, the supposed social tie between the members of a species that biologism aims to establish is too fragile and ineffective for it is ultimately secondary to self-preservation. Fraternity, in contrast, can account for both the separateness of the interlocutors and their social bond because it rests on the ethical relation and the notion of responsibility that it entails. Fraternity is not, however, simply an alternative that builds upon the biological notion of human race in order to more adequately explain the fact of sociality. "Instituted by language"⁵⁴ and based upon a non-biological notion of paternity, fraternity is in fact prior to "the commonness of a genus."⁵⁵ It is not the case that language is added on to an already formed notion of the human race; rather, "it is in fraternity, or language, that this [non-biological] race is founded."⁵⁶

Fraternity thus opposes the reduction of humanity to biology by highlighting the priority of the social dimension of human existence borne by the ethical relation. The

⁵² Ibid., 280.

⁵³ Ibid., 214.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159.

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 123.

analysis of fraternity is evidently motivated by Levinas' lasting quarrel with National Socialism's exaltation of a biological notion of race that absorbs the individual into the life of the *Volk*. In fraternity, therefore, we find a direct link to the problematic of "Hitlerism" with which we began. In "Hitlerism," Levinas associated the triumph of the racist ideology of National Socialism with the rise of popular materialism – i.e., a materialism in which an abstract negation of the idealistic separation of the spirit and the world leads to an immediate identification of the self with the body. Levinas' attempt to find a response that could simultaneously oppose both popular materialism and idealism led him to the formulation of the problem of the embodied spirit, translated equally as the desire to depart being while retaining a foothold in being. The one-for-the-other of substitution was proposed in the previous chapter as the basis of the mature Levinas's philosophical response to this dilemma, as it accomplishes the passage of the I toward the other – i.e., toward the otherwise than being – at the same time that the I is reverted back to its own being. Now, fraternity builds upon that basis to directly oppose National Socialism's exaltation of race. It overcomes the idea of a society based on consanguinity by both providing a more adequate (compared to biologism) account of the fact of sociality and highlighting the posteriority of the biological unity of race to "the kinship of men"⁵⁷ originated in language and the ethical relation.

Levinas thus ultimately succeeds in directly confronting the philosophy of Hitlerism and rebuking its particularist ideology of race as a political doctrine. Levinas' response to racism as a political doctrine follows the structure of the relation between ethics and politics that we discussed earlier in this chapter. Fraternity provides an account of sociality that serves to negate racism, without constituting a positive alternative to it. That is to say, in accordance with the characterization of the relation between ethics and politics as a state of permanent interruption, Levinas' politics of fraternity is a negative or critical politics, rather than an affirmative political position.

⁵⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214.

Fraternity does not, and cannot, constitute an affirmative political position because politics cannot be directly derived from ethics. Instead, Levinas' critique of racism signifies an instance of the disruption of the injustice of politics by ethics.

For Levinas – the Jew, the other, the direct victim of anti-Semitism whose thought was “dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror”⁵⁸ – this specific instance of political injustice had indeed a unique significance. But, we must ask, what about other instances, other forms of victimization and exclusion? What does Levinas, the philosopher of the other, have to say about other others, the Palestinian, the woman, the colonized? Where does the permanent interruption of politics by ethics stand in relation to the victims of other moments of political injustice, other forms of “the hatred of the other man”?⁵⁹ There are certain passages in Levinas' writings and interviews that make one doubt the generosity of this ethics of the other toward other others.

Soon after the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, in a Radio interview on 28 September 1982, Shlomo Malka confronts Levinas with a carefully formulated question, forcing the philosopher to break his silence on the matter:

S.M.: Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of the 'other.' Isn't history, isn't politics the very site of the encounter with the 'other', and for the Israeli, isn't the 'other' above all the Palestinian?

E.L.: My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in this sense, if you are for the other, you are for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Signature,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 291.

⁵⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, v.

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Politics,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, trans. Jonathan Romney (Cambridge: B. Blackwell, 1989), 294.

Put in the context of Levinas' scattered comments on the Israel-Palestine conflict, this interview, and in particular this passage, is usually taken by scholars to indicate Levinas' dismissal of the suffering of the Palestinian. David Campbell, for instance, criticizes Levinas' notion of the other for its restriction "to the neighbor in such a way as to keep the Palestinian out of the reach of those to whom the 'I' is responsible."⁶¹ Judith Butler pushes this line of thought even further and, referring to the same interview, writes that Levinas "betrayed" his own ethical principle by claiming that "the Palestinian had no face," which, for her, meant that "their human vulnerability can be the ground for no obligation not to kill."⁶² Howard Caygill, while recognizing Levinas' ambivalent position with regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict, presents a similar, though milder, dissatisfaction with Levinas' apparent ignorance of the suffering of the Palestinian.⁶³ Looking at Levinas' oeuvre at large, Tina Chanter charges Levinas with a deeper critique and extends the scope to include the woman as well as the Palestinian: "while Levinas appears to engage an infinitely generous ethics, his stance in face rests upon the abjection of certain others, women and Palestinians among them."⁶⁴ Simon Critchley identifies the issue of Israel, together with fraternity, monotheism, androcentrism, and filiality and the family, as five essential problems that make politics Levinas' "Achilles' heel."⁶⁵ Finally, Enrique Dussel argues that since Levinas' ethics "demands the exertion of justice with respect to the poor (Palestinian?)," his exclusion of this other of Israel "contradicts" his ethics.⁶⁶

⁶¹ David Campbell, "The Deterritorialization of Responsibility: Levinas, Derrida, and Ethics after the End of Philosophy," in *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics*, ed. David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 39.

⁶² Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 23 and 227.

⁶³ Howard Caygill, "Levinas's Silence," in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. Marinos Diamantides (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 83-92; and Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 150-198.

⁶⁴ Tina Chanter, "Hands That Give and Hands That Take: The Politics of the Other in Levinas," in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. Marinos Diamantides (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 76.

⁶⁵ Simon Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas' View of Politics and a Sketch of a Solution to Them," in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. Marinos Diamantides (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 93.

⁶⁶ Enrique Dussel, "'The Politics' by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy," in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz, trans. Jorge Rodriguez (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 86.

To be fair to Levinas, however, one has to recognize that, in the passage cited above, Levinas does not explicitly identify the Palestinian with the attacker or the enemy. Nor does he imply that the Palestinians who were the victims of the massacre of Sabra and Shatila did not have a face or were not worthy of responsibility. In fact, right before being confronted with Malka's question cited above Levinas had just said: "the place where everything is interrupted, where everything is disrupted, where everyone's moral responsibility comes into play, a responsibility that concerns us and engages even innocence, unbearably so, that place lies in the events at Sabra and Shatila. Everyone's responsibility."⁶⁷ In accordance with his philosophical writings, throughout the interview Levinas repeatedly reminds that responsibility for the other extends to each and every other regardless of their ontological status, that is, regardless of his or her being the enemy or the neighbor, and concerns each and every I, guilty and innocent alike.⁶⁸

It thus seems that some of the harsh criticisms of Levinas on the matter of the Palestinian – such as the ones raised by Campbell and Butler who argue that Levinas deprives the Palestinian of having a face and that his notion of the other excludes the Palestinian – are exaggerations based on misreadings. In a recently published article, Oona Eisenstadt and Claire Elise Katz expand this line of thought and take on the task of examining what is really at stake in the debate on Levinas' position on the Palestinian.⁶⁹ Clarifying that they do not intend to defend "Levinas' political commitments" or "his ambiguous response to the massacres,"⁷⁰ they nevertheless find the rather common trend to take the interview as revealing Levinas' "ethnic or national parochialism that violates the terms of his ethics"⁷¹ a "compounded misreading."⁷²

⁶⁷ Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 293.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 290.

⁶⁹ Oona Eisenstadt and Claire Elise Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian: A History of an Error," *Telos* 174 (2016), 9-32.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

⁷² Ibid., 10.

Beside their insightful examination of some of the key figures who have contributed in the formation of this misreading, including Martin Jay, Howard Caygill, and Judith Butler,⁷³ Eisenstadt and Katz's argument in defense of Levinas' position – or, more precisely, his refusal to take a position – in the interview can be summed up in three points: first, the facts of the matter, including the direct involvement of the State of Israel in the event of Sabra and Shatila, were yet unclear at the time of the interview; second, as a philosopher, Levinas wanted to remain faithful to the radical distinction between ethics and politics, which led him to refrain from taking a bold political position; and, third, he had come to the interview with the aim of expressing certain ideas about the relation between responsibility and guilt and its implications for the Jews in general.⁷⁴ Let us look at these three points more closely.

According to Eisenstadt and Katz, on September 28, 1982, when the interview was held, it was generally thought the massacre of Sabra and Shatila occurred as a result of the long-standing tension between the Christian Phalangists and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This tension had reached its height on September 14, 1982, when Bachir Gemayel, a senior member of the Phalange Party and the supreme commander of the Lebanese Forces who had just recently been elected as the president of Lebanon, was assassinated. It was initially believed that PLO was responsible for the assassination, until early October when it became clear that it was in fact Habib Shartouni, a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and a Maronite Christian who had planted the bomb that killed Gemayel, along with 26 others. It was not until later that the direct involvement of Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in particular Ariel

⁷³ Eisenstadt and Katz trace the history of this "error" from Jay's brief and "narrow" yet "[not] absolutely illegitimate" (Eisenstadt and Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian, 21) comment on the interview, according to which Levinas is accused of circumscribing "the infinity of alterity and the transcendence of mere being by ethical demands" by "the cultural-cum-biological limits of permissible kinship alliances" (Jay, quoted in *ibid.*, 20); to Caygill's extension of Jay's view through "illegitimate interpolations" (*ibid.*, 21), which results in exaggerated conclusions such as the failure of Levinas' ethics to ever legitimize the possibility of standing "with the Palestinian against the State of Israel" (*ibid.*, 22), or his exclusive use of the term neighbor as referring only to kin, i.e., Israel and the Jews (*ibid.*, 23); and finally to Butler's absurd misreading of the interview, according to which Levinas deprives the Palestinian of his/her face (*ibid.*, 25-8).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Sharon, the Israeli Defense Minister, and Raphael Eitan, IDF's Chief of Staff, in the event of Sabra and Shatila began to surface: that they had allowed or even encouraged the Phalangist militia to enter and sweep the camps, that they guarded the exits during the time of the massacre, that they refused to engage in or even withdraw from the exits when they received the reports of what was going on in the camps, and so on.

As Eisenstadt and Katz recognize, their historical sketch is too brief, "necessarily incomplete,"⁷⁵ and – I add – therefore inevitably contestable. But this should not be taken against their argument, for, admittedly, they did not intent to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of the situation. Neither is it my concern here. The point they want to make is simply that the involvement of the State of Israel in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila was not as clear to Levinas at the time of the interview as it is for us now and that ignoring this fact could become a pretext for misunderstanding the interview. Granted.

But even if we accept the idea that Levinas' refusal to take a position was due to the fact that the precise role of the State of Israel in the specific event of Sabra and Shatila was not yet known, we must ask what then had brought thousands of Israelis to protest in the streets of Tel Aviv demanding the government to account for the massacre, the protests that Levinas himself glorifies so dearly as "an ethical reaction"?⁷⁶ Those who marched in the streets were not factually aware of the details of the role of IDF in the matter either; but they nevertheless were disrupted by the massacre. By characterizing the demonstrations as "an ethical reaction," Levinas wants to perhaps imply that it was inspired by a general sense of responsibility for the killing of the others. But that simply cannot be, for that would be a direct distortion of the facts of the matter. Sabra and Shatila did not affect the demonstrating Israelis as just any event; rather, it was seen as a specific event for which the government of Israel must be held responsible to account.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁶ Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 291.

For, although it was known that the Christian Phalangists had committed the massacre, the event itself was regarded, by the Jews and non-Jews alike, as a scene in the long and sad story of the Israel-Palestine conflict in which the unjust treatment of the Palestinians by the State of Israel was undeniable – then as now. Is it not then just fair to expect the philosopher of the other to at least acknowledge the *concrete* concerns of the Israeli protestors whom he himself cherishes, rather than reducing the matter to an absolute responsibility of all for all? Is it not irresponsible, whether on the part of Levinas or Eisenstadt and Katz, to isolate the event of Sabra and Shatila from its context and history and take the lack of factual information at the time about this specific event as an excuse for silence?

What was revealed later on as ‘facts’ about the involvement of IDF in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila did not come as a surprise, but rather just verified the worry that was already present, hovering in the space, in the streets of Tel Aviv as well as Radio Communauté’s studio, where the interview was held. It was this worry, motivated by a historical knowledge of the undeniable contribution of the State of Israel in creating and maintaining the misery of the Palestinians, that led Malka to press Levinas to clarify his position, not only on the recent event of Sabra and Shatila, but also on the Palestinian in general. In fact, Malka had begun the interview by explicitly asking the philosopher whether or not he holds Israel responsible for that specific event, hoping that he would break his silence on the matter. It was only after he realized that Levinas is not going to respond to this question that he confronted him with the more generally formulated question about Levinas’ position on the status of the Palestinian vis-à-vis Israel – in vain, of course, for the philosopher would not yield; he would not break his silence.

Instead of clarifying his position with regard to the concrete situation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Levinas carefully formulates his responses in broad philosophical terms of his ethics. When he is asked about the responsibility of Israel

about the event of Sabra and Shatila, he responds by speaking about the absolute responsibility of one for the other, which holds everyone, guilty and innocent, Jews and non-Jews alike, responsible for the massacre. And when Malka asks him about the Palestinian, Levinas responds by referring to the complexity of the question of justice in the contingent reality of politics, where infinite responsibility turns into the need for comparison and prioritization between the neighbors.

Of course, philosophically speaking, there is nothing wrong with Levinas' answer. Even his refusal to take a position on the concrete situation by resorting to the language of philosophy could have been justified in other occasions, perhaps in another time, in a lecture course or an academic talk. But this interview is not just any occasion, it's time not just any time, and the concrete situation under discussion not just any situation. In fact, in his opening speech, Malka highlights that the interview is organized precisely with the hope that Levinas "would break the silence" on the recent events that "have shaken Jewish communities throughout the world, beginning with Israeli society itself," the events that confront Levinas "in particular," for Levinas is not just any philosopher, but a philosopher of the other "who has given Judaism its most exacting expression."⁷⁷ Evading the contingencies of the concrete situation in this condition does not simply amount to silence, for there are situations in which silence is itself a *concrete* position. Theoretical innocence is not always ethically justified, for it might entail practical partisanship.

Levinas' partisanship in favor of Israel is implied in his silence, for example in the way he reduces the concrete question of the responsibility of Israel for the Palestinians to an abstract moral question, accompanied by his repeated references to Israel's probable "lack of guilt"⁷⁸ – a view that he did not ever care to correct, neither in his later writings nor in the numerous interviews that he gave after 1982, when the 'facts'

⁷⁷ Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 289-90.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

about the direct involvement of IDF in the massacre had been revealed. This unfortunate conclusion is further supported if we put his comments in the interview in the broader context of what could be called Levinas' politics – a politics that could be characterized as a Eurocentric Zionism.

Despite his incessant deferral of the question of the political in his philosophical writings, Levinas does indeed hint upon the principles that guide his political view in some of his interviews and in his *Zionism* essays. In the interview with François Poirié, quoted from in the beginning of this chapter, where he identifies Europe with the Bible and the Greek, Levinas reveals a distasteful sense of Eurocentrism:

I don't know if it is very popular to say this, but for me European man is central, in spite of all that has happened to us during this century, in spite of 'the savage mind.' The savage mind is a thinking that a European knew to discover, it was not the savage thinkers who discovered our thinking. There is a kind of envelopment of all thinking by the European subject.⁷⁹

Elsewhere, in an interview with Raoul Mortley, he forcefully repeats the same view:

I often say, though it's a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest - all the exotic - is dance.⁸⁰

It is such a Eurocentrism combined with Levinas' view of Zionism that makes possible, in Jason Caro's words, "the orientalist production of the Palestinian Other."⁸¹

In "Politics After!" Levinas writes:

The origins of the conflict between Jews and Arabs go back to Zionism. This conflict has been acute since the creation of the State of Israel on a small piece of arid land which had belonged to the children of Israel more than thirty centuries before and which, despite the destruction of Judea in 70 CE, has never been abandoned by the Jewish communities . . . But it also happens to be on a small piece of land which has been inhabited by people who are

⁷⁹ Levinas, "Is It Righteous to Be?" 64.

⁸⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Chapter I: Emmanuel Levinas," in *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*, ed. Raoul Mortley (New York: Routledge, 1991), 18.

⁸¹ Jason Caro, "Levinas and the Palestinians," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35, no. 6 (2009), 679.

surrounded on all sides and by vast stretches of land containing the great Arab people of which they form a part. They call themselves Palestinians.⁸²

Palestinians are thus a part of “the great Arab People,” who must not ever be conceived as the oppressed minority living in Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The immediate consequence of diffusing the Palestinians into the whole population of Arabs is the victimization of the State of Israel. The true state of affairs, Levinas writes, is not “the position of an armed and dominant State, one of the great military powers of the Mediterranean basin facing the unarmed Palestinian people whose very existence Israel refuses to recognize;” rather, it is the position of a fragile and vulnerable State which is “under the permanent and growing threat of all its neighbors ... who are rich in natural allies, and surrounded by their lands. Land, land, land, as far as the eye can see.”⁸³

Levinas’ Zionism is grounded in his messianic politics of the State of David. In “The State of Caesar and the State of David,” Levinas writes against Christianity that it has made too clear-cut a distinction “between the political and the spiritual orders – between the terrestrial City and the City of God,”⁸⁴ as suggested by the formula “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”⁸⁵ According to Levinas, Christianity has so often been able to function as “a state religion” because it does not bring about any conflict between the two orders. Judaism, on the contrary, delivers the promise of a Messianic politics, without identifying the political order with the divine order: “not only is the essence of the State not in contradiction with the absolute order, but ... it has been called up by that order.”⁸⁶ Such a State, i.e., a State permeated by the divine word, would be a culmination of the State of David: “Messiah is descended from [king] David,” who “wars and governs by day” but comes into “a

⁸² Emmanuel Levinas, “Politics After!” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, trans. Roland Lack (Cambridge: B. Blackwell, 1989), 277–278.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 281–282.

⁸⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “The State of Caesar and the State of David,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, trans. Roland Lack (Cambridge: B. Blackwell, 1989), 268.

⁸⁵ Luke 20: 25, quoted in *ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

nocturnal contact with the Absolute" at night.⁸⁷ This view of the State, Levinas indicates, would be utopian and premature if it intended to found its culmination in the idolatrous politics of Caesar, i.e., the only politics that has hitherto existed. But it is in fact a call for an utterly new politics, a call to Israel "to obtain from Zion the formulation for a political monotheism that no one yet has managed to formulate."⁸⁸ The formulation of this new political monotheism is not, however, a mere internal concern of Israel because "the Messiah founds a just society and delivers humanity after having delivered Israel."⁸⁹ Such is the extraordinary task of the State of Israel (hence its indispensability):

For two thousand years, Israel did not engage with History. Innocent of any political crime, pure with a victim's purity, a purity whose sole merit is perhaps its patient endurance, Israel had become unable to conceive of a politics that would put the finishing touches to its monotheistic message. Now such a commitment does exist. Since 1948. But all this is only a beginning. Israel is no less isolated in its struggle to complete its incredible task than Abraham was, four thousand years ago, when he began it.⁹⁰

It is Levinas' messianic politics of the State of David and the Eurocentric Zionism that stems from it that makes one suspect of his partisanship in favor of Israel and against the Palestinian.⁹¹ To be sure, such partisanship is not embedded in his ethics of the other, which is why I find it promising and revolutionary despite the man's question

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 276.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 271.

⁹⁰ Levinas, "The State of Caesar," 276-7.

⁹¹ The brief examination of Levinas' politics presented here is admittedly incomplete. Perhaps, it would be possible to complicate his reference to the State of Israel in this essay by distinguishing it from the existing government or by a discussion of his ambivalent relation to the question of the State in general (on the latter question see: Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 242-243; and John Drabinski, "The Possibility of an Ethical Politics: From Peace to Liturgy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26, no. 4 (2000), 62-63). It would also be possible to appeal to Levinas' other writings where he more explicitly highlights the ethical content of Zionism – for example: "what is promised in Jerusalem ... is a humanity of Torah ... Our texts, which began with the cities of refuge, reminds us or teaches us that the longing for Zion, that Zionism, is not one more nationalism or particularism; nor is it a simple search for a place of refuge. It is the hope for a science of society, and of a society, which are wholly human. And this hope is to be found in Jerusalem, in the earthly Jerusalem and not outside all places, in pious thoughts" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 52). A thorough analysis of Levinas' politics could not be attempted here – and it is not my main concern either. The point I am trying to make is that there is enough evidence in Levinas' oeuvre to support critics' view that he had a biased inclination toward Israel on the urgent issue of Israel-Palestine conflict. If, instead of assuming the position of a sympathetic reader of Levinas, we treat his comments on Israel and its other, the Palestinian, in their clarity and intensity, I think we can argue that they, at the very least, cast serious doubt on Levinas' faithfulness to the "humanity of Torah" and what it demands (see the second epigraph to this chapter – who is the stranger if not the Palestinian?) and on whether his Zionism did not turn out to become another nationalism or particularism.

begging politics. Nevertheless, although, as Eisenstadt and Katz have correctly observed, some of the criticisms of Levinas on the issue of the Palestinian are unsubstantiated and misleading, other, more nuanced, criticisms – such as the ones raised by Chanter, Critchley, and Dussel – cannot as easily be refuted, for they point to an inherent problem in Levinas’ ethics. The formulation of this problem and the examination of possible responses to it is the task of the next chapter, but let me briefly say that what concerns me is that Levinas’ notion of justice is, in Caro’s words, “*too* underdetermined,” “*too* unsafe,”⁹² in such a way that it seems to be incapable of rejecting as unjust a politics that can easily overlook the suffering of its immediate other.

There is a tendency among Levinas scholars, sympathetic and critical alike, to associate Levinas’ politics and his relation to the State of Israel to his identity politics or existential situation – for example as a Jew who first-hand experienced the horror of Nazism, as a Jew who felt guilty for living in the tranquility of a European capital, as a member of a historical diaspora who for the first time has found a representation in a State, and so on. The issue of Levinas’ politics is not in itself my main concern, for I am not particularly interested in the biography of Levinas, the man, and his personal views. Nonetheless, one immediate implication of this tendency is directly related to our discussion. If Levinas’ politics can be associated with the specificities of Levinas’ existential and biographical situation, then it may be possible to separate his politics from his ethics, that is, it may be possible to reject his politics without thereby undermining his ethics. This is the ‘solution’ proposed by Derrida and followed by the majority of Levinas scholars. In the next chapter, I will examine this approach and argue that while such a separation of ethics from politics might offer a faithful representation of Levinas’ view, it is inadequate because it does not recognize that the idea of the permanent interruption of politics by ethics fails to meet the requirements of Levinas’ own ethics.

⁹² Caro, “Levinas and the Palestinians,” 671-672 (emphasis is mine).

My conviction is that a consistent and accurate reading of Levinas is *not* enough because, as it stands, the notion of justice that stems from his notion of the permanent interruption is too ambiguous so that in practice ethics seems to lend itself to an arbitrary appropriation by politics. What is required is a critique of Levinas that could lead to the characterization of a politics of the other, which, in its ambiguities and limitations, follows the demands of responsibility. Such a critique would amount to moving beyond phenomenology and, in spite of Levinas' unwillingness, extending his ethics in the direction of political theory.

Chapter III

Toward an Ethical Politics

The alterity of the Other does not result from its identity, but constitutes it: the other is the Other. The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and abasement – glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.¹

The Perpetual Duty of Vigilance

We were concerned, at the end of the previous chapter, with the distressing fact that Levinas' ethics seems to allow for a politics that ignores the suffering of the Palestinian or at least belittles its significance by reducing the concrete issue into a general moral problem. Levinas' sympathetic reader and friend, Jacques Derrida, recognizes this difficulty in Levinas' thought and attempts to find a way to separate his ethics from his political views. In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida poses the question of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas by asking whether Levinas' ethics – this "ethics of hospitality," as he calls it – is able to found a law or "a politics of hospitality."² Derrida's humble claim is that we have to leave the question in suspense and content ourselves with situating "some of its premises and points of reference."³ Nevertheless, Derrida's "suspense" turns out to have direct consequences for politics. In short, Derrida's

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 251.

² Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 19-20.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

position is that it is impossible to found, deduce, or derive a politics from Levinas' ethics and that this impossibility is not a failure for it results from the unbridgeable gap between ethics and politics.

According to Derrida, Levinas remains silent on the question of politics in general, and justifiably so as it is consistent with the demand of his ethics. To be sure, Derrida does not deny the necessity of a relation between ethics and politics: "*this relation is necessary*, it must exist, it is necessary to deduce a politics and a law from ethics. This deduction is necessary in order to determine the 'better' or the 'less bad,' with all the requisite quotation marks: democracy is 'better' than tyranny."⁴ Nevertheless, an unbridgeable gap, or a "hiatus,"⁵ separates ethics from politics such that their relation could not take the form of knowledge, or presentation, to be determined once and for all. Silence is the mark, not of the absence of relation, but of "the necessity of a leap," without which politics would have been able to lay claim to "a program or course of action," thereby being rendered totalitarian and irresponsible.⁶ Derrida thus makes a distinction between the formal injunction and political content in Levinas' thought:

The *formal* injunction of the deduction remains irrecusable ... Ethics enjoins a politics and a law ... But the political or juridical *content* that is thus assigned remains underdetermined, still to be determined beyond knowledge, beyond all presentation, all concepts, all possible intuition, in a singular way, in the speech and responsibility *taken* by each person, in each situation, and on the basis of an analysis that is each time unique ... unique but *a priori* exposed to substitution.⁷

Politics is not the comforting sphere of obedience to a universal law dictated by ethics once and for all. Political decision always takes place in the face of uncertainty and risk; each decision requires an invention, uniquely calculated based on an analysis proper to the singularity of the situation. But the analysis of the situation always begins with the responsibility for the other. Ethics interrupts politics by reorienting it away

⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁷ Ibid., 115.

from the self-referentiality of ontology and toward responsibility, while forcing it to engage with a never-ending process of examination, calculation, and decision-making. Such is the non-relation of the relation between ethics and politics.

The distinction between the formal injunction and the political content allows Derrida to separate Levinas' ethics from his politics. Thanks to the inevitable hiatus between ethics and politics, one is able to fully subscribe to what Levinas has to say about ethics, without necessarily sharing his views on real political issues that are in fact nothing more than "opinions" formed by a person in his unique encounter with the world.⁸ In this way, Derrida finds a way to both justify Levinas' silence on the relation between ethics and politics and separates his promising ethics from his question begging political judgments.

Building upon Derrida, Simon Critchley examines the consequences of such a view of the hiatus for political theory and attempts to formulate a political position based on it. According to Critchley, while the necessity of the passage from ethics to politics is a constant undertone of Levinas' thought, the terms of this passage must be thought differently from Levinas. So, without denying the value of Levinas' ethics, he calls, in opposition to Levinas, for a "non-fraternalistic, non-monotheistic, non-androcentric, non-filial, non-familial and non-Zionist"⁹ relation between ethics and politics. Critchley's idea of a non-Levinasian relation between ethics and politics that nevertheless preserves the basic tenets of Levinas' ethics relies on Derrida's view of the hiatus, which enables him to separate the unconditional injunction of ethics from the situation-dependent content of politics. Reformulating Derrida's view, Critchley writes that the correct relation between ethics and politics "is both non-foundational and non-arbitrary."¹⁰ Politics is inherently context-dependent. Making a decision or adopting a position thus requires an invention proper to each case. Therefore, ethics must not

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹ Simon Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas' View of Politics and a Sketch of a Solution to Them," in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. Marinos Diamantides (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

attempt to *a priori* found politics – because if it does, the result would be ignorant of the uniqueness of each situation, that is, inevitably totalitarian and irresponsible. Nevertheless, politics is not thereby left to the arbitrary decisions of free wills because ethics has already demonstrated the priority of responsibility for the other over the spontaneity of the free will. Ethically informed political decision amounts to – Critchley cites Derrida – “*the other’s decision in me.*”¹¹

With such a view of politics, Critchley approaches the awaiting practical question, “what is to be done?” and attempts to formulate “an anarchist meta-politics”¹² in response. For this purpose, he invokes Levinas’ thematic of *anarchism*. According to Critchley, political thought is, for the most part, *archic*, that is, it is obsessed with principles, foundations, and institutions in direct relation to the act of government and the decision of a sovereign subject. In this way, the true meaning of the term political – which, in Critchley’s view, consists in “the radical manifestation of the people, the people not as *das Volk* or *le peuple* shaped by the state, but as *die Leute*, or *les gens*, the people in their irreducible plurality”¹³ – is betrayed. The anarchy of the relation with the other can revive the political by introducing “a meta-political moment into politics.”¹⁴ That is to say, the interruption of ethics by politics prevents politics from closing over itself and forming a totality neglectful of the plurality of the people. Ethics is, Critchley concludes, “the meta-political disturbance of politics for the sake of politics.”¹⁵

The order of the *polis* and the activity of the government tend to continually build and re-build totalitarian frameworks which unify, that is, depoliticize, the people. The people – the *demos* – are, however, plural. They are not “the alleged unity of a race, the citizens of a nation state, the members of a specific class like the proletariat, or indeed the members of a specific community defined by religion, ethnicity or

¹¹ Derrida, quoted in *ibid.*, 99.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

whatever.”¹⁶ The task of politics is to prevent such totalization by providing channels for the manifestation of the multiplicity of the people. In this sense, politics is *democracy*. But this interpretation should not be taken as providing an apology for Western liberal democracies because for Critchley democracy does not refer to any existing political system. Elsewhere, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley clarifies this point by highlighting that he employs the term democracy in a Derridean sense, that is, as a “democracy to come,” a “democracy that does not exist,”¹⁷ or, in Derrida’s own words, a democracy that has “the structure of a promise.”¹⁸ For Critchley, democracy is defined as the process of democratization which consists “in demonstration as *demos*-stration, in the street – even dancing in the streets – in London, in Berlin, in New York, but equally in Damascus, in Tel-Aviv, in Cairo, but also in Basra, in Baghdad.”¹⁹ The essence of politics as democracy consists in “the manifestation of a *dissensus*” against totalization, in democratization as “dissensual emancipatory praxis.”²⁰ Ethics is the name of that dissensus.

Derrida’s acknowledgment of the hiatus as the final structure of the relation between ethics and politics and Critchley’s formulation of ethics as a meta-political disturbance of politics exemplify a rather dominant trend among most Levinas scholars, according to which ethics can enter the realm of politics only as a permanent interruption of politics.²¹ As we have seen in the previous chapter, Levinas’s own writings do in fact invite such an interpretation. To be sure, Levinas does frequently emphasize that the responsibility for the other must not be conceived of as an

¹⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁷ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1999), 212.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 78.

¹⁹ Critchley, “Five Problems,” 103.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ In addition to Derrida and Critchley, see, for example, Robert Bernasconi, “The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30, no. 1 (1999), 86; C. Fred Alford, “Levinas and the Limits of Political Theory,” in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. Marinos Diamantides (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 116; and Jeffrey Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 247.

interruption of the I by the other in an abstract sense, but rather as a demand imposed on me to, not only respect its absolute otherness, but also feed, clothe, and house the other, which in turn requires my engagement with the political, economic, and technological reality of the world. Nevertheless, he does not ultimately provide an account – or at least an unambiguous and conclusive analysis – of the concrete terms of this engagement. It is not surprising that his description of ethical responsibility as “a perpetual duty of vigilance”²² is taken by Derrida and others to utter the final word on the relation between ethics and politics.

But we must ask whether or not the mere acknowledgment of the hiatus and, as a result, the affirmation of the perpetual duty of vigilance over politics as either the goal or the limit of ethics provide a convincing response to the problem of the relation between Levinas’ ethics and politics (whether his politics or politics in general). In the case of Levinas’ own politics, the affirmation of the hiatus, the paradox, seems to simply eliminate Levinas’ troubling views on the Palestinian as it is content with disregarding Levinas’ political views as mere personal “opinions”²³ as long as we do not need to as well give up on his ethics. And if we insist on asking whether Levinas’ view on the Palestinian is just or not? I imagine we would be referred to an unending critique of Levinas’ politics that in effect would postpone the answer ever forward, for evidently no concrete political judgment can ever be perfectly just. Or, in the particular case of Derrida and Critchley who emphasize the singularity of political decision, we would perhaps be assigned the task of engaging in detail with the complexities of the specific issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict in order to be able to judge Levinas’ view (and it is not clear to me how, if at all, we will ever be in a position to make such a judgment). Similarly, in the case of politics in general, projection ever forward of judgment seems to be the most we can expect, for the idea of permanent interruption lacks the socio-

²² Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 30.

²³ Derrida, *Adieu*, 117.

historical content that is necessary for making the distinctions and comparisons that the question of justice demands.

The eternal postponement of political decision does not amount merely to an innocent deferral of the ethical. My conviction is that it is in effect unethical and irresponsible since it renders ethics vulnerable to appropriation by politics. As Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz put it, “as a projection ever forward, Levinas’ revolution in ethics strongly risks being appropriated as ideology.”²⁴ Insofar as the permanent interruption of politics by ethics remains at the level of *mere* interruption, in practice it succumbs to the existing state of affairs by verifying the logic of war as the only *viable* logic in the reality of politics. That is to say, insofar as ethics does not entail a vision of peace, a vision, that is, of “foreseeing peace in the real society,”²⁵ against and beyond the logic of war, perpetual vigilance opens itself into ideology as an illusory hope for peace and risks being appropriated by politics.

In Search of Vision

If we were lead to the idea of permanent interruption by the recognition that any *a priori* deduction of politics from ethics risks being totalitarian and thus irresponsible, then we do not seem to have advanced much further since, in the absence of concrete political content, the mere interruption of politics is also at the risk of affirming the existing state of affairs which is indeed unethical and irresponsible. If there is any advancement, it is in the realization that we are now confronted by a much deeper *aporia*: neither *a priori* deduction nor a projection ever forward – which is what unending interruption ultimately amounts to – seem to adequately respond to the problem of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas. A viable view of the relation between ethics and

²⁴ Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz, “An Ethical Orientation for Marxism: Geras and Levinas,” *Rethinking Marxism* 15, no. 2 (2003), 193.

²⁵ Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008), 35.

politics must not only disrupt politics, but also contain a vision of the possibility of transforming the existing reality of politics toward a better, that is, more just, one.

Liberalism, insofar as it relies on the priority of the individualistic logic of self-preservation, is limited to the ontology of war and does not seem to be able to offer any vision of peace beyond rational peace, understood within the framework of the social contract theory.²⁶ Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas has opened up the possibility for liberal interpretations of his ethics.²⁷ But if, as the notion of the third party seems to indicate, society is to be understood as a result of “the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another,” rather than “the limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another,”²⁸ then any vision of ethical peace requires a radical departure from the idea of rational peace – a departure that liberalism could not easily, that is, without itself undergoing a radical change in its view of the individual, accomplish. Insofar as the liberal subject is primarily concerned with its own freedom, it is caught up in the logic of being, unable to account for the ethical priority of the other, the otherwise than being. Liberal readers of Levinas must be referred to the question he posed to them: “we must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. Does the subject arrive at the

²⁶ On the limitations of liberal readings of Levinas see, for example, Annabel Herzog, “Is Liberalism ‘All We Need’? Levinas’s Politics of Surplus,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 2 (2002): 204–27; and Victoria Tahmasebi, “Does Levinas Justify or Transcend Liberalism? Levinas on Human Liberation,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 5 (2010): 523–44. Herzog outright rejects liberalism as an answer to the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas (Herzog, “Is Liberalism ‘All We Need’?” 205) and Tahmasebi argues for “the irreconcilability of Levinas’ ethico-politics to liberal conception of the individual, its rational peace and economic arrangement” (Tahmasebi, “Does Levinas Justify or Transcend Liberalism?” 523).

²⁷ See, for example, Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Richard A. Cohen, “‘Political Monotheism’: Levinas on Politics, Ethics and Religion,” in *Essays in Celebration of the Founding of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations*, ed. Chan-Fai Cheung et al. (The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations, 2003), <http://opo-phenomenology.org/essays/CohenArticle.pdf>; Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Robb A. McDaniel, “Garden-Variety Liberals: Discovering Eden in Levinas and Locke,” *Polity* 34, no. 2 (2001): 117–39; William Paul Simmons, *An-Archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas’s Political Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003); Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Eduard Jordaan, “Affinities in the Socio-Political Thought of Rorty and Levinas,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (March 1, 2006): 193–209.

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 80.

human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man in the act of election that raises him up to this height?"²⁹

Dissatisfied with liberalism as such, Fred Alford attempts to extract an inverted version of liberalism from Levinas's defense of the I as the locus of the ethical relation. The I that Levinas defends, he points out, is not, to be sure, the rational subject of liberalism, but the unique I who alone can come into a face to face relation with the other. Hierarchy, law, and the state, even, or particularly, when they function based on reason, justify cruelty and violence according to the logic of distributive justice. The suffering of the other caused by such cruelty and violence is hidden to the individual insofar as the individual is conceived of as a rational subject. It is only the I, in its uniqueness and singularity, who can see the suffering and tears of the other. Therefore, ethics announces that the I must be protected for the sake of the other. But, according to Alford, although the singular I of ethics is not the particular individual of liberalism, the need for protecting the I is eventually nothing but an indirect form of individualism, for substitution, the one-for-the-other, "is best understood as a form of *inverted individualism* and inverted liberalism."³⁰ He thus finds in substitution "Levinas' non-liberal defense of liberal individualism."³¹ Relying on such a view of inverted individualism and characterizing Levinas' position as the position of a prophet who is not a "lawgiver,"³² Alford concludes, "Levinas would leave the institutions of liberal individualism much as they are, so that everything else might change."³³

Alford's reading of Levinas' defense of the I is indeed thought provoking, particularly as I think it sheds new lights on Levinas' own position on Western liberal democracy. But, it seems to me, he fails to recognize that Levinas' inverted individualism, i.e., his defense of the I for the sake of the other, is not so easily

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990), 63.

³⁰ Alford, "Levinas and the Limits of Political Theory," 119.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

³² *Ibid.*, 120.

³³ *Ibid.*, 123.

reconcilable with liberal individualism. For, it is precisely in exercising their function to protect the freedom of the subject that the institutions of liberal democracy dissolve the singularity and uniqueness of the I and deny the primacy of the ethical relation in politics. It is because of this failure that at the end he seems to be content with characterizing the political function of ethics as merely an “anarchic intrusion into the world,”³⁴ dismissing the ethical need to transform the existing political reality for the sake of the other.

Recognizing the limitations of the mere acknowledgement of the disruptive role of ethics in relation to politics, John Drabinski takes a crucial step further by proposing a “liturgical politics” that, he argues, could more adequately than Levinas’ own “politics of peace” satisfy the requirements of ethics.³⁵ According to Drabinski, what distinguishes Levinas’ politics from the tradition of modern political theory, which derives the universality of law from the extension of the rights of the individual, is that Levinas grounds the rights of human (i.e., the universality) in the rights of the singular other. This is a politics of peace because its universality is derived from the responsibility of the I for the other and therefore the peace it seeks is for the other before it is for me. Nevertheless, Drabinski argues, Levinas’ politics of peace ultimately fails as an ethical politics for it falls short of adequately responding to the extravagant generosity of the for-the-other.

Drabinski refers to Levinas’ comment on the Palestinian in the interview with Malka³⁶ as “a factual instance, a case of putting the politics of peace into action” in which “one cannot but see ... a failure of the extravagant generosity so elegantly and systematically articulated in Levinas’ ethics.”³⁷ Moreover, unlike Derrida, Drabinski argues that this failure could not simply be dismissed as a personal failure on Levinas’

³⁴ Ibid., 120.

³⁵ John Drabinski, “The Possibility of an Ethical Politics: From Peace to Liturgy,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26, no. 4 (2000), 49.

³⁶ See, Chapter II, note 60.

³⁷ Drabinski, “The Possibility of an Ethical Politics,” 58-59.

part or an incorrect application of Levinas' notion of peace. For, it originates in Levinas' construal of politics as a politics of peace whose requirement for the comparison of incomparables (demanded by justice) undermines the fundamental dis-interestedness of ethical responsibility.³⁸ "Comparison," Drabinski writes, "is not dis-interested,"³⁹ because it necessitates making decisions that could determine who my neighbor is, whose rights must be defended, and who deserves peace. Such decisions would inevitably bring about "factual features of particularity"⁴⁰ and thereby contradicts the definition of alterity, as the alterity of the face in its nudity, independent of its contextual marks.

Insofar as the alterity of the other, and, by extension, of the third, do not have any place for contextual characteristics, the passage from ethics to politics could not amount to anything more than a mere interruption of the totalitarian practice of politics. In other words, although Levinas' ethics can exercise a perpetual duty of vigilance over politics, it is incapable of introducing an ethical curvature into the symmetric and neutral space of politics. Therefore, politics is ultimately left alone with its own unethical exigencies to deal with the *practical* necessity of breaking its symmetry, that is, of determining the priorities that could inform political judgment and action. It is at this point that particularistic categories such as defense and kin inevitably impose themselves as necessary in order to introduce the asymmetry required for forming decisions in the space of politics.

According to Drabinski, this failure signifies Levinas' conservatism, which is twofold. Levinas' "practice of politics"⁴¹ is conservative in that it fails to put into question the traditional idea of symmetrical political space. This conservatism is in turn the result of another, more fundamental, conservatism manifested in his insufficiently

³⁸ Ibid., 59-60.

³⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 58.

radical phenomenological account of alterity which fails to fully appreciate the force of alterity due to his insistence on the nudity of the face.⁴²

If we follow Levinas' emphasis on the materiality of responsibility,⁴³ we will have to take seriously the fact that concrete political spatiality is marked from the beginning by "asymmetrical distribution."⁴⁴ According to Drabinski, the categories of the poor, the stranger, the oppressed, the orphan, etc., that so frequently appear in Levinas' writings, must not be conceived of as metaphors, but rather must be considered in their literal sense as referring to the asymmetry of political space. Therefore, he concludes, we have to redefine alterity as "the site designated or constructed *as* the Other through various elements of political space."⁴⁵ It is only through a "reinscription of context into the signification of the face" that we can appreciate the fact that the face of the other is never purely nude and singular, but always also clothed and social, that is, raced, classed, gendered, and so on. It is only then that we can encounter the true alterity of the other in its materiality. The same argument must be applied to the other side of the ethical relation, i.e., the I who is disrupted by the face of the other. The I stands in relation with the other, not as an abstract individual conscience, but as a body with a history, an embodied I who is also raced, classed, gendered, and so on: "the subject is accused in its skin."⁴⁶

The reinscription of the asymmetry of political space into the ethical relation paves the way for the formulation of an ethical politics beyond the universality of the politics of peace. Drabinski calls this ethical politics a "liturgical" politics, where liturgy is understood as "the moment in which work accedes to the ethical."⁴⁷ Liturgical politics

⁴² Ibid., 62.

⁴³ Recall from our discussion in the previous chapters that for Levinas "no human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172).

⁴⁴ Drabinski, "The Possibility of an Ethical Politics," 63.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Levinas, quoted in Ibid., 65.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 66.

responds to the extravagant generosity of ethics in accordance with the realization that giving is not simply ethical and singular, but also political and public.

Drabinski then turns to elaborate the characteristics of liturgical politics in relation to democracy and wealth as “the most important sites of asymmetry in political life.”⁴⁸ In both cases, liturgical politics is unsatisfied with a mere contestation of power and demands a responsive transformation of political reality according to the requirements of generosity. Liturgical politics as democracy demands a redistribution of power that goes beyond a majority rule democracy and its logic of reciprocity: “this democracy calls for a non-reciprocal, redistributive giving to the other of democratic space: the minority.”⁴⁹ Similarly, the liturgical response to the asymmetry of wealth distribution would consist in a redistribution of wealth beyond the reciprocity of exchange, in giving without the expectation of return. At the end of the essay, Drabinski narrows down the context of his discussion by referring to the specific context of the USA, where violence to the other takes place according to the logic of “a certain kind of democratic representation and capitalist conceptions of wealth accumulation.”⁵⁰ In this situation, the task of liturgical politics consists in ruining these “petrified idols of violence” which, Drabinski suggests, calls for a rapprochement between Marx and Levinas.⁵¹

Drabinski’s belated reference to Marx might seem a bit out of place as it arises out of his move, or rather jump, from the articulation of the task of liturgical politics throughout the essay in terms of the *redistribution* of giving – whether political power or wealth – to suddenly assigning it with the work of *ruining* the existing idols of violence. The former terminology of redistribution does indeed carry a reformist sense that does not seem to be easily reconcilable with either the radical sense of the word ruining or with Marx. To his credit, however, Drabinski does not explicitly formulate the exact

⁴⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁵¹ Ibid.

terms of his idea of the redistribution of giving so that it is not impossible to interpret his call for “the transformation of political institutions”⁵² – which comes out of the need for redistribution – as a call for a radical transformation in Marx’s sense. In any case, it is not Drabinski’s reference to Marx that constitutes the virtue of his analysis. Rather, the valuable insight of his work consists in his proposal for the contextualization of alterity. It is by virtue of this contextualization that Drabinski is able to take the discussion of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas a crucial step further as it opens up a path toward the formulation of an ethical politics that moves genuinely beyond the perpetual duty of vigilance. This path is indeed promising, in particular when it is accompanied by a further analysis of the possibility of a rapprochement between Levinas and Marx.

Drabinski is not the first to suggest the possibility – and perhaps even necessity – of a rapprochement between Levinas and Marx. In English speaking academia, this credit belongs to Robert Gibbs’ *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, which examines this possibility through a systematic analysis of the points of intersection and divergence between Levinas and Marx.⁵³ Levinas was certainly aware of the significance of Marx and Marxist movements, as his scattered comments on various aspects of the matter and his essay on Ernst Bloch⁵⁴ shows. But as a whole it could be said that he was not interested in the project of Marxism. Levinas was disappointed not only by Stalinism, which indicated a definitive failure of Marxism, but also by the 1968 revolt, which he described as “a revolt of sadness,” resting upon the awareness that “the communist ideal had degenerated into totalitarian bureaucracy.”⁵⁵ At the theoretical level, although he admired “the ethical conscience” that guided Marx’s “prophetic cry” against Western idealism,⁵⁶ he was, as we have seen, convinced that dialectical materialism was not

⁵² Ibid., 67.

⁵³ Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 229-54.

⁵⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “On Death in the Thought of Ernst Bloch,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): 33–42.

⁵⁵ Levinas, “Dialogue,” 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

materialist⁵⁷ or realist⁵⁸ enough to be able to overcome idealism. Moreover, he was suspicious about Marxism's emphasis on economic equality insofar as it has not sufficiently insured itself against the totalizing tendencies of the universal revolution of the proletariat.⁵⁹

To be sure, Levinas came close to identify his project as a quest for economic equality in "The Ego and the Totality," an essay published in 1954. "Justice," Levinas writes, "has no other object than economic equality."⁶⁰ But he seems to have given up this view by the time of *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. According to the earlier essay, if justice demands measuring what is immeasurable and comparing things which are incomparable and if economic work, labour, and money are precisely the social concepts that make possible the quantification of the world (which is necessary for measurement and comparison), then they are key elements for accomplishing justice. In *Totality and Infinity*, however, explicit references to money and labour are dropped and economy is defined, quite generally, in terms of the regulation of the world of works, occupied by free wills. In *Otherwise than Being*, economics is totally pushed out of the text and, as Gibbs points out, the analysis of the reality of the material world and its significance for ethics is limited to the discussion of the materiality of responsibility.⁶¹

Gibbs interprets this move as Levinas' change of focus from justice in "The Ego and the Totality" to a rather exclusive concern with the face and its infinitizing responsibility, which is related to the quest for justice only as a "perpetual interruption and critique of politics and its discourse."⁶² If in the earlier essay, economic equality was presented positively as the goal of Levinas' project, in *Totality and Infinity* he attempts to establish "religion," as a form of social institution, distinct from politics, that originates

⁵⁷ Levinas, "Hitlerism," 67.

⁵⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Between Two Worlds," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 186.

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Ego and the Totality," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 44.

⁶¹ Gibbs, *Correlations*, 235.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 236 and 242.

in the relations of the family and retains the possibility of “a positive form of sociality based on the approach of the face.”⁶³ However, in Levinas’ later works, including *Otherwise than Being*, the notion of religion disappears and politics is presented as the sole form of sociality. Without the positivity of the society of religion, the society of politics is bound to the emergence of an intrinsically unethical state that must be subjected to a perpetual critique. “Liberation,” Gibbs writes, “becomes solely a praxis, but one which can never be established or instituted” and Levinas thus focuses exclusively on “the ethical moment that subtends the demand for justice.”⁶⁴

According to Gibbs, the suspicion toward the possibility of a historically-determined ethical praxis of liberation is rooted in the traditional idea that “mislocates ethics in individuality and sociality in totality.”⁶⁵ But it is possible, Gibbs suggests, to liberate the thought of liberation from this “unfortunate heritage.”⁶⁶ His proposal is that we can detect the outlines for a non-totalitarian, that is, ethical, project of liberation in Marx, though this would require a more radical critique of the Hegelian dialectic than was attempted by Marx himself. According to Gibbs, Marx shared many of Levinas’ fundamental points about human sociality. Like Levinas, Marx believed that “human beings are fundamentally social beings.”⁶⁷ Marx also shared with Levinas the idea that speech, and with it consciousness, are the direct outcomes of this sociality as they emerge out of the need for exchange with other human beings. Marx’s critique of capitalism was in fact motivated by his realization that this fundamental sociality is systematically threatened by the primacy of private property and the alienating form of the division of labour that it imposes. Finally, like Levinas, Marx is suspicious of the particularist universalism upon which civil society is founded.⁶⁸

⁶³ Ibid., 238.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 242.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 230.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 243.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 248.

Unlike Levinas, however, Marx envisioned the possibility of another form of universalism that will emerge through the functioning of economic globalization.⁶⁹ Marx's view of the privileged historical place of the proletariat as the universal agent of revolution is grounded in this new notion of universalism. For Marx, the proletariat opposes, not merely the capitalist class, but the very idea of class; it stands, not merely against the oppression of capitalism, but against oppression itself. The proletariat revolution is thus that last revolution which will free humanity as a whole.

Levinas would rightly object to Marx that no revolution could put an end to totalization and protect humanity from the immorality and violence of society. Marx, on the other hand, would rightly accuse Levinas of overlooking the need for radical transformation of society and its institutional and economic structure by laying too much emphasis on the singularity of the face. Having led us to this chasm between Marx and Levinas, Gibbs then provides some preliminary comments on the possibility of a "bridge that might preserve the best each thinker has to offer."⁷⁰ According to Gibbs, such a bridge would require, first and foremost, the emancipation from "the Hegelian dialectic, which both thinkers oppose and also presuppose, [and which] forces them to abandon any stopping point in society short of the state."⁷¹ We need to inquire whether there are models for non-totalizing social practices and institutions that are not subordinated to the state. With regard to this inquiry, Gibbs writes, "the central element ... must be the vulnerability to critique – but taken in the most radical, Levinasian way. A society must be open to critique from outside, which means that it cannot conquer the outside, cannot be universalizing by inclusion In addition, it must not exclude the outside, silence it, for example, through, the monopolies of race, gender, or capital."⁷² Finally, Gibbs suggests that Jewish social thought might be a valuable resource with regard to the possibility of a bridge between the two Jews: "if Marx and Levinas had

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 251.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

drawn more deeply on the tradition of Jewish social thought about institutions, they might have produced more constructive insights into the partial remedies for our situations."⁷³

From Social Critique to the Ethics of Liberation

Considering Drabinski's call for the contextualization of alterity and Gibbs' announcement of the possibility, and necessity, of a systematic rapprochement between Marx and Levinas, we can finally distinguish two parallel, though not identical, directions that together form the outline of a promising response to the problem of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas. We were confronted with the need to break through the symmetric space of politics that results from conceiving the ethical as merely disruptive of politics. In response to this, Drabinski proposed that we need to radicalize the notion of alterity by reinscribing context into the notion of the face. The other would then become the oppressed, generally defined as the other of the totality. However, Drabinski's proposal remained at too general a level, as it did not provide a conceptual framework that is necessary for understanding the totality, its mechanisms of exclusion, and the possibility of its transformation for the sake of the oppressed. Gibbs' announcement of the possibility of a Levinasian Marxism is a promising initial step in this regard, but it is just that – an initial step. In what follows I will engage with the works of two scholars who have made significant contributions to the formulation of a rapprochement between Marx and Levinas: Asher Horowitz, who responds to Gibbs' call by attempting to construct a dialogue between Levinas and the Frankfurt School and Enrique Dussel, the Latin American philosopher, still largely unknown to the English speaking academia, who had independently begun a similar project in the 1970s.⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid. 252.

⁷⁴ Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation*, published in Spanish in 1977 and in English translation in 1985, presents an original contribution, where Levinas is fruitfully linked to Marx. However, Dussel's work reaches its culmination as an original philosophy that goes beyond both Marx and Levinas during the 1990s. His mature thought is perhaps best presented in his 1998 book, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and*

Horowitz and Dussel share the conviction that in order to find a rapprochement between Marx and Levinas, we need a non-totalitarian Marxism, freed from the remnants of Hegel's identitarian dialectic. For this purpose, Horowitz turns to the Frankfurt School's dialectic of nonidentity, whose philosophical culmination is presented in Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectic*. Dussel, for his own part, provides a new interpretation of Marx by highlighting the influence of late Schelling's positive philosophy on Marx. While the Frankfurt School emphasized the primacy of the material through the perpetual work of negativity in order to formulate an open-ended, non-Hegelian dialectic, Dussel's Schelling highlights the positive, material substance which every act of thinking presupposes. The difference between Horowitz's and Dussel's points of departure, that is, the negative dialectics of the Frankfurt School and the positive dialectics of Schelling, results in two distinct formulations of the relation between Marx and Levinas, which, I will argue, are simultaneously conflicting and complementary.

Ethical Social Critique

In *Ethics at a Standstill*, Horowitz argues that "both the Frankfurt School and Levinas fall short of their own theoretical ambitions, yet do so in ways that allow for the possibility of a mutual fecund embrace."⁷⁵ On the one hand, the social critique of the Frankfurt School does not have the means to perceive and articulate the prophetic ethical drive that lies at the heart of its idea of emancipation. On the other hand, Levinas' ethics falls short of the social critique that his ethics demands. Therefore, while Levinas can come to aid the Frankfurt School by providing it with a (meta)phenomenological understanding of its ethical substance, the Frankfurt School could offer to Levinas' ethics an orientation toward an ethical social critique. Horowitz thus engages in a comprehensive analysis of

Exclusion, which has only recently (2013) appeared in English translation. For a brief, but informative, summary of Dussel's philosophical development from the 1970s to the present see Eduardo Mendieta's Introduction to *Ethics of Liberation*.

⁷⁵ Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, ix.

the points of intersection and divergence between Levinas and the Frankfurt School in order to show the possibility of this “mutual fecund embrace” and, ultimately, formulate it as a relation of supplementation – as opposed to an overarching new theory that would embrace both – that can best be described in terms of Theodor Adorno’s idea of thinking in constellations.⁷⁶ Horowitz’s proposal with regard to what the Frankfurt School has to offer to Levinas has two main elements: first, the conception of natural history that stems from negative dialectic is compatible with Levinas’ ethics in the sense that, unlike the Hegelian notion of universal history, it has room for a non-teleological eschatology that the ethical relation requires; second, the Frankfurt School can correct Levinas’ one-sided view of history in a way that enables the latter to engage in an ethically-oriented social critique which goes beyond the perpetual duty of vigilance.

Guided by the Frankfurt School’s view of natural history, Horowitz takes on the task of addressing the relation between Marxian social theory and Levinasian ethics with regard to the question of history. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents the relation between history and eschatology as the temporal counterpart of the relation between totality and infinity, or between ontology and metaphysics. For Levinas, eschatology refers to the experience of the break up of the totality of the time of history, borne by the relation with exteriority. Eschatology does not enter history as an experience of consciousness, i.e., as experience in the sense of the adequation of thought with its object; rather, it refers to the temporal dimension of the relation with the face, which Levinas sometimes describe as a forgotten or original experience of peace. The experience of eschatology does not thus appear in history as a force that orients history; it does not, that is to say, lend itself to teleology. According to Horowitz, it is this non-teleological character of eschatology that both Hegelian idealism and Marxian materialism fail to preserve: “[i]f Hegelianism is the idealist reduction of eschatology to objective history understood in teleological terms, [Marxian] materialism would be the

⁷⁶ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

reduction of history to an eschatology still understood in teleological, purposive-instrumental terms."⁷⁷

Recognizing the limitation of Marx's teleological view of history, Horowitz turns to the conception of history proposed by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. His goal is to find a relation between subjectivity and history that in pointing beyond history is not totally detached from it, so that the possibility of the de-totalization of history from within history is preserved. He finds a parallel between the relation between history and eschatology in Levinas and the relation between empty-homogeneous-time and time-of-the-now in Benjamin. Nevertheless, Benjamin's reflections on history remain, according to Horowitz, at the level of suggestive remarks for he did not ever formulate a finished project capable of instigating a "de-idealized Marxian conception of history" which "could meet up with the sensibility and responsibility of the Levinasian subject."⁷⁸

Horowitz thus turns to Adorno's idea of natural history, which builds upon Benjamin's early remarks on nature and history and, eventually in *Negative Dialectics*, provides a fully achieved philosophy of history.⁷⁹ Highlighting the transient character of both nature and history, Adorno proposes a notion of natural history in which the dialectical relation between the two is preserved. Natural history thus rejects the traditional duality of nature and history and the conception of universal history that stems from it. However, instead of abstractly moving beyond the duality of nature and history, Adorno argues that this duality is simultaneously true and false. It is false insofar as it conceals the transient character of both nature and history, but true insofar as it expresses the falsity of an inverted world in which abstraction has gained priority over its material bases. Universal history is therefore also both true and false. It can neither be simply dismissed as a myth nor accepted as rational truth; rather, it should be simultaneously construed and denied.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 85-97.

In this sense, Adorno criticizes Marx's teleological view of history in a manner reminiscent of Levinas.⁸⁰ Marx's historical materialism was successful in both construing and denying universal history; but, he also denied this denial in its resurrection of the idealist subject as the agent of revolution, in which the transformation of history is brought about from within history. It was this teleological view of history that prevented Marx from foreseeing the continuation of domination in the proletarian revolution and in the planned economy that will follow. It was also this view of history that ultimately rendered Marxist philosophy incapable of recognizing the uniqueness and radical inwardness of ethical subjectivity beyond its particularity as an agent of universal history. In this way, Adorno formulates Levinas' charge of insufficient realism in terms of a critique of Marx's teleological metaphysics of history.

To be sure, Adorno's denial of universal history is also inadequate for conceiving the singularity of the ethical relation for it is brought about through dialectical negation which is not radical enough to be able to account for ethical transcendence (this would be what Levinas' (meta)phenomenology could offer to the Frankfurt School). But, at least, it does not completely close off the possibility of the ethical relation as it admits of a temporality beyond the time of universal history. The dialectical denial of universal history thus corrects Marx in such a way that it is no longer incompatible with Levinas' non-teleological eschatology.

Having resolved the issue of compatibility, we can now see how the Frankfurt School can correct Levinas' view of history. Levinas falls to the impasse between history and eschatology, and between politics and ethics, because he cannot envision any possibility for historical change. For Levinas, eschatological transcendence can do no more than deny – and disturb through denial – the inevitable continuation of universal history, which is necessarily totalitarian and unethical. According to Horowitz, this results from Levinas' conflation of totalization with domination, which results in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 94.

overlooking the historical dimension of ethics. Levinas equates history with totalization. The Same as the totality is thus rendered ahistorical. Consequently, the role of the ethical is also interpreted ahistorically as the perpetual interruption of the totality. But there is, both ethically and historically speaking, a significant difference between totalization and domination as the former refers to “the law of the third” per se and the latter to “the law of the few” which is the outcome of a history of domination.⁸¹

It is through the articulation of this difference that the Frankfurt School is able to offer to Levinas a way out of the impasse. For Adorno, and Benjamin, universal history does not have the finality of fate as it is nothing more than a transient moment of natural history. Although it could be said that the Same remains eternally the same in the sense of always representing a totality, its structure is subject to historical change according to the dialectics of domination and liberation. While liberation cannot deny the fact of totalization, it can instigate an ethically significant change in the structure of domination. Therefore, a politics that aims to remain faithful to the demands of ethics would require a historically-situated, liberatory social critique of domination as much as it needs a perpetual duty of vigilance. According to Horowitz, such a social critique is precisely what the critical theory of the Frankfurt School provides.

But, as Horowitz recognizes, a truly ethical politics requires something more than a negative support from critical theory. It is also in need of something “positive” that would support the possibility of “the propagation of the ethical relation.”⁸² This is the task of the last chapter of the book, titled “The Sense of Hope.” It is in this chapter, and in Horowitz’s turn to Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, that we come close to something like a positive characterization of the possibility of liberation, beyond a mere critique of domination and distinct from Marxian revolution.

⁸¹ Ibid., xx and 306. Also see *ibid.*, 385, note 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 301.

Concerned with the problem of liberation in a historically specific society in which capital determines the terms of domination, the first generation of the Frankfurt School shared Marx's critique of capitalism and his call for radical social transformation. Nevertheless, they went beyond Marx's idea of the primacy of economics. In Marcuse's formulation, the abolition of alienated labour is inseparable from a change in the character of necessity, either as a release from the order of necessity or at least as a reduction of the realm of necessity to a minimum. A necessary pre-condition of this change is the liberation of eros, "the builder of culture," from "surplus repression."⁸³ It is only in a nonsurplus-repressive civilization that "a fundamentally different experience of being, of nature, and of existential relations," a total change in the character and reach of necessity, and, consequently, a radically different relation between the Same and responsibility, would be possible.⁸⁴ Marcuse's indispensable contribution consists in theorizing the non-impossibility of the liberation of eros, which in turn makes possible a vision of a society in which the law of the third "is not only the abrogation of the law of the few, but a law that ... no longer subverts the ethical relation, but supports it."⁸⁵ According to Horowitz, although "the law of the third and the ethical relation cannot be synthesized in a final and ultimate form," a liberated eros can potentially carry out the work of the propagation of ethics in a society in which "the development of the law of the third is *not* a detraction from the ethical relation."⁸⁶

Is this sense of hope, which seems to signify a point of convergence between Levinas and the Frankfurt School, adequate as the positive support that the propagation of the ethical relation requires? For Dussel, it would be still too detached from history to be able to point to anything close to a concrete praxis of liberation. Horowitz, however, seems to be suspicious of any thought that too directly appeals to practice. His position is closer on this matter to Levinas, who writes, "the language that tries to be direct and

⁸³ Marcuse, quoted in *ibid.*, 328 and 347.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

name events fails to be straightforward. Events induce it to be prudent and make compromises. Commitment unknowingly agglomerates men into parties. Their speech is transformed into politics. The language of the committed is encoded.”⁸⁷ This disagreement on what a positive support for ethics in history could mean leads directly to the point of divergence between Dussel and Horowitz. We shall return to it after the exposition of Dussel’s philosophy of liberation.

Ethical Politics as the Praxis of Liberation

Dussel’s view is in many senses similar to that of Horowitz’s. Like Horowitz, Dussel believes that Levinas’ (meta)phenomenological ethics is in need of social and historical categories that could enable it to move beyond the mere anti-political gesture that the perpetual duty of vigilance provides and engage in a concrete critique of politics; like Horowitz, he turns to Marx’s critique of political economy in search of an appropriate dialectical framework that could bring Levinas’ ethics into a fruitful dialogue with the historical reality of politics; and like Horowitz, he seeks to formulate a non-Hegelian, non-totalitarian interpretation of Marx that has room for Levinas’ ethics of the other. But, unlike Horowitz who finds the Marxian social critique proper to Levinas’ ethics in the Frankfurt School’s negative dialectics, Dussel takes the positive philosophy of latter-day Schelling as its point of departure. As we shall see, this point of departure leads Dussel to interpret Marx’s critique of political economy as a work of ethics in itself and formulate a different relation between Marx and Levinas.

Against the purely negative philosophy of Hegel’s later works, Dussel argues, Schelling’s 1841 *Philosophy of Revelation* “ushered in a tradition of critical affirmation in philosophy” to which thinkers like Feuerbach, Marx, and Levinas as well as his own

⁸⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Signature,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 289. What is quoted above appears as the first of three epigraphs which are followed by a curious note in parenthesis: “from a conversation overheard in the Underground.” It remains unclear whether the epigraphs are simply quoted from an unknown source or they belong to Levinas himself and the peculiar way of referencing is rather a stylistic technique, perhaps to let a voice be heard.

ethics of liberation belong.⁸⁸ Schelling rejected Hegel's philosophy of identity by recognizing that the origin of thought is not itself thought and that "every act of thinking presupposes Being."⁸⁹ To this extent, his critique of Hegel is close to that of the Frankfurt School as both defend the nonidentity of thought and being. However, according to Dussel, Schelling surpasses the negativity of nonidentity in his turn to the positive, though not graspable, manifestation of the divine in the real. Dussel interprets this turn as indicating that "before being looms reality, as a necessary prior assumption of thinking and being."⁹⁰ Sensuous reality is the positive source of both being and knowledge; but it cannot itself be grasped as knowledge. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of Levinas, Schelling locates the locus of this positivity in the concrete encounter of the bodily reality of another human being: "the real dialectic is not the monologue of a solitary thinker with his or herself, but rather the dialogue between you and me. Absolute philosophy used to say ...: I am the truth. Human philosophy says, to the contrary: even while lost in thought, even to the extent that I am a philosopher, I am a human being in the face of another human being."⁹¹

According to Dussel, Marx was influenced by this Schellingian heritage through the mediation of Feuerbach and Engels, both of whom had attended Schelling's 1841 lectures. On the one hand, Feuerbach, who had put Schelling's insight to work in an attempt to make philosophy descend from "the realm of separated souls to that of *living* and incarnate souls,"⁹² directed Marx's attention to the dimension of material human misery as the correct starting point for philosophical thought. Engels' precise descriptive works, on the other hand, helped Marx to identify the condition of the working class as the historical locus of "the highest and the most visible summit" of human misery and,

⁸⁸ Enrique D. Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 219.

⁸⁹ Schelling, quoted in *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Schelling, quoted in *ibid.*, 220.

⁹² Feuerbach, quoted in *ibid.*

therefore, “the concrete grounding and *point of departure*” for his work.⁹³ In this way, Schelling’s critique of Hegel indirectly led Marx to take the material suffering of the worker, the victim of the capitalist system, as his point of departure. Marx’s turn to economy was the result of his recognition that critical political economy is the proper discourse that he needed to develop in order to deal with this problem. For Dussel, this means that Marx’s critique of political economy was in fact an “exercise of the critical-ethical reason at a relevant epistemological material level.”⁹⁴

Dussel’s interpretation of Marx’s critique as a work of ethics stems from his understanding of ethics as the ethics of liberation. The ethics of liberation is for Dussel “an ethics of life,” concerned with “the negation of human life,” “the negation of corporeality, the *bodily reality* (*Leiblichkeit*) reflected in the suffering of the victims, of all those dominated (as workers, indigenous people, African slaves, or exploited Asians in the colonized world; as the bodily reality of women, of those who are not white, of the future generations who will suffer the effects of ecological destruction ... etc.).”⁹⁵ The term “victim”⁹⁶ refers to the others of the totality, all those excluded by the system, the majority of humanity whose lives are negated, i.e., have been made impossible, by the globalized systems of domination and exclusion. The ethics of liberation departs from the material suffering of those excluded by the system and adopts the standpoint of the victims.

Dussel’ planetary ethics of the victim builds upon, and modifies, Levinas’ ethics of the other. Following Levinas, Dussel argues that among the real things (i.e., the sensible things of sensuous reality) that retain exteriority to being, the face of the other

⁹³ Marx, quoted in *ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹⁶ In Dussel’s earlier works (e.g., *Philosophy of Liberation*), the other of the totality is described by terms such as “the poor” and “the oppressed.” While he continues to use these terms, in *Ethics of Liberation*, and generally in his later works, he has a preference for the term “victim” (which he takes from Benjamin) as it conveys a “broader and more exact” sense of exclusion and suffering (Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, xxii).

person is “one absolutely *sui generis*, distinct from all the rest.”⁹⁷ In its radical sense, the other is thus understood as “the other woman/man: a human being, an ethical subject, whose visage is conceived of as the epiphany of living human reality in bodily form (corporeality).”⁹⁸ However, Dussel continues, the other person is not always revealed to us in its radical exteriority as a person. It appears most commonly as just another being, a mere sense-thing. Nevertheless, there are moments when the other person shows oneself as *someone* rather than *something*. Generally speaking, this happens when the other person is “extracted from our systems of instruments,” for example, “when the taxi driver (who turns out to be a friend) says to us, ‘How goes it?’”⁹⁹ Specifically, this revelation is most intensified in the case of the encounter with someone who says, “‘Please help me!’ Or ‘I’m hungry, Give me something to eat!’”¹⁰⁰ According to Dussel, the face of the one in need – the poor, the oppressed, the victim – forcefully breaks out of our instrumental totalization and reveals itself as someone who is absolutely exterior. In this sense, it is in the encounter with the victim that the disruption of totality by ethical exteriority acquires “practical reality.”¹⁰¹

In the context of ethics, the other is never revealed in its “absolute unconditionality”¹⁰² as the other human being as such. Rather, the other of ethics “is always a quasi-unconditionality with reference or ‘relative’ to a context, a world, a concrete reality, or a feasibility.”¹⁰³ That is to say, ethical exteriority is always revealed as the other human being who has “a history, a biography, freedom.”¹⁰⁴ For Dussel, it is this quasi-unconditional face of the other person that constitutes the most real reality, beyond the totality of being, and is the subject matter of the ethics of liberation.

⁹⁷ Enrique D. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 40.

⁹⁸ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, xxii.

⁹⁹ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰² Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, xxii.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 41.

Moreover, in the empirical reality of politics, the other is always connected to other others through her or his history and biography. For Dussel, the face of the other appears as the collective face of the community of the victims. To be sure, Levinas had already clarified the collective sense of the face through his notion of the third party, who “looks at me in the eyes of the Other”¹⁰⁵ and reveals justice as an obsession with humanity as a whole. But the collectivity of the victim for Dussel has a historical sense that makes it more determinate and concrete as compared to the ahistorical collectivity of the humanity as a whole. The face of the other, unique and singular as it is, is always “the face of a sex, a generation, a social class, a cultural group, a historical epoch.”¹⁰⁶

Marx for his own part was concerned with one such collective exteriority, that is, the working class whose lives were, and still are, denied by the capitalist system. Living labour is the sole creator of value; but in capitalism the process of valorization consists paradoxically in the negation of the life of the worker as it rests on the objectification of living labour into commodity, resulting in the ever-increasing domination of dead labour over living labour. For Dussel, Marx’s critique of political economy, which was primarily concerned with the negation of living labour in capitalism and had adopted the perspective of the workers, serves as an example of the ethics of liberation at work.

The ethics of liberation, Dussel admits, has indeed a lot to learn from Marx, who correctly recognized the material impossibility of capitalism by detecting its contradictory nature manifested in the negation of the life of the worker. But Marx undervalued other, not primarily economic, aspects of victimization. The ethics of liberation must also move beyond Marx and develop multiple concrete fronts – economic, but also, political, cultural, technical, etc. – in order to face various forms of systematic domination and exclusion in today’s globalized world. Even the economic front of liberation cannot be limited to a mere reiteration of Marx, because so much has

¹⁰⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

¹⁰⁶ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 44.

changed since Marx's time and new dimensions of economic negation and exclusion have emerged.

Today, the ethics of liberation has to face the process of the globalization of Modernity which consists in the convergence of three inter-related processes, namely capitalism, colonization, and Eurocentrism.¹⁰⁷ One important consequence of the simultaneous functioning of these three processes has been the construction of a specific geopolitics of globalization. According to Dussel, it is clear, today more than ever, that capitalism has the capacity of expelling its gravest contradictions from the stronger capital toward the weaker ones, so that the geopolitical distinction between the center and the periphery has become an underlying factor in the process of massive victimization under the domination of global capital and in the rise of a critical consciousness among the community of victims in the periphery.¹⁰⁸

This observation prompts Dussel to emphasize, particularly in his earlier works, the distinction between the ontological philosophies of the center and the liberation philosophy that emerges from the peripheral regions of misery (Latin America, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, etc.): "against the classic ontology of the center, from Hegel to Marcuse – to name the most brilliant from Europe and North America – a philosophy of liberation is rising from the periphery, from the oppressed, from the shadow that the light of Being has not been able to illuminate. Our thought sets out from non-Being, nothingness, otherness, exteriority, the mystery of non-sense."¹⁰⁹ I think the argument here is that a philosophy of liberation is more likely to emerge from the periphery because it is in the peripheral regions of misery, where the victims are gathered together on a massive scale and under intolerable material conditions, that the victims are prone

¹⁰⁷ Enrique Dussel and Eduardo Ibarra-Colado, "Globalization, Organization and the Ethics of Liberation," *Organization* 13, no. 4 (2006), 493. Eurocentrism for Dussel includes "Americanocentrism" and refers to both the first Eurocentrism epitomized by Hegel and the second one that continues to live in and as contemporary world-system theory (Enrique Dussel, "World-System and 'Trans'-Modernity," *Nepantla: Views from South* 3, no. 2 (2002), 230).

¹⁰⁸ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 232.

¹⁰⁹ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 14.

to develop a collective, critical self-consciousness of themselves as the victims of global capital. Moreover, during the last few decades, the periphery, much more than the center, has witnessed various forms of significant social transformations – coups, revolutions, revolts, social movements, radical structural and legal changes of the state, etc. – that have exposed the weakness and volatility of the dominant systems. Therefore, in the periphery, where the critical self-consciousness of the community of the victims is linked with the concrete awareness of the fragility of the system, historically situated praxes of liberation have come to be conceived as both immediately necessary and possible. In the periphery, the thought of liberation cannot content itself with a projection ever forward of hope for emancipation; rather, it emerges as a result of an immediate necessity for reflecting on imminent historical possibilities.

Dussel's philosophy of liberation does not, however, aim to be conceived as limited, either in the scope of its applicability or the range of its comprehensibility, to the periphery. Founded upon Levinas' ethics of the other, it has a claim to universality and "aspires as well to be understood in the contemporary 'centers' of the United States and Western Europe."¹¹⁰ Dussel's analysis of victimization is thus not exclusively presented in geopolitical terms, but is rather generally and diversely described as the process of the negation of the life of subjects living under various forms of systematic exclusion: from "the *feminine* subject (different by gender)" to "the *Indian* subject (ethnicity), of a *dark color* (race), in devastated *lands* (ecological problems), *with no rights* (juridical exclusion), *no participation* in the dominated civil society (political), *poor* (economical), *peasant* (class), *illiterate* (formal culture), *Guatemalan* (a peripheral country), and so on."¹¹¹

The politicization of the other through the notion of the victim marks Dussel's departure from Levinas. For Dussel, ethical politics is ultimately a politics that serves the victim, that is, the other of the system of exclusion understood in all its diverse forms. To

¹¹⁰ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 232.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 374.

be sure, Levinas' criticism of politics is "fundamental" for the ethics of liberation.¹¹² But Levinas' ahistorical rendition of politics as the sphere of war and totalization, in which the ethical is always simultaneously revealed and betrayed, limits the work of critique to a permanent interruption of politics. The notion of politics that stems from Levinas' ethics is, Dussel writes, an "anti-politics" that operates at the level of "skeptical or deconstructive negativity."¹¹³ However, in addition to anti-politics, the ethics of liberation demands a "*positive and critical-emancipatory*" politics that is able to provide historical and concrete content for the praxis of liberation.¹¹⁴ For Dussel, such content cannot be provided by phenomenology alone. Phenomenology "should be 'mediated' by categories belonging to other epistemic disciplines,"¹¹⁵ categories such as Marxian political-economic categories which are able to explicate the historical and concrete conditions of domination and articulate feasible courses of actions for the liberation of the victims. It is because of the absence of such categories that Levinas' (meta)phenomenological ethics cannot conceive of politics as anything but totalitarian and unethical and fails to envision the possibility of another form of politics, that is, an ethical-critical politics as "*Abodah*," "service-to-the-Other as 'work' or 'praxis' of liberation."¹¹⁶

For Dussel, the ethics of liberation is inseparable from the praxis of liberation. Ethical action is defined principally as act of liberation of the victims that must take into account the empirical limitations and possibilities of the given social and historical context in which the praxis of liberation is pursued. He identifies six principles for

¹¹² Enrique Dussel, "'The Politics' by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy," in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz, trans. Jorge Rodriguez (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 81.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

ethics;¹¹⁷ the last principle, i.e. the principle of liberation – which relies on and includes all the rest – is described as follows:

One who operates in an ethical-critical manner *should* (is ethically obliged to) act to liberate the victim, as part (either by ‘location’ or by ‘positioning’ ...) of the same community to which the victim belongs, by means of (a) a feasible *transformation* of the moments (norms, acts, microstructures, institutions, or ethical systems) *that produce* the material negativity at issue (which impede a certain aspect of the reproduction of life) or its formal discursivity (a certain asymmetry or exclusion with regard to participation) for the victim; and (b) *the construction*, through mediations with strategic-instrumental critical feasibility, of new norms, actions, microstructures, institutions, or even complete ethical systems, where such victims could live, as full and equal participants.¹¹⁸

Evidently, here is not a place to engage with the technical details of Dussel’s principle of liberation; nevertheless, even this brief description could give us a clue on Dussel’s view of the level of practicality on which an ethical politics must operate. Moreover, the two *positive* aspects of the liberation principle, that is, transformation and construction, highlight the difference between Dussel’s ethics of liberation and Horowitz’s approach to the problem of the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas.

In the Face of the Dilemma

Dussel, I suppose,¹¹⁹ would mostly agree with Horowitz’s formulation of the possibility of a relation between Levinas and the Frankfurt School, the need for such a relation, and the ethical social critique that comes out of it. His disagreements with, or rather his critique of, Horowitz’s approach would I think stem mainly from his dissatisfaction with the negative dialectics of the Frankfurt School. Dussel engages, both directly and indirectly, with the works of the first generation of the Frankfurt School in various

¹¹⁷ *Ethics of Liberation* consists of a lengthy Introduction and six chapters, each presenting one principle. These principles are summarized as “(1) the principle of production, reproduction, and development of human life in community, of each ethical subject; (2) the ethical-formal principle of discursive reason; (3) the principle of ethical fallibility; (4) the critical-material principle[;] (5) the intersubjective-formal principle of critical validity;” and, finally, (6) the principle of liberation (Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 365).

¹¹⁸ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 420.

¹¹⁹ To my knowledge, Dussel has not (yet) directly engaged with Horowitz’s work.

places.¹²⁰ His treatment of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is largely positive: “the Frankfurt School is critical, a direct predecessor of the philosophy of liberation,”¹²¹ which “enabled me to politicize ontology.”¹²² Nevertheless, he is also critical of the critical theorists mainly because of what he considers to be a “lack of *positivity* in their work, an insufficiently clear *exteriority*,”¹²³ which renders their social critique inadequate for dealing with the historically specific problems that the philosophy of liberation has to face today.

Dussel admires the Frankfurt School’s profound critique of the history of domination and argues that they offered “a philosophical-critical material that has no substitute.”¹²⁴ According to Dussel, building upon Marx and Freud, the critical theorists were able to correctly identify their point of departure in the negative materiality of the life of the victim. Moreover, they were successful in formulating a critical reason as “dialectical reason at the service of negativity, at a material and practical level” that is sufficiently distinguished from instrumental reason.¹²⁵ However, Dussel points out, their critique was “unfortunately, not yet one that was specifically ethical.”¹²⁶ Neither were they able to “affirm a truly liberatory sense of history ... precisely because of the ambiguity of the ‘social subject’ to which they were most closely linked before their exile (1933) and after the return of some of them to Germany, after the war (1946).”¹²⁷

Critical theorists recognized the need to begin from the experience of the victims. They also realized that the condition of misery is not by itself enough for the development of a critical self-consciousness on the part of the victims. They thus characterized their task as the reduction of the gap between the “[intellectual’s]

¹²⁰ See, for example, Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 234-249; and Enrique Dussel, “An Ethics of Liberation: Fundamental Hypotheses,” in *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 142-144.

¹²¹ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 234.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 235.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

comprehension and that of *oppressed* humanity for which he thinks.”¹²⁸ Nevertheless, they were ultimately unable to adequately articulate their relation to a historical social subject or agent of liberation and situated themselves, “as did Levinas and so many others ... in the place, and from the ‘perspective’ of the philosopher-critic, and not properly that of the victim *him- or herself*.”¹²⁹ Dussel considers this a failure and suspects that it could be the result of “an absence of concrete social commitment,”¹³⁰ “a lack of concrete experience or an excess of Hegelianism on the part of the Frankfurt School.”¹³¹ He also links the ambiguity of the historical agent in critical theory to the specific historical situation in which it developed, where “its possible sociohistorical subjects were gradually ‘diluted’.”¹³²

The same ambiguity penetrates the philosophy of history proposed by the Frankfurt School. Benjamin, for example, identified two arrows that traverse history. On the one hand, there is the empty-homogeneous time of history, the profane time of the prevailing system, within which the mystification of ‘progress’ takes place – the myth of progress that is promoted not only by the bourgeoisie, but also by social democrats and, Dussel adds, “common Marxism.”¹³³ On the other hand, there is the messianic time that disrupts the time of history. It refers to the moment when the victims, equipped with a revolutionary consciousness and a memory of ‘the tradition of the oppressed,’ produce a rupture within the continuity of history and introduce something genuinely new. However, the possibility of hope that the notion of the messianic time conveys soon turns dark for Benjamin never clarified “exactly how ‘messianic time’ becomes

¹²⁸ Horkheimer, quoted in *ibid.*, 240.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 240. Writing in 1998, Dussel recognizes this “perspective” as the weakness of his own works of the 70s, which he now has tried to overcome: “I must confess that the difference between my *Ethics* of the 1970s ... and that of the present is precisely this ‘perspective’; that is to say, I wish to focus for now on the ‘position’ of the victim in the first instance, and only later to move on to the description of ‘reactions’ from the ‘perspective’ of the scientist, philosopher, or expert ‘actually committed’ to the struggle of the victims for their own liberation” (*Ibid.*, 576).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 241.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 242.

transformed into 'historical time' of the messianic community or movement itself."¹³⁴ Dussel asks: "is this impossible or contradictory?"¹³⁵ "Is some kind of concrete continuity possible among what Benjamin described as "messianic time,' of such a kind that they could be constitutive of a 'tradition' in sociohistorical terms? ... Or ... does all of the praxis of liberation end up being nothing but a sublime but always tragic story of defeated messianic pessimism?"¹³⁶

For Dussel, the ambiguity that runs through the thought of the first generation of the Frankfurt School is, at the theoretical level, a result of critical theory's "lack of *positivity*,"¹³⁷ which it inherited from "the purely *negative* philosophy of latter-day Hegel."¹³⁸ The critical theorists did not realize that the historical reality of oppression, and therefore its critique, do not begin with the negation of oppression, but rather with the exteriority of the other – that is, with the victims and their praxis of liberation – as "the fundamental and initial" positive element.¹³⁹ In addition and prior to negative dialectics, there is a positive dialectics, "a dialectics that is initially positive," a diachronic dialectics, that is, which has affirmation "as the origin of negativity."¹⁴⁰ Dussel calls this trans-ontological, metaphysical, positive element "the analectic element."¹⁴¹ Thus, the first generation of the Frankfurt School, he writes, "discovered principally Hegel's critical *negativity* (the *negative* dialectics...) but not *positivity* (analectics) and for that reason in the end succumbed to a tragic messianism (Horkheimer and Adorno) or to a creative imagination without radical alterity [an artistic fantasy, he writes elsewhere¹⁴²] (Marcuse). Walter Benjamin himself adopted a

¹³⁴ Ibid., 243.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 241.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 235.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 218.

¹³⁹ Dussel, "An Ethics of Liberation," 144.

¹⁴⁰ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 559.

¹⁴¹ Dussel, "An Ethics of Liberation," 143.

¹⁴² Ibid., 143.

messianic antihistorical posture (messianic time erupts into certain unique and powerful ethical moments, which cannot be developed as a history of liberation).¹⁴³

Horowitz's view seems to converge, to a certain extent, with Dussel's when he presents the ethical relation, that is, the relation with the absolute exteriority of the other, as "the fixed point" that the social critique of the Frankfurt School needs but cannot articulate by means of its own categories.¹⁴⁴ However, their convergence is only temporary, because Horowitz's fixed point is strictly Levinasian. It was in fact Levinas himself who first wrote "one can inaugurate the work of criticism only if one can begin with a fixed point. The fixed point cannot be some incontestable truth... it can only be the absolute status of an interlocutor, a being, and not a truth about beings."¹⁴⁵ Dussel's analectics departs from Levinas, and Horowitz, as soon as he replaces the unconditional exteriority of the other with the socially and historically determined alterity of the victim, or the community of the victims. This is central to Dussel's thought because it is precisely through this socialization (i.e., both contextualization and collectivization) of the other that the initial, metaphysical, fixed point is transformed into a *positive* support that permits Dussel to articulate a praxis of liberation 'beyond'¹⁴⁶ the emancipatory critique of the Frankfurt School. In other words, it is precisely this socialization that distinguishes Horowitz's approach from Dussel's.

This leads us to Horowitz's critique of Dussel. Horowitz argues that Dussel is able to offer a way out of the Levinasian impasse only by "drastically changing the reach

¹⁴³ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 559.

¹⁴⁴ Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, 289.

¹⁴⁵ Levinas, "The Ego and the Totality," 41.

¹⁴⁶ As we will see in the next chapter, Dussel's move *beyond* the Frankfurt School is at the same time a move backward. Dussel's critique of the Frankfurt School is rather one-sided. One of the central arguments that I will try to develop in the next chapter is that while negative dialectics does suffer from a lack of positivity, one cannot simply move beyond negativity toward some notion of positivity. Instead, an ethical critique of negative dialectics amounts to the preservation of both negativity and positivity in a state of permanent tension. In this sense, while I think Dussel's criticism of the Frankfurt School has the virtue of identifying a crucial limitation of their critique, I argue that he fails to give negative dialectics its deserved due. The approach of the positive, in Dussel's own sense of the term, could never be released from the critical force of the negative. Moreover, Dussel's objection that the first generation of the Frankfurt School stood in too far a distance from determinate historical praxis of liberation seems to dismiss Marcuse's later writings, such as *An Essay on Liberation* and *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, in which he engaged, at least as concretely as Dussel's own writings, with the analysis of the existing struggles of the oppressed and their emancipatory potentials.

and the meaning of the key Levinasian category of proximity¹⁴⁷ in a way that is pre-Levinasian. Thus, instead of going beyond Levinas, Dussel's politics of the victim risks undermining the central and fundamental teaching of Levinas' ethics, summarized in the phrase 'ethics as first philosophy,' and eliminating the necessary gap between history and eschatology.

Horowitz's critique targets Dussel's reformulation of both sides of the ethical relation in *Philosophy of Liberation*. For Dussel, "the face of the other, primarily as poor and oppressed, reveals a people before it reveals an individual person."¹⁴⁸ Moreover, it is the oppressed people themselves who "have unlimited commiseration of their equals" and are thus the real agent of liberation.¹⁴⁹ According to Dussel, the depiction of proximity as a relation between a singular I and a unique Other – even if in it the whole humanity looks at us – is a misunderstanding caused by forgetting that personal mystery is always entangled with the history of a people. He thus argues that the face-to-face is a "collective personal experience," whose individualization is "a European deformation derived from the bourgeois revolution."¹⁵⁰ According to Horowitz, this construal leads to a conclusion that is summarized in a sentence that he quotes from Dussel: "philosophy of liberation knows that politics – the politics of the exploited – is the first philosophy because politics is the center of ethics as metaphysics."¹⁵¹ For Horowitz, Dussel's reformulation of the ethical relation in this way is objectionable because it eliminates the necessary radical distance between history and eschatology. As soon as 'the people' become the collective subject of responsibility, the eschatological experience ceases to be an experience of the break-up of the totality of history, but rather *enters* history as a power or a force that can lead the movement of history. Thus, Horowitz writes, "history already contains eschatology, but in Dussel's hands it once

¹⁴⁷ Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, 40.

¹⁴⁸ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 44.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 170, also quoted in Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, 40.

again is on its way to becoming a teleological eschatology, and this in spite of the fact that Dussel would like to forbid fetishization of any future system.”¹⁵²

I think it is possible to respond to a part of Horowitz’s critique of Dussel from within Dussel’s own writings; however, in the last analysis, Horowitz’s critique points to a deeper problem that would require a modification of not only Dussel’s position, but also his own. Politics is, Dussel writes, the “first philosophy;” but, for Dussel, this is a Marxian, rather than a Cartesian, statement. “First philosophy” does not here refer to a *prima philosophia*, but rather to the “philosophy of the *praxis* of liberation.”¹⁵³ Dussel’s statement of the priority of politics – the one that Horowitz quotes – begins with a qualifying term that Horowitz drops, but I think is crucial for understanding Dussel’s view: “the *method* of the philosophy of liberation knows that politics ... is the first philosophy.”¹⁵⁴ What I take this to mean is that politics has *methodological* priority for the philosophy of (the *praxis* of) liberation because in it “ethico-metaphysical exteriority is *concretized* in a *privileged* way.”¹⁵⁵ Two decades later, in *Ethics of Liberation*, Dussel gives us more clues about the relation between his project and Levinas’ ethics. Right after discussing Levinas, he writes “now, although we find ourselves at the very core of all of the ethics of liberation, in a sense this is not the most arduous theoretical question that we have to confront in this book. To the contrary, although we are ‘at the heart’ of this critical *Ethics*, it nonetheless can be applied just in terms of its *foundation*.”¹⁵⁶ So, while ethics is *foundationally* prior to politics, the ethics of liberation – insofar as it is first and foremost concerned with the *praxis* of the liberation of real, existing victims – must *methodologically* begin with politics in which the victims and the system that victimizes them are empirically identifiable. In other words, while responsibility for the other is the ethical foundation of the ethics of liberation, the victim is its methodological starting

¹⁵² Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, 41.

¹⁵³ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 170.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* (emphasis is mine).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* (emphasis is mine).

¹⁵⁶ Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 278 (the last emphasis is mine).

point. This is what Dussel means when he writes “Levinas is *necessary* in order to demonstrate the ultimate content of a material, positive ethics (the access to the carnality of the Other), which is also negative (critical) and inherent to the discourse of an ethics of liberation ... but he is also *insufficient* for the larger purpose [i.e., the project of the praxis of liberation].”¹⁵⁷ If we understand the relation between ethics and the praxis of liberation in this way, we can then realize that Dussel does not contradict himself when he writes that what the ethics of liberation has intended to do, in various forms “since the 1960s,” has been “to develop an ethics as the ‘first and practical philosophy’ to discuss the criteria and principles to ground the required ‘transformation of the world’ with its victims as the ultimate reference.”¹⁵⁸ In this sense, it could be said that for Dussel the victim marks the entry point of the ethical into politics, while, at the level of ethics, the I remains to be infinitely responsible for the *unconditional* other, that is, the other as the human other, independent of social and historical characteristics. This is after all not far from Horowitz’s own position, according to which social critique begins with (the victim of) the history of domination, that is, with the dominated.

Moreover, Dussel’s mediation between history and eschatology is not teleological in the sense of simplistically positing a notion of finality in history. He is aware that when the praxis of liberation succeeds in constituting a definite movement capable of transforming the condition of misery of the victims, this process would necessarily bring about new forms of domination and oppression. He thus portrays the process of liberation as a continuous, never ending process of transformation and construction.¹⁵⁹ At each stage, the process of liberation consists in transforming the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 598 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 398.

¹⁵⁹ Dussel distinguishes between functional praxis, reform, transformation, and revolution and argues that the ethics of liberation is first and foremost concerned with transformation: “for the ethics of liberation, in contrast with Luxemburg’s ethics, the ethical action that is contrary to functional praxis (which is fulfilled *in* [and serves] the system without contradiction) and to reformist praxis (which [is critical of the system but accepts its criteria and, therefore,] has a bad consciousness and wants to critically explain the reasons of its conformist action) is not ‘revolution’ but ‘transformation.’ This is of the highest strategic (and even tactical) importance, because if the ethics of liberation intended to justify the goodness of a human act from ‘revolution’ exclusively, it would destroy the possibility of a critical (or liberation) ethics of *everyday life*”

existing state of domination and constructing a new order. The new order will gradually transform into another form of domination that must in turn be subjected to another process of transformation and construction.¹⁶⁰ For Dussel, this continuous transformative-constructive action constitutes an ethical-critical politics insofar as the “new” is derived not from the war of all against all, but rather from the responsibility for the other¹⁶¹ (and it would be so derived to the extent that it complies with the principles of the ethics of liberation).

However, the difficulties associated with making *eschaton* a power within history do not simply vanish by the rejection of finality and acknowledgement of the endlessness of the praxis of liberation. *Eschaton* becomes a historical power only at the cost of reducing the gap that safeguards the absolute exteriority of the other with regard to the same. In Levinas’ words, “to realize the *eschaton* would ... mean that we could seize or appropriate God as a *telos* and degrade the infinite relation with the other to a finite fusion.”¹⁶² Horowitz’s critique of Dussel is not nullified by the above observations as it stems from this fundamental Levinasian idea. The problem is a serious one, for the transformation of *eschaton* into a power threatens to neutralize the whole profundity of Levinas’ ethics by bringing the other back to the totality of the same. In this sense, the preservation of the radical distance between history and eschatology is the criterion for any politics that could legitimately be called ethical, in the Levinasian sense.

To be sure, unlike Drabinski’s direct replacement of the face with a collective and contextualized other (which renders him an easy target for Horowitz’s charge), Dussel’s

(Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 393). But revolutionary praxis is not incompatible with transforming action as both follow the same criteria and principles. The only difference is that revolution refers to exceptional and short lived historical situations when the praxis of liberation is concerned with the transformation of the whole system – though even that would not put an end to the process of liberation: “only the *critical* ‘transformation’ of a whole ethical system (a culture, an economic system, a state, a nation, etc.) can be called ‘revolution.’ Hence, revolution is nothing but the extreme moment of a complexity that starts at its lowest level with the transformation of a maxim of everyday life in reference to an insignificant possible action (e.g., from the very vulgar ‘I will spit on the floor!’ [which must be transformed because it harms the person who has to do the cleaning, i.e., the victim])” (ibid., 394).

¹⁶⁰ Dussel, “‘The Politics’ by Levinas,” 91.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Levinas, “Dialogue,” 30.

move from the personal other to the victim is conscious of the impossibility of doing away with the naked face of the other. This is evidenced in his attempt to preserve the foundational priority of ethics over politics, while taking the victim as the methodological point of departure for the ethics of liberation. Nevertheless, Dussel too seems to bridge the gap between ethics and politics in his translation of ethical categories into collective historical ones, which, eventually, leads him to derive a set of ethical principles that are supposed to somehow guide the praxis of liberation.

Dussel's ethics of liberation could not simply be defended against this charge. But his recognition of the need for an ethical politics beyond Levinas' anti-politics poses a genuine challenge to the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School that could not be easily disregarded either. Here we are confronted with a tension between ethical social critique and transformative-constructive ethical politics, a tension that, I think, cannot, and must not, be resolved, for it originates in the irreconcilable demands of other. Responsibility for the other calls for a social critique that, while capable of engaging with the concrete historical reality of politics, respects the radical exteriority of the other. Responding to this requirement, Horowitz embraces the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which, in its dialectical negativity, brings history and eschatology into a relation without thereby eliminating their distance. But the other demands more than a critique of the unjust order of politics. It also calls for feeding the hungry and housing the stranger, that is, for changing and repairing the world for the sake of the other. Taking this latter demand as its principle, Dussel recognizes that the ethics of liberation must engage with empirically feasible acts of liberation that could transform the historical reality of politics. He considers the emancipatory social critique of the Frankfurt School to be inadequate for this purpose as it falls short of articulating a path toward liberation and transformation in socio-historical terms. The dialectical negativity through which critical theory is able to preserve the distance between history and eschatology now appears as its limitation, for it tends to postpone the demand to change the world to an

unknown future. Obsessed with the concrete needs of the other, here and now, the ethics of liberation strives to create a direct link between the tradition of the oppressed and the existing praxis of liberation, forgetting the ethical necessity to preserve their distance. It thus allows the eschatological experience to become more than an experience of the break up of the totality and transforms it – or more precisely, wishes to transform it – into a power that could drive the movement of history.

This irresolvable tension reflects the tension between ethics and politics, which is 'real' and would not simply vanish into thin air through the magic of conceptual analysis. With the formulation of this tension we are not, however, back to the idea of the permanent interruption of politics by ethics. For, while the idea of the permanent interruption provides an abstract formulation of the real tension between ethics and politics, it is now a historical social critique that incessantly interrupts a concrete ethical politics by reminding it of the radical exteriority of the other which the latter necessarily betrays in its practice. The idea of permanent interruption is thus not done away with, but rather deepened through concretization. This deepening does not, however, leave the theories that we have been discussing as they were. In the next chapter, I will examine the process of concretization of ethics and its implications in further details and attempt to show how it might lead to something like a third position between Dussel's ethics of liberation and Horowitz's ethical social critique.

Chapter IV

Critique and Re-appropriation

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.¹

Levinas' ethics demands a politics that it cannot provide. Derrida justified this lack by highlighting the impossibility of deriving politics from ethics. He posited the notion of a "hiatus"² as the limit of the relation between ethics and politics, from which he deduced the idea of permanent interruption – or, in Levinas' own words, "a perpetual duty of vigilance."³ But, we argued, a mere disruption of the unjust operation of politics would not exhaust the demands of justice. The identification of a perpetual duty of vigilance over politics as either the goal or the limit of the relation between ethics and politics conceals the fact that more must, and could, be done for the other. Ethics may interrupt politics obsessively, but this would not be enough for the other has concrete needs, for whose fulfillment the I is responsible to not only critically engage with the concrete reality of politics, but also partake in the attempts to repair it. Surely, ethics cannot prescribe politics. But there is a range of possibilities between permanent interruption and prescriptive politics. If the recognition of the aporetic structure of the relation between ethics and politics seems to directly lead to the identification of permanent

¹ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173.

² Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 116.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 30.

interruption as the limit, it is because Levinas' ethics lacks the appropriate social and political categories that are required for the formulation of a concrete passage from ethics to politics.

In the previous chapter we turned to Marxism as one particularly relevant – though not necessarily the only – source to compensate for this lack. We examined the works of Asher Horowitz and Enrique Dussel as two scholars in whose analyses the possibility of a rapprochement between Marx and Levinas is to a great extent realized. While Horowitz's mainly Adornian approach and Dussel's specific type of Marxism are not easily reconcilable, they both seem to be indispensable as each responds to a certain aspect of the question of justice. The concrete historical content of the tension between the former's social critique and the latter's ethics of liberation, we argued, takes the relation between ethics and politics a step ahead toward a middle ground between abstract interruption and prescriptive politics.

Building upon the analysis of the last chapter, in this chapter, I will reexamine the possibility of a rapprochement between Marxism, and, in particular, Adorno's negative dialectics, and Levinas' ethics. Following Horowitz, I argue that, operating on distinct levels of analysis, "like left and right hands at the piano,"⁴ negative dialectics and ethics as first philosophy could supplement each other, without thereby merging into a single unifying theory. However, while the relation of supplementation does not amount to the elimination of the distance between negative dialectics and ethics, it would not leave them intact either. Just like left and right hands at the piano, their dialogue would require each to attend to what the other calls for.

On the one hand, from a dialectical standpoint – whether Adornian or Marxian – Levinas' passage from ethics to politics would appear as an abstract generalization that needs to be corrected. On the other hand, ethics as first philosophy would reveal that

⁴ Asher Horowitz, "By a Hair's Breadth': Critique, Transcendence and the Ethical in Adorno and Levinas," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28, no. 2 (March 1, 2002): 221.

Adorno's notion of morality is still primarily ontological, the correction of which would require negative dialectics to register the primacy of responsibility over objectivity. The incorporation of the primacy of responsibility would affect negative dialectics in its operation. Specifically, it would problematize its view of praxis by highlighting the ethical impossibility of dismissing the existing forms of praxis, despite the recognition of their deficiencies and dangers. The consideration of this last point leads to the formulation of the relation between ethics and politics in terms of a tension between *critique* and *re-appropriation*. This formulation would differ from Horowitz' ethical social critique in its position on political praxis and from Dussel's ethics of liberation in its emphasis on the indispensability of the dialectical negativity of the Frankfurt School.

From Ethics to Politics: a Dialectical Critique

The other is a human being who lives in the world and belongs to a social and cultural whole. He presents himself from within this whole, that is, from within a context which is disclosed through "our cultural initiative, the corporeal, linguistic, or artistic gestures."⁵ But the manifestation of the other also involves a signifyingness that is independent of the signification of the totality of the context in which he presents himself. In the ethical relation, the mediated, mundane presence of the other in the world is accompanied – or more precisely *disturbed* – by the signifyingness of a face, which affects the I as an immediacy, independent of the significations he receives from the world. The manifestation of the other thus simultaneously involves a concrete, mediated presence as a person and an "abstract,"⁶ immediate epiphany as a face. Moreover, as we have seen in the discussion of the third party in Chapter II, the signification of the face is not limited to the personal other who presents itself in the immediacy of the encounter, but also at the same time signifies the others of the other.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 351.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

That is to say, “the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.”⁷ Therefore, the encounter with the other is not individualistic, but rather a personal collective encounter in which the whole humanity comes into view.

In this sense, the passage from ethics to politics concerns the relation between the other as a face that is absolute in its abstractness and the other in its concrete existence in the world, where he belongs to a social and cultural totality and is entangled with the contingencies of that totality. In order to examine the relation between ethics and politics, we should thus inquire into the sense of abstractness of the face and its relation to the concrete world in which the other(s) live.

“The face is,” Levinas writes, “abstract.”⁸ But the abstractness of the face is not the abstractness of knowledge, as it “is not obtained by a logical process starting from the substance of beings and going from the particular to the general.”⁹ The abstractness of the face is its absoluteness, which is produced, not as knowledge, but rather as an overwhelming of consciousness by what, being produced in the world, goes toward beings without thereby being dissolved in the world. The absoluteness of the face is a “wretchedness”¹⁰ that transcends being. In the encounter with the nudity of the face, which is a “destitution,” “consciousness loses its first place,” for “the putting into question [of the I by the face] is not reducible to becoming aware of this being put into question.”¹¹ Rather, the absoluteness of the face is produced as an infinite responsibility for its wretchedness that affects the I in absolute passivity, divested of the capacity to either comprehend or deny it.

Responsibility for the other is not, however, exhausted in the impossibility of ignoring the face, but rather involves concrete demands. Just as the other of the ethical relation is simultaneously a face, which is abstract, and a person, who lives in the

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 213.

⁸ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 354.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

concrete reality of the world, the infinite responsibility that it summons is both absolute and concrete. That is to say, responsibility for the other simultaneously involves an absolute injunction against – or an impossibility of – the violation of the face and a command to care and provide for the concrete needs of the other. In the encounter with the other, I find myself obligated not only to respect his absolute alterity, but also to provide him with food and shelter, to repair the world in such a way that it is a better place for the other and the others. Responsibility for the other, that is to say, entails an obligation to strive for a more just world.

Ethics thus demands an engagement with the concrete reality of the world for the sake of the other, an engagement which it cannot by itself formulate for it lacks the necessary social and historical categories. It is at this point that the possibility of a dialogue between negative dialectics and ethics reveals its significance. The consideration of this possibility involves, as a first step, the issue of compatibility, that is, whether or not negative dialectics could allow for the kind of radical exteriority and the sense of immediacy that Levinas' notion of the face entails.

It is quite well known that dialectical thought, whether Hegelian, Marxian, or Adornian, is suspicious of the notion of immediacy that twentieth-century phenomenology, such as the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger, is after. One of the most famous, and most unforgiving, dialectical critiques of such immediacy could be found in Adorno's own critique of Heidegger, presented mainly in *Jargon of Authenticity*¹² and Part One of *Negative Dialectics*.¹³ For Adorno, the thought of immediacy – that is, the view that underlies Heidegger's notion of being, according to which "what is transcendent to subjectivity is immediate for subjectivity, without being stained by subjectivity"¹⁴ – is nothing but an illusion. Immediacy is, dialectics teaches us, always already mediated: "we cannot by thinking, assume any position in which [the]

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 61-131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

separation of the subject and object will directly vanish, for the separation is inherent in each thought; it is inherent in thinking itself.”¹⁵ The thought that strives to find what is immediately accessible to the subject by going behind the duality of the subject and object discovers nothing but a fetishized notion of immediacy.

Is not Adorno’s forceful rejection of immediacy in Heidegger applicable as well to the immediacy of the face? Has not Adorno thereby already undermined any project that would seek to find a rapprochement between negative dialectics and Levinas’ ethics? Perhaps. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between Heidegger’s being of beings and Levinas’ notion of the face, the consideration of which might lead to a more forgiving relation between negative dialectics and Levinas’ ethics. Adorno’s critique of immediacy in Heidegger targets the relation between being and truth. The thought of being, Adorno writes, fails because it ignores the fact that “no immediacy ... is the whole of cognition. Each immediacy is a moment.”¹⁶ Levinas, who has already criticized being’s claim to truth, is indeed aware of the difficulties associated with the kind of immediacy that Heidegger’s being relies on. The thought of being is, Levinas would say, vulnerable to Adorno’s criticism precisely because in Heidegger the being of beings is still approached “in terms of light and obscurity, disclosure and veiling, truth and untruth.”¹⁷ In contrast, the face, which transcends not only subjectivity but also being, does not belong to truth, which is still a category of being. The absolute immediacy of the face is not produced as truth, but rather as an infinite responsibility that points to the otherwise than being. It is thus not susceptible to Adorno’s total rejection of immediacy as a form of absolute knowledge that lies beyond the reach of dialectical critique.

Moreover, in spite of his rigorous criticism of a thought that claims to reach the absolute, Adorno opens up the possibility for a thinking of the absolute as *beyond being*

¹⁵ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 346.

in his recognition that negative dialectics is not final. In the last fragment of *Negative Dialectics*, he writes, “it lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total.”¹⁸ Just as Levinas conditions the work of criticism on a “fixed point”¹⁹ without which the subject would not ever find the motivation to question the comfort of its dogmatism, Adorno recognizes that knowledge requires an absolute exterior to it, “a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence.”²⁰ Adorno’s view seems to even more closely converge with Levinas in his repeated emphasis on the moral character of this exteriority that conditions knowledge. Insofar as reason is, at least in the identitarian form it has taken in the present time, totalitarian, that is, insofar as it does not tolerate anything outside it, “self-criticism of reason is its truest morality.”²¹ Negative dialectics, as a thinking that breaks the totalitarian spell of reason by incessantly yielding to the primacy of the nonidentity of identity and nonidentity – even if, or precisely because, it embraces contradiction as the experience of “nonidentity under the aspect of identity”²² – is thus “the morality of thought.”²³ In a manner reminiscent of Levinas’ insistence on “the suffering called physical” as a privileged situation in which evil presents itself “at the limit of consciousness,”²⁴ in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno highlights the priority of suffering over truth, which lies at the basis of negative dialectics’ desire to preserve the nonidentity of the object and subject: “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.”²⁵

¹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 41.

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 247.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

²³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 74.

²⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 238.

²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17-8.

However, despite the affinities between Adorno's negative dialectics and Levinas' ethics, it would be an exaggeration to identify Adorno's "standpoint removed" with Levinas' "fixed point," for such an identification would ignore the significant differences between their views, including their different formulations of the relation between transcendence and immanence and, in particular, the fact that Adorno's thought of exteriority is primarily concerned with the primacy of the object, while for Levinas the fixed point can only be the absolute exteriority of a person. Nonetheless, it does seem fair to say that Levinas' characterization of the absoluteness of the face could be read as a positive answer to the Adornian desire for a "metaphysics as a knowledge of the absolute ... without the construction of an absolute knowledge."²⁶ In this sense, it could be said that the relation between Adorno's negative dialectics and Levinas' ethics is, in Horowitz's words, that of "identity and opposition"²⁷: "there is distance and there is proximity in their difference."²⁸

But even if there is room for the absolute exteriority of the other and the immediacy of its epiphany in the specific form that Marxian dialectic takes in Adorno's hands, dialectical thought, whether Marxian or Adornian, could not as easily be brought to terms with Levinas' passage from ethics to politics. In his move from responsibility to justice, not only does Levinas ultimately place the burden of responsibility on the individual – which is evidently inadequate for the fulfillment of the concrete demands of justice – but he also derives his notion of collectivity in an 'abstract' sense in such a way that is no longer immune to dialectical criticism.

The other is simultaneously a human being living in the concreteness of the world *and* a face. Through the notion of the third party Levinas is able to show that the

²⁶ Ibid., 405.

²⁷ Horowitz, "By a Hair's Breadth," 214.

²⁸ Ibid., 242. In this essay, Horowitz examines the relation between Adorno and Levinas on the question of the possibility of metaphysics. My brief engagement with this topic here was only meant to show that despite negative dialectics' rejection of the kind of pre-subjective absolute immediacy that phenomenology, and in particular Heidegger, is after, there is room in Adorno's thought for the Levinasian characterization of the immediacy of the face. Now, since Horowitz has already attended to this matter in details, I cut my analysis short and refer the interested reader to his insightful analysis.

epiphany of the face points, beyond the personal other who faces the I, to the others of the other, that is, to the humanity as a whole. The collectivization of the signification of the face in Levinas thus could mean nothing but that the ethical relation is not a private relation like love and that the demand of responsibility that originates in the face of the other is not limited to my neighbor alone, but rather extends to other human beings as well. That is to say, the notion of the third party collectivizes the other in its manifestation as a face, which is absolute and independent of the concrete context in which the other presents itself as a human being.

However, the move from responsibility to justice, that is, from ethics to politics, requires not only the sense of the collectivity of the face, but also a notion of collectivity that is applicable to the concrete existence of the other in the world. Levinas seems to ignore the distinction between these two senses of collectivity and, as a result, comes up with an abstract notion of justice. Insofar as the question of justice is considered to solely and exclusively convey the collective sense of the absolute signification of the face, its abstractness has the same status as that of the face. The problem begins when justice is taken not as a purely ethical notion, but rather as an intermediary concept that is supposed to bear a reference to politics. As a political concept, Levinas' notion of justice is abstract in the negative sense of the term, that is, abstract in the sense of lacking the concrete content it requires to have any signification at all with regard to the reality of politics.

That the notion of the third party is inadequate for the collectivization of the other in its concrete existence is revealed in the notion of the 'humanity as a whole,' upon which Levinas seems to found his idea of justice. Again, the problem does not appear in stating that "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity"²⁹ or when the question of justice posed with regard to humanity as a whole is taken to merely convey the infinite responsibility of the I toward all the others. The difficulty begins when

²⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

justice is taken as an intermediary between ethics and politics, that is, as a political concept that is supposed to convey the ethical necessity of attending to the concrete needs of the other(s). The other as a human being who lives in a specific concrete context is the source of ethical responsibility, but through its collectivization in the notion of humanity, his needs and demands are entrusted to a notion of justice that abstracts from that context. Instead of highlighting the political significance of responsibility, Levinas' justice overlooks the life of the other and concerns itself with a notion of collectivity that is detached from the reality of the world in which the suffering and the needs of the other(s) originate. The passage from ethics to politics, which was supposed to situate responsibility in relation to the political reality of the life of the other(s), in effect postpones the fulfillment of the needs of the other(s) to a no-place, which is not a negative utopia of peace, but rather an empty space of abstraction.

The abstractness of the collectivity of the notion of humanity as a whole could be demonstrated by a return to Marx's critique of liberal political economy's concepts of collectivity such as the population or the nation. Concerned with the analysis of political economy at the level of nation-states, classical political economists begin with a given, observable concept such as population, and then move analytically toward simpler and thinner abstractions such as division of labour, money, value, etc. According to Marx, this approach is methodologically false for it confuses what should be the result of the analysis with its point of departure. What seems to be given and observable is not concrete by the mere fact that it is given and observable. Rather, "the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception."³⁰ The correct method is to begin with the basic

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1993), 101.

determinations and categories (such as, in this case, commodity, use- and exchange-value, etc.) that an engagement with the phenomenon under study imposes on thought. It is only then that we can trace the journey back to general concepts such as population. The concept of population that is arrived at this time could properly be called concrete because it is now “a rich totality of many determinations and relations,”³¹ in which, for example, the fundamental conflict of interest between the workers and the owners of the means of production is not covered over. For Marx – and for Adorno who would not disagree with Marx on this point – Levinas’ notion of humanity would be abstract because, like population as given, it is “a chaotic conception of the whole.”³² To jump from the individual other to humanity as a whole is to ignore that a concrete notion of collectivity proper to politics could only be derived from the analysis of, and in relation to, the specific social and historical context from which the other presents itself and which is responsible for the suffering of the other.

With the notion of concrete so construed, one can argue that Levinas’ concepts of the state and the institutions – when they are taken as political concepts, that is, when they are supposed to entail a political significance in the passage from ethics to politics – are also abstract. For, instead of being the outcomes of an analysis of the context, they are taken as givens, that is, as points of departure. The state and the institutions, which Levinas frequently refers to as indispensable elements of justice, are socio-political concepts that could have meaning only in relation to a specific collectivity in a particular historical context. But in Levinas’ usage, it is not clear what sense of collectivity underlies these concepts. Whether it is Europe, or the modern nation-state, or the collectivity of a faith (in the case of Israel) that Levinas has in mind, the state and the institutions appear as pre-defined concepts and thus take on the status of ahistorical empty generalizations.

³¹ Ibid., 100.

³² Ibid.

Levinas' undialectical and ahistorical construction of political categories has prompted scholars, critical and sympathetic alike, to find in his ethics an affirmation of liberalism as the least unethical form of politics.³³ To be sure, this would be a one-sided reading of Levinas for, as Victoria Tahmasebi, among others, recognizes,³⁴ there is evidence in his writings to suggest that, despite his ahistorical construal of the state and the institutions, his notion of justice cannot be simply relegated to a liberal notion of rational peace. Nevertheless, the fact is that there is in Levinas also significant evidence in support of liberalism. The problem is that, in the absence of a concrete socio-political analysis, Levinas' references to Hobbs and Lock, or to Marx and Hegel for that matter, appear as rather arbitrary, opening up a space for different, even opposing, political readings of his ethics. Despite the bold claim of her essay – i.e., the claim that Levinas' ethics transcends liberalism as a political doctrine³⁵ – perhaps Tahamsebi comes closer to truth when she writes “even if Levinas seemingly fixes his own saying in the said which views violence as an inevitable consequence of ontology [which is an ahistorical view taken by some readers of Levinas as an evidence for his support of liberal institutions], his ethical relation implies that politics need not be defined as the calculus of war.”³⁶ While it is true that Levinas' ethics calls for a politics beyond liberalism, it is also true that it fails to adequately characterize that politics. This failure is not simply a result of a lack of commitment or a corrupt identity politics. It stems from a systematic deficiency of his ethics that cannot be corrected from within ethics itself, but rather requires a supplementation of ethics by proper historical, social, and political categories.

The political inadequacy of Levinas' ethics can be better understood if we take into account that besides immediately political concepts such as justice, the state, and the institutions, his view of ontological rationality also suffers from a rather similar sense of

³³ See, Chapter III, note 27.

³⁴ Victoria Tahmasebi, “Does Levinas Justify or Transcend Liberalism? Levinas on Human Liberation,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 5 (2010): 523–44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 538.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 532.

abstractness. In this case, however, the process of abstraction takes place at a more fundamental level – that is, the level of the tension between metaphysics and ontology – which underlies his abstract construal of political categories. Here again the problem does not lie in the identification of “apology” as the “primordial phenomenon of reason,”³⁷ but rather in Levinas’ ahistorical formulation of ontological rationality as the rationality of politics – that is, not in ethics per se, but in the passage from ethics to politics.

For Levinas, reason as the “universalization of presence” – i.e., reason as understood in the tradition of ontology – is a “derived order” which presupposes the one-for-the-other of substitution.³⁸ The synchrony of the ontological said relies on the diachrony of ethical saying. But Levinas stops his analysis too soon. In his affirmation of the indispensability of ontological rationality as the only logic that politics could comprehend, Levinas acknowledges the need to differentiate between the various historical forms that reason has taken and could take. But his wholesale characterization of ontological rationality as the intelligibility of presence, in which the diachronic signifyingness of proximity is always necessarily betrayed, is too general a definition of reason that is unable to make such distinctions. Insofar as Levinas conditions the refutation of idealism strictly on the recognition that “the essence of discourse is ethical,”³⁹ he would have to reject Marx on the same ground as Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger as just different forms of idealism. Paradoxically, failing to make such distinctions, Levinas’ ethics, despite its capacity to disrupt ontology, in effect leaves ontology to itself, thereby inadvertently carrying forward the project of idealism. Let me elaborate.

Saying is betrayed in the said; always; necessarily; but it does not disappear. The indelible residue of saying in the said persistently disrupts the smooth functioning of the

³⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 252.

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” in *entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 165.

³⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 216.

said, as manifested in the perpetual return of skepticism to philosophy. To this extent, ethics does not leave ontology to itself. Nevertheless, insofar as ethics disturbs ontology, but only disturbs it, that is, insofar as ethics disturbs all forms of ontological rationality in the same way, ontology is ultimately left to itself to deal with the challenges it faces according to its own measures. In political terms, the lack of differentiation between different forms of ontological rationality leads to what Adorno, in reference to Sartre's Existentialism, calls "decisionism": "each bloc has its partisans."⁴⁰ In this sense, it could be said that Levinas' ethics restores idealism, not in its theoretical analyses, but in the arbitrariness of its "political function."⁴¹

Although Levinas does not provide a comparative analysis of the various forms of ontological rationality and their distinct relations to ethics, his reference to skepticism gives us a clue regarding the forms of reason that would not beforehand close off the possibility of the radical exteriority of the other. The perpetual return of negation to philosophy, brought about as skepticism, is for Levinas a reminder that the ontological said is never the statement of being alone, but rather always carries with itself more than itself. To be sure, the skeptical negation – insofar as it is merely negation – is not adequate for the preservation of the distance between the other and being, that is, between saying and the said, for the exteriority of the other is more radical than the exteriority of negation. Nevertheless, the periodic return of skepticism reveals the impossibility of pure synchrony in the said and, thereby, alludes to the diachronic signifyingness of saying as the ineradicable source of the signification of the said. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter I, through the analysis of the relation between skepticism and philosophy we were able to identify successive negation as the principle structure of the way the unsaying of the said could be approached through the language of ontology.

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In this sense, what the analysis of skepticism does for Levinas is to situate ethics in relation to the language of ontology. But the negation that skepticism poses to philosophy is yet an abstract negation for it is independent of the specific historical form of the language of ontology. That is to say, Levinas' ahistorical construal of skepticism points to his ahistorical view of ontological rationality. Therefore, it can be inferred that the identification of a historically situated form of skepticism could help us move toward an ethical language that is not indifferent to the historical character of ontological rationality. Negative dialectics, it could be argued, is precisely such a historically situated skepticism, for, in its incessant rejection of affirmation,⁴² it preserves the moment of *skepsis* through *determinate* negation rather than abstract negation. Once again we have to highlight that, in spite of its declared desire for metaphysics, negative dialectics' sense of exteriority is limited to the exteriority of nonidentity that is produced by negation and has objectivity (rather than transcendence of the other) as its goal. It would therefore never become one with ethics that is concerned with the exteriority of the other, which is more radical than the exteriority of nonidentity. Negative dialectics, that is, would stand at a distance from ethics (just as did skepticism). Nevertheless, the reformulation of the relation between ethics and ontology in terms of negative dialectics rather than the abstract negativity of skepticism, could provide Levinas' ethics with a historically situated critical language that it desperately needs.

Let there be no misunderstandings: strictly speaking, negative dialectics cannot and must not replace skepticism, for the ahistorical negativity of skepticism points to a general limitation of the language of the said in relation to its ethical origin, which is a real limitation and cannot be resolved. Levinas' condemnation of the whole philosophical tradition as idealism based on the latter's ignorance of the otherwise than being is not, of course, without meaning. The problem is that by such characterization, he stands at too far a distance from that same tradition, which prevents him from

⁴² "What is negated is," Adorno writes, "negative until it has passed" (ibid., 160).

effectively distinguishing between its various manifestations. Rather than a substitute for skepticism in Levinas' analyses, negative dialectics must be considered as a welcomed addition – a supplementation, that is – that could enable ethics to make such necessary distinctions. Informed by negative dialectics, ethics would be able to distinguish between Hegel's identitarian dialectic, Marx's materialistic dialectic and its return to idealism in its revitalization of the idealist subject as the agent of revolution, and Heidegger's totalizing ontology, while simultaneously recognizing their obliviousness to the transcendence of the other. Moreover, the welcoming of negative dialectics as a critical language proper to ethics would provide ethics with concrete social and political categories that the passage from ethics to politics requires. Equipped with dialectics, the disruptive capacity of ethics would no longer be compromised by an abstract understanding of notions such as the state and the institutions. It would no longer be trapped in an ahistorical construal of politics.

To conclude by way of repetition, if, beyond the need to respect the absolute alterity of the other, justice also entails the need to feed the hungry and house the homeless, then ethics needs to be supplied with concrete political categories that could situate the other in relation to the specific social and historical context that is responsible for taking the bread out of his mouth and destroying his home. The need for such concretization originates in the absolute demand of justice, but ethics cannot by itself fulfill that need. It would require dialectics in order to formulate the appropriate political categories it needs to be able to engage with the historical reality of politics – categories, that is, that are not abstract generalizations, but rather *concrete totalities* which are ethically non-indifferent. Derrida was indeed right to argue that politics cannot be deduced from ethics, that deduction eliminates the radical distance between the absolute and the contingent, and that political decision requires in each case an engagement with the specific problem that is at stake. Nevertheless, he was mistaken to conclude from this that ethics cannot do anything beyond disturbing politics. With the identification of

negative dialectics as the critical form of ontological rationality proper to ethics, we have come a crucial step forward from the mere interruption of politics by ethics.

Negative Dialectics and Praxis: an Ethical Critique

The incessant critique of the unjust order of politics does not, however, exhaust the requirements of responsibility. The ethical demand to attend to the material needs of the other and the others also requires to move beyond critique and strive to repair the reality of politics in such a way that it could better serve the other. It is an ethical obligation imposed upon the responsible subject to interpret the world, not for the sake of interpretation, but in order to change it for the sake of the other. Marx's Thesis Eleven is the translation of ethical responsibility into the language of political theory. That is to say, the pragmatism of Marx that approaches truth as a "practical question"⁴³ and identifies the demand to change the world as ultimately the point of theorization is already an ethical pragmatism. This recognition does not intend to ignore the naïveté inherent in a thought that directly clings to practice. The identification of practice as the measure of truth does not need to lead into a fetishized notion of practice that divests theory of its indispensable critical role. For Marx, practice is inseparable from its "comprehension"⁴⁴ and could mean nothing but "'practical-critical' activity,"⁴⁵ which forever and again invites philosophy to reflect on the meaning and historical forms it could take in relation to the social context.

However, despite all these qualifications, Adorno, whose negative dialectics we have celebrated so far as the form of social critique proper to ethics, was harshly critical of the notion of the primacy of practice that Thesis Eleven entails. Accordingly, he adopted a position with regard to practical politics, which is, I argue, ultimately *too* critical and therefore *ethically* unacceptable. But, in order to reach this conclusion, we

⁴³ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 171.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

need to carefully examine his arguments against the primacy of practice. Marx's pragmatism is, Adorno writes, proven to be "an inadequate interpretation" which has mostly become "the pretext used by executive authorities to choke, as vain, whatever critical thoughts the practical change would require."⁴⁶ Considering the historical situation in which negative dialectics developed as a critical theory of society – the historical situation that was haunted by the distressing memory of fascism and the real possibility of its return, and witnessed the emergence of various forms of totalitarian Marxism and the disastrous politics that resulted from them – Adorno's observation was no doubt accurate. But the recognition of the unfortunate historical fate of Thesis Eleven was not Adorno's only point of reference here. Never is he so naïve to appeal to fate alone as evidence for or against the truth of an idea. He has more compelling reasons to be suspicious of the notion of the primacy of practice.

According to Adorno, the historical understanding of the relation between theory and praxis is directly dependent on the way the relation between subject and object is conceived. Just as the absolute duality of subject and object is false, theory that is totally detached from praxis is abstract and "powerless," with the disastrous consequence that it would render praxis "arbitrary."⁴⁷ The direct opposite of the duality of subject and object, i.e., immediate identity, is also false, for "the separation of subject and object is both real and illusory."⁴⁸ It is real because it expresses a real separation in the cognitive realm and has emerged as a historical necessity that cannot be revoked immediately by an act of will, but it is illusory when hypostasized, as an invariant, as if to deny the history sedimented in it.⁴⁹ Absolute duality and immediate unity are, in fact, the two sides of the same coin: they are both the results of understanding the terms in abstraction and presuppose the primacy of the idealist subject. With regard to the

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3.

⁴⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 261.

⁴⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 498.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 502.

relation between theory and praxis, immediate unity entails the tendency to subordinate theory to praxis. But, insofar as the unity of theory and praxis results from an abstract understanding of both, the predominance of praxis over theory would not bring theory closer to objectivity; quite the contrary, it would undermine theory by depriving it of the element of autonomy that is the essence of thinking. True, theory is a part of the societal process; but at the same time it “maintains an independence within this process.”⁵⁰ As soon as theory is identified with praxis and tailored to fit the latter’s demands, it ceases to be “a moment” of the totality with the capacity to stand at a critical distance from it, but rather becomes a mere “means of the totality,” incapable of resisting “to any degree the captivating spell of that totality.”⁵¹

Like the duality of subject and object, the separation of theory and praxis must be dialectically maintained. Marx was not of course ignorant of the dialectical relation between theory and praxis. But, according to Adorno, Thesis Eleven signifies a moment in Marx’s writings in which he betrays his own dialectical materialism and resorts to an idealistic dialectic of identity. Thesis Eleven, Adorno writes, is nothing but a “sharpened” reformulation of the idea of the primacy of practical reason, which Marx inherited from Kant and the German idealists.⁵² What underlies the demand to change the world instead of merely interpreting it is the idealist illusion according to which the subject has the power to reshape the object in its own image. It thus follows “the real model of the principle of identity” and is “as arch-bourgeois as the program of an absolute control of nature.”⁵³ For Adorno, “the forced primacy of praxis” that Thesis Eleven imposes on theory is but a mockery of Marx’s own idea of the “ruthless criticism of everything

⁵⁰ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 277.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 244.

⁵³ Ibid.

existing,⁵⁴ which was (partially) responsible for “irrationally” stopping the critique he himself had practiced in the later development of Marxism in the twentieth century.⁵⁵

To be sure, Marx did not in any way intend to restore the idealist notion of practice. For Marx, Adorno writes, “the *telos* of due practice ... was the abolition of the primacy of practice in the form that had prevailed in bourgeois society.”⁵⁶ His recourse to praxis as the criterion of truth was motivated by his frustration with the historical “indifference”⁵⁷ of contemplation to the need to change the world, which had crippled philosophy in the face of the overwhelming domination of social life by practical rationality and by practical people. Nevertheless, the requirement that theory should measure itself against praxis quickly turns into the subordination of theory to praxis. It thus dissolves the critical and utopian dimension of theory that can only be maintained if theory preserves its distance from praxis. Theory deprived of its autonomy would succumb to the same practical rationality it was supposed to oppose. In contrast to the common view that celebrates Thesis Eleven as the high point of dialectical materialism, for Adorno it is a moment of failure in Marx, when he betrays the critical essence of his own dialectics.

It is a moment in – rather than an integrated part of – Marx’s thought for, according to Adorno, Marx never really followed its insight in his own works.⁵⁸ Let there be no misunderstandings: insofar as Thesis Eleven is interpreted as simply highlighting the truth content of the idea of the (dialectical) unity of theory and praxis, Adorno would not of course have any problem with it. The problem begins when it is read as a declaration of the primacy of praxis over theory. Although this latter reading is, according to Adorno, encouraged by the authoritative tone of Thesis Eleven, it could not have been what Marx intended (or if it was, it was his mistake), for he did not ever let

⁵⁴ Marx, quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, “Resignation,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 290.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 244.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 278.

his theory be compromised by the immediate demands of praxis. The independence of Marx's own works from immediate praxis, that is, its incommensurability with Thesis Eleven, can be appreciated if we recognize that, even though his thought was dominated by "the presentiment that it could be too late, that it was now or never," which demanded immediate praxis, "[his] theory as it is actually explicated, the Critique of Political Economy, lacks all concrete transitions to that praxis that, according to the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, should constitute its *raison d'être* The theory of surplus value does not tell how one should start a revolution."⁵⁹

True, Marx did not ever provide a recipe for praxis. But that would be required by Thesis Eleven only if we push the idea of the primacy of praxis that it admittedly entails to an extreme. No theory can, even if it wants to, ever prescribe a program of action. We do not need complex philosophical theories to understand that a thought that claims to have found a practical solution to end human misery lies. Adorno's exaggeration here is not, however, without justification. Anyone who has read Adorno would admit that he is not someone who could easily be charged with making a straw-man argument. His targeted audience in these texts – i.e., "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" and "Resignation" – is not his usual philosophical readership alone, but also the proponents of immediate action ("actionists,"⁶⁰ as he calls them), specifically the contemporary German student activists and some of their academic supporters. By clarifying that Marx did not provide any program of action, Adorno's intention was to reveal the superficiality of actionism, whose partisans considered themselves Marxists, but criticized critical theory for its lack of engagement with praxis. According to Adorno, actionists could remain consistent with their reading of Thesis Eleven – which

⁵⁹ Ibid., 277.

⁶⁰ Adorno, "Resignation," 290; see also Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 262 and 273-4.

apparently reduced the worth of theory to its immediate applicability – only if, alongside critical theory, they also reject Marx for not being practical enough.⁶¹

Neither Marx, nor critical theory, directly linked their theories to praxis. To this extent Adorno was certainly right to argue that they both kept theory apart from praxis. However, in its reference to a historically specific collectivity, namely the proletariat, Marx's critique responds to Thesis Eleven in a way that Adorno's negative dialectics does not allow. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Adorno is critical of Marx on this point for, in Marx's identification of the proletariat as the agent of revolution, he finds an unacceptable notion of the primacy of economics and an affirmation of a teleological view of history. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that Marx's reference to a concrete collective agency was at least partly justified by the historical fact that "at that time the proletariat was still visible."⁶²

Negative dialectics, however, has developed in and against a historical situation in which, according to Adorno, the proletariat is integrated into the fabric of the capitalist society in such a way that it would be a mistake to think that it does not have anything to lose but its chains. "Statistics," Adorno writes, "can easily verify that, since the time of the *Communist Manifesto*, the workers' standard of living has significantly improved to the extent that "there can be no question of their being driven by hunger to join forces and make a revolution."⁶³ Adorno does not deny the objective existence of the proletariat as a class, for insofar as it is defined based on its relation to the means of production, it remains to be a relevant concept. Nevertheless, the integration of the proletariat into bourgeois society has compromised its class consciousness, on which the Marxian hope for the possibility of revolution depends. Today, the mechanisms of control are expanded and extended to people's consciousness in ways unforeseeable by Marx in the middle of the nineteenth century. Not only do the masses now share the

⁶¹ Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 277.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 103.

views and needs of the establishment, but they are also incapable of developing a consciousness of their objective status, that is, of grasping that “they are the objects and not the subjects of the social process.”⁶⁴ Critical consciousness is thus removed, along with the sense of solidarity, so that we can no longer speak of a proletarian class consciousness.⁶⁵

The elimination of class consciousness is not, however, the only consequence of late capitalism’s total control of the masses. In the totally administered society, with its culture industry, the subject is liquidated to the extent that we can no longer presuppose the existence of autonomous, free individuals, at least not in a collective sense.⁶⁶ The proletariat has lost its capacity for instigating a revolution (even if it had it at some point) and no social agent has taken its place or seems to be emerging. In this situation, revolutionary praxis is blocked, or, at least, postponed for the foreseeable future. But it would be wrong to think that the impossibility of revolutionary praxis is merely practical. It is not simply that we do not know how to move toward a better world. The fact is that we do not, and could not, even know, in any concrete way, what a better world should look like: “in the present situation the higher form, toward which society should move according to progressive thought, can no longer be read out of reality as a concrete tendency.”⁶⁷

In this situation, the demand that critical theory must include a positive image of something better and articulate a transparent relation to a praxis that could lead to it does not bring it closer to objective truth, but rather deprives it of its limited degree of autonomy which constitutes its value. According to Adorno, “by making the positive a

⁶⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 114–5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94, 112-3, 124-5, and 200-1.

⁶⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Critique,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 287.

condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses its vehemence.”⁶⁸ The obsession to always qualify the word “critique” with the added word “constructive” is more often than not the mark of a regressive tendency, which, frustrated with the hopelessness of the situation, threatens to undermine the only progressive element of that situation, i.e., the negativity of critical thought.⁶⁹

For Adorno, the correct relation between theory and praxis is one of nonidentity. Neither proceeds independently from the other. But no continuous path exists between the two either. “Praxis,” Adorno writes, “appears in theory merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what is being criticized.”⁷⁰ True, as a form of intellectual labour, theory is, like art, in itself praxis. But beyond that, no theory can lead to praxis without surrendering to praxis, that is, without suspending its critical power. The nonidentity of theory and praxis is the condition of the former’s autonomy from which stems its capacity to break through the social ideologies that justify the status quo. Theoretical praxis is not, to be sure, one with revolutionary political praxis. Critique of the social reality and its ideologies would not change the social reality. Nevertheless, without breaking the spell of reification that distorts the knowledge of the social reality and conceals its antinomies – which, according to Adorno, is the task of critical theory – no revolution would be even imaginable. Theoretical praxis that refuses to compromise its critical attitude and preserves its distance from immediate political action is in this sense a precondition of revolutionary praxis.

In the absence of a concrete social agency and in the face of the objective impossibility of praxis, preserving the nonidentity of theory and praxis requires respecting the separation between the intellectual and the manual labour. “In reified society,” Adorno writes, “all progress occurs via continued specialization.”⁷¹ In a

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.; see also Adorno, “Resignation,” 291-2.

⁷⁰ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 278.

⁷¹ Adorno, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 31.

thoroughly mediated society, theory cannot recover immediacy by leaping into praxis. Instead, such a leap results in “pseudo-activity,” which “deceives about the debilitation of a praxis presupposing a free and autonomous agent that no longer exists” and, in its self-conscious hopelessness, contributes to the reproduction of the administered world of which it is but a product.⁷² Theory’s task in this situation is to resist the pragmatic fetters that the actionist ideology wants to impose upon it: “without a practical visa, thought should go as much against the façade as possible, should move as far as it is capable of moving.”⁷³

For Adorno, the opposition of theory to (immediate) praxis does not in any way mean that it has forgotten the need to change the world. Quite the contrary, it is the mark of its non-resignation against the objective societal condition which must be changed but does not allow for its transformation through any immediately foreseeable form of praxis. “Paradoxically,” Adorno writes, “it is the desperate fact that the practice that would matter is barred which grants to thought a breathing spell it would be *practically* criminal not to utilize.”⁷⁴ In fact, Adorno goes to the extent to say that in this situation the theory that does not compromise its critical force by trying to make itself immediately practical “should have the most hope for realization.”⁷⁵ Referring to his own works, Adorno concludes that wherever he has been able to intervene and induce “visible practical influence,” it has been because he has written “without practical intentions,” which, “in a world where even thoughts have become commodities and provoke sales resistance,” has made it possible for his audience to absorb his thought without feeling that they are “being sold or talked into something.”⁷⁶

⁷² Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 270.

⁷³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 245.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* (emphasis is mine).

⁷⁵ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 277.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Unlike what is suggested by some scholars, such as Susan Buck-Morss, Adorno never believed that “the criterion of truth was rational rather than pragmatic,”⁷⁷ as though the rational is separate from the pragmatic. Adorno’s problem with the idea that the validity of theory ultimately depends on its relation to praxis is that, more often than not, it leads to the primacy of an undialectical notion of praxis over theory. For Adorno, the notion of praxis can remain true to its pragmatic aspirations only if it respects the primacy of the object in terms defined by negative dialectics. His criticism of Thesis Eleven should not be read as a dismissal of the need to change the world or of revolutionary praxis. Rather, it stems from his recognition that, in a reified society where practice already has an overwhelming objective priority, the forced primacy of praxis amounts to nothing less than silencing the critical thought without which no emancipatory praxis would be possible. In this sense, it could be said that it is precisely the non-indifference of Adorno’s thought to the need to change the world that compels him to identify critical negativity, whether in theory or in art, as the only genuine emancipatory praxis available to the intellectual laborer.

Negative dialectics’ refusal to engage with practical politics thus finds its justification in its recognition that in late capitalism, where immediate emancipatory praxis is objectively impossible, the translation of theory into praxis is doomed to failure. Spirit, which seemed threatened by the reminder that the point is to change the world, regains its happiness by welcoming its objective impotency. Let there be no misunderstandings: for Adorno there is no “blessing,” no happiness, whether objective or subjective, in either the impossibility of praxis or the impotency of theory.⁷⁸ It is in spite of this recognition that a happy spirit is justified: “the objection, extrapolated from the ‘Feuerbach Theses,’ that a happy spirit is impermissible amidst the growing misery of the exploding populations of poor countries, after the catastrophes that have occurred

⁷⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 25.

⁷⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 244-5.

and in view of those that impending” – this objection is invalid because “when a man can do nothing that will not threaten to turn out for the worst even if it meant for the best, he will be bound to start thinking – and that justifies him as well as the happy spirit.”⁷⁹

Insofar as the obsession with emancipation, from which stems the need to change the world, is ethically motivated, it could be said that Adorno’s insistence on critical thinking as an indispensable element of true emancipatory praxis is in itself ethical. This interpretation is indeed verified by Adorno’s explicit characterization of negative dialectics as “the morality of thought.”⁸⁰ Moreover, there are in Adorno’s writings also implicit references to the moral character of his justification of the happiness of the thinking spirit. True, both theory and (immediate) praxis are “repressive” and doomed to failure in the current situation; nevertheless, those who content themselves with critical thinking are relatively more justified than those who succumb to the comfort of praxis, because “immediate action ... is incomparably closer to oppression than the thought that catches its breath.”⁸¹ Through a rather coarse generalization – of which Adorno is indeed aware⁸² – Adorno explains that the oppressive tendency of praxis originates in its historical relation with labor. The notion of praxis emerged at a point in history when human labor, which was originally concerned with the *reproduction* of life, was extended to changing the hostile existing reality and *producing* new conditions.⁸³ But in its decent from labor, praxis inherited the element of necessity and self-denial that is the characteristic of the struggle for self-preservation. “To this day,” Adorno writes, “[praxis] carries the baggage of an element of unfreedom” which makes it more repressive than the thought that distances itself from immediate necessity.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ibid., 245.

⁸⁰ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 74

⁸¹ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 273-4.

⁸² Ibid., 261.

⁸³ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Moreover, referring to the historically specific situation of late capitalism, Adorno argues that it is the characteristic of the individuals who cannot cope with their subjective disintegration, caused by the objective social conditions, to resort to immediate praxis and take refuge in the illusory security of the collective. Unable to “accept reflectively within consciousness objective contradictions that the subject cannot resolve harmoniously,”⁸⁵ the actionists take the easy route: “weak and fearful people feel strong when they hold hands while running.”⁸⁶ In reality, however, no short cut is possible. The actionist ideology is nothing but self-delusion, an escape from “private paranoia” to “collective paranoia.”⁸⁷ The aversion to a critical thought that does not let itself be bargained away is “founded on anxiety,” which is rooted in “what one deeply knows, but cannot openly admit: that the thought is right.”⁸⁸

In this situation, a critical thought that is truly committed to the demand to change the world must refuse to succumb to immediate action, for otherwise it would betray its cause. It is obliged to persistently measure itself against the hostile objective reality without adapting itself to it. This means that it must respect the primacy of the object in its relation to praxis, which requires nothing less than the dialectical preservation of irreconcilable objective contradictions within consciousness. The moral superiority of critical thought over practical one thus consists in its unwavering faithfulness to the primacy of the object, which obliges it to unceasingly resist the temptations of security and comfort that repressive collective action could bring about.

In sum, in late capitalism, the happiness of a thinking spirit who does not partake in action is, according to Adorno, justified for at least four, morally-charged, reasons: first, from the standpoint of emancipation, the currently feasible forms of praxis are futile; second, they indirectly support the status quo by their aversion to critical thinking; third, immediate action is in itself repressive and thus prone to directly

⁸⁵ Ibid., 266.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 276.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 266.

⁸⁸ Adorno, “Resignation,” 290-1.

producing new forms of oppression; and fourth, it provides an illusion of security which must be resisted. The immediate implication of this argument is that as long as the possibility of effective, non-repressive forms of emancipatory action is not in sight, thought is obliged to operate within the boundaries of critical negativity.

For Adorno, we can thus conclude, negative dialectics' refusal to engage with praxis was both theoretically grounded and morally justified. However, I think the view of morality that permeates his arguments is inadequate, i.e., pre-Levinasian, the correction of which would result in a modified formulation of the relation between negative dialectics and praxis. From the standpoint of Levinasian ethics, negative dialectics must be confronted at least at two interconnected levels: first, its view of subjectivity, which, I argue, is only *secondarily* ethical; and, second, the fact that it has objectivity rather than the transcendence of the other as its goal.

Adorno, as we have seen, alludes to something like an absolute alterity, a fixed point outside the realm of being, upon which knowledge depends.⁸⁹ Moreover, he identifies suffering as "a condition of all truth"⁹⁰ and highlights the moral essence of negative dialectics.⁹¹ Nevertheless, in the absence of an analysis that could adequately demonstrate the ethical character of that fixed point, Adorno's allusions to the beyond do not go beyond mere prophetic insights, so that, in effect, negative dialectics continues to base its operation on an ontological notion of subjectivity.

In the context of our discussion, this could be seen in Adorno's characterization of both labor and praxis as purely ontological activities. Whether in the form of the simple reproduction of life or the more complex production of life's condition, human activity seems to be rooted in the struggle for self-preservation and caught up in the clash between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.⁹² It is, that is to say, primarily self-serving. Thought is not independent of self-preservation either.

⁸⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

⁹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17-8.

⁹¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 74.

⁹² Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 262.

Nevertheless, in its capacity to distance itself from the immediacy of need, thought enjoys a sense freedom that enables it to entertain the idea of emancipation beyond the necessities of self-preservation. In this way, Adorno seems to locate the ethical in thought – or, more precisely, in the space of freedom that is opened up by its distance from the immediacy of need – as though it is added on to the thinking subject’s ontological existence. However, subject as substitution is ethical, not merely at the level of thought, but also, and more fundamentally, at the level of sensibility. The priority of ethics over ontology means that the subject becomes the subject qua responsibility. Responsibility for the other awakens the subject; it is not added on to it. The ethical permeates the subject’s activities in all its forms, even in its relation to the material world. It is through the one-for-the-other of substitution – rather than the struggle for self-preservation – that “matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality.”⁹³

This is not to deny the crucial difference between theory and praxis, that is, the fact that, in relation to ontological necessity, thought preserves a degree of freedom which enables it to move beyond the horizons of immediate action. Nevertheless, we must also recognize that the freedom of thought, i.e., its capacity to distance itself from immediacy, owes to the other-in-the-same, that is, to the disruption of the same by the other. In other words, without denying the difference between theory and praxis in their relations to the requirements of self-preservation, the priority of ethics over ontology means that the same ethical necessity that propels praxis also animates thought. No account of praxis or labour would be complete unless it acknowledges its ethical substance at the same time that it reveals its ontological instrumentality. Insofar as Adorno’s defense of theory against immediate praxis relies on a reductive, i.e., ontological, view of praxis, it is limited in its reach and range of applicability.

⁹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 77.

This limitation comes to the fore when Adorno accuses the actionists of resignation. Actionism, he contends, is motivated by the promise of immediate psychological satisfaction; but since in late capitalism immediate action is illusory, futile, and repressive, actionism is both wrong and irresponsible. The actionists, who are deeply aware of their own resignation, anxiously react by accusing critical theory of the same thing. Adorno might well be right in protecting critical theory against the naïveté of actionism. However, this should not prevent us from objecting to his reduction of the appeal of collective action to selfish, psychological satisfaction. The anxiousness that holds critical theory in contempt for its refusal to engage with collective action can never be reduced to the psychological anxiety of “weak and fearful people.”⁹⁴ For that anxiousness – it must never be forgotten – is *also*, and more fundamentally, rooted in responsibility, in the disruption of the I by the face of the other, which prevents the I from drowning in despair even when the prospect of success is not foreseeable. Responsibility for the other does not allow the I to ever *come to peace* with the idea of the postponement of action to an unforeseeable future – even if one is *convinced* that emancipatory action that would matter is objectively impossible at the time. For, the other cannot wait.

Moreover, as Adorno himself has taught us, the nonidentity of theory and praxis – that praxis always remains as a blind spot, at a distance from theory – prevents that conviction from ever taking on the status of certainty. The view that, in late capitalism, emancipatory praxis is doomed to failure could have all sorts of theoretical justifications behind it; but the space of ambiguity that separates theory from praxis forces thought to admit that it could be wrong. The idea of the impossibility of praxis, that is to say, is never firm enough to become a basis for a one-sided rejection of all forms of existing praxis. True, thought is responsible to, as forcefully as it can, criticize praxis and demonstrate its weaknesses; but it is also responsible to acknowledge its virtues. This

⁹⁴ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 276.

does not mean that critique is obliged to always provide something positive or be constructive. What it demands is that critique must never thoroughly reject the existing forms of praxis as if to suggest that the last word could belong to theory, as if, that is, to deny the nonidentity of theory and praxis.

In other words, it is Adorno's own dialectics of nonidentity that invites us to respect the inherent uncertainty of the idea of the impossibility of praxis, thereby negating the wholesale negation of praxis. Through this negation of negation, a space of ambiguity is opened up in which the ethical dimension of the relation between theory and praxis comes to the fore. While it is irresponsible to blindly follow praxis, it is also irresponsible not to acknowledge the ethical demand that underlies actionism. Those who appeal to praxis with the intention to disrupt the unjust order of the status quo are not ethically the same with the status quo, even if they fail, even if in their praxis the metaphysical desire for the other is conflated with self-serving psychological desires. Those who struggle against oppression are not the same with the oppressors, even if the *probable* failure of their praxis *may* entail the danger of indirectly helping the oppressors. It would be wrong to demand from critical theory to betray its view of the objective reality – however pessimistic it may be – and compromise its autonomy in order to provide alternative courses of action; but, in the absence of such alternatives, it would also be irresponsible to indiscriminately reject all forms of praxis, emancipatory and oppressive alike.

That Adorno does not account for the ethical dimension of actionism is not a matter of ignorance. Rather, it stems from the fact his critique of actionism is exclusively guided by negative dialectics, which is still ontological. For, negation is inadequate for the radical alterity of the otherwise than being. For Adorno, true praxis is one that follows "the neediness of the object."⁹⁵ The object is not, however, an immediate, sense-thing that could reveal itself positively. Rather, the object is "mediated via the total

⁹⁵ Ibid., 265.

societal system”⁹⁶ and could be approached only through dialectical negation. Consequently, immediate action, insofar as it is necessarily affirmative and positive, is unable to maintain its connection to the object. Negative dialectics’ unwavering faithfulness to the primacy of the object thus forces it to reject immediate action as “false praxis,” and therefore “no praxis” at all.⁹⁷ The only truly objective form of praxis would be critical-intellectual praxis in which the primacy of the object could be dialectically preserved. This is why, in his assessment of the present potentialities for praxis, Adorno tends to take the side of the intellectual as the revolutionary *avant-garde*, who, whether in theory or in art, refuses to conform to the repressive demands of collective action and thereby preserves the critical negativity of thought.⁹⁸

Negative dialectics thus appears to have paradoxical implications with regard to the relation between theory and praxis. On the one hand, the need for the critical preservation of the primacy of the object leads to the rejection of immediate action on account of its positivity; on the other hand, the nonidentity of theory and praxis warns against such exaltation of thought over praxis and precludes the possibility of a wholesale rejection of the existing forms of praxis. This is not a sort of dialectical contradiction that could be maintained within negative dialectics, for it points beyond dialectics to its goals and desires.

Insofar as the primacy of the object, that is, objectivity or truth, is the criterion for praxis, negative dialectics would be right to disapprove of the positivity of action as what structurally blocks its access to the object. But if we approach the notion of praxis from the standpoint of ethics as first philosophy, then the lack of objectivity is not *by itself* adequate to determine the truth or falsity of praxis. True praxis would be one that

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ See, for example, this assertive statement: “one who without concern, that is, here and now, solitarily works on his material serves a true collective better than one who submits to the demands of what presently exists and thereby, despite collective appearances, forgets the social demands which come out of his own ... sphere, namely his work and its problems” (Adorno, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 41).

follows the demands of responsibility and the criterion for comparing different forms of praxis would be their capacity to serve the other.

Of course, this would not mean that praxis could simply do away with the criterion of objectivity. Objectivity and responsibility are not contradictory; quite the contrary, praxis that follows the neediness of the object has indeed more chance of effectively responding to the demands of responsibility. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of service to the other – rather than objectivity – as ultimately the *telos* of both theory and praxis is not without consequences, for now they acquire their value from ethics. If it is true that, in the totally administered society, philosophy can gain objectivity and freedom only through articulating its captivity⁹⁹ and negatively preserving the nonidentity of the object, it is also true that thought does not thereby exhaust its responsibility. If the value of objectivity is secondarily derived from ethics, then it would not be permissible to summarily reject immediate praxis because of its positivity, that is, because of its failure to preserve the primacy of the object. In the face of its impotency to instigate real change, theory is no longer allowed to rank itself above action due merely to its claim to truth or objectivity. Thought is not thereby rendered inferior to praxis; rather it is put under an ethical obligation to humbly respect the space of ambiguity that is opened up by the nonidentity of theory and praxis. If, in late capitalism, the faithfulness to the primacy of the object results in the identification of critical thought as the only viable form of emancipatory praxis, and if, as Adorno admits, such praxis has no prospect of bringing about social change, then Adorno is not ethically justified to reject actionism because of its lack of objectivity, probable failure, or psychological weakness. From the standpoint of ethics, negative dialectics is obliged to respect the ethical dimension of the actionist subjectivity and incorporate into its analysis the possibility that, despite its predictions, something *new* might come out of praxis.

⁹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

If the subject is a hostage to the other, then it can never 'happily' enclose itself in its own thinking. While the conviction that one "can do nothing that will not turn out for the worst even if meant for the best"¹⁰⁰ could justify critical thought, it would not neutralize Thesis Eleven's rejection of a happy thinking spirit. For, the impermissibility of a happy spirit is rooted in the infinity of responsibility and could not be refuted by a theoretical justification of the objective impossibility of praxis. Thesis Eleven is – to use Adorno's own word – "a wound" concealed in Marx.¹⁰¹ But it is a wound not, as he thought, because in it Marx mocks his own view of criticism or because its assertive form ironically reveals Marx's uncertainty about its content.¹⁰² The apparent contradiction that Adorno finds between Marx's assertion of the primacy of praxis in Feuerbach theses and his refusal to abandon critique for the sake of immediate action is not simply a matter of theoretical failure. If Thesis Eleven signifies a wound in Marx's oeuvre, it is because it is the articulation of an ethical principle that inevitably enters the ontological language of theory as a disruption. Its authoritative tone reflects the absoluteness of ethical responsibility that is prior to both theory and praxis. The overwhelming need to change the world and the notion of the primacy of praxis that derives from it confront thought as a paradox, an impossibility, which can neither be fully accepted nor happily denied, for it originates in the paradoxical situation of a finite subjectivity that is exposed to an infinite responsibility.

Negative Dialectics and the Student Movement

The implications of this ethical critique of negative dialectics' view of praxis could be further examined if we turn our attention to a concrete historical case, that is, the student movement of the 1960s, which Adorno regarded as an example of naïve actionism. We will examine Adorno's position on the movement by looking at his correspondence with

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, "Resignation," 290.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Herbert Marcuse during the few months before his death on August 6, 1969. But before we can engage with the letters, a brief context is in order.

Before the disagreements between Adorno and the students turns into overt hostility, the student activists, who were indeed influenced by Adorno's writings, looked up to him as an ideal leading figure. Adorno, however, did not consider a direct engagement with the events on the street as his primary task. Unlike Marcuse, Adorno was not particularly interested in the concrete reforms that the student movement was after. Instead, in accordance with his view of praxis, he was mainly concerned with the preservation and development of critical thought, which, having recently published his *magnum opus*, *Negative Dialectics*, at the time meant for him to try to finish *Aesthetic Theory*. In an interview with *Spiegel* in 1969, he demonstrates this point as follows: "my interests are turning increasingly toward philosophical theory. If I were to give practical advice, as Herbert Marcuse has done to a certain degree, it would detract from my productivity. Much can be said against the division of labor; but even Marx, who in his youth attacked it vehemently, later on conceded that we cannot do without the division of labor after all."¹⁰³

Adorno's unwillingness to engage with the student movement led to a series of confrontations. One such confrontation was occasioned on June 6, 1967 by Adorno's appearance in the main lecture hall of the Free University of Berlin to give a lecture on "The Classicism of Goethe's *Iphigenia*." It was a sensitive time for the students. A few days before Adorno's arrival, in a demonstration against the Shah of Iran, the student Benno Ohnesorg had been shot dead, followed by the arrest of some other students including Fritz Teufel. The leading student organization, *Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund* (SDS), thus requested that Adorno turn the lecture into a venue for political discussion and testify in defense of the students. Adorno was considerate

¹⁰³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno," *Monatshefte* 94, no. 1 (2002): 18-9.

enough to declare his sympathy for Ohnesorg and call for the formation of a disinterested committee to conduct an inquiry on the matter.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, he refused to cancel the lecture or accede to any of the other demands raised by the SDS. The students, who expected more than a declaration of solidarity from Adorno, were outraged. The SDS thus released a leaflet in front of the main lecture hall, demonstrating the student's disappointment:

The arson trial against Fritz Teufel documents the irrationalism of the judicial process that has been unleashed, and can end with a student victory only if a network of testimony undermines even the most remotely rational arguments the court can produce. Professor Adorno was an ideal figure to produce such testimony, as he has peddled concepts such as 'the commodity character of society', 'reification' and 'culture industry', a repertoire with which his listeners are invited to share in sophisticated despair. But requests from colleagues and students were fruitless. Prof. Adorno could not condescend to interpret the commune's leaflet as a satirical expression of despair. He refused to help. This attitude is truly classicist in its modesty, since Adorno's theorems of immutability are the very precondition for the frivolities the Commune instigates.¹⁰⁵

This and similar incidents gradually developed a sense of hostility between Adorno and the student activists which at its height led to some aggressive confrontations in the winter of 1969. One particularly infamous incident took place on January 31, 1969. A group of students, led by Adorno's doctoral student, Hans-Jürgen Krahl, headed to the sociology department in order to occupy. Having found the building locked down by the police, they marched toward the Institute for Social Research in order to find a space to hold a discussion to co-ordinate their follow up activities.¹⁰⁶ When Adorno saw the students entering the Institute from the window of his office, he immediately concluded that they intend to occupy the Institute instead of the sociology department. Failing to convince the students to leave the building, Adorno and Friedeburg – both members of the Institute's board at the time – summoned the

¹⁰⁴ According to Rolf Wiggershaus, "this was virtually the only 'intervention' of this sort that [Adorno] engaged in during his whole career as a professor" (Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 620).

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 633; see also, Esther Leslie, "Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence on the German Student Movement," *New Left Review* 233, no. 11 (1999): 120.

police. Seventy-six students were arrested, all of whom were released on the same day except Karhl. The resort to the police force was met by the students with harsh reactions, the most traumatic among which took place on April 22, when Adorno's lecture was disrupted with noise and sexual mockery.¹⁰⁷

These events, and in particular the fact that Adorno and Friedeburg had called on to the police to remove the students, dominate the letters that Adorno and Marcuse exchanged during the next few months. On January 12, Marcuse had written to Adorno expressing his willingness to give a lecture during his summer visit to Frankfurt and requesting an official invitation from the Institute, so that he could sort out the bureaucratic matters with the University of California. After the January 31 incident, the situation, Marcuse thought, was changed:

I believe that if I accept the Institute's invitation without also speaking to the students, I will identify myself with (or I will be identified with) a position that I do not share politically. To put it brutally: if the alternative is the police or left-wing students, then I am with the students—with one crucial exception, namely, if my life is threatened or if violence is threatened against my person and my friends, and that threat is a serious one.¹⁰⁸

Besides the personal aspects of the letters, Adorno and Marcuse's debate revolves around two interconnected theoretical points: the possibilities for political praxis in the specific context of advanced industrial societies in the 60s and critical theory's position with regard to the existing political matters, including, but not limited to, the student movement. The two brilliant dialecticians did not have much disagreements about the dangers associated with "the unmediated translation of theory

¹⁰⁷ Leslie describes the incident as follows: "on 22 April 1969, Adorno had just begun his lecture 'Introduction to Dialectical Thought' when a student interrupted him from the back of the auditorium, and another wrote a rhyme on the blackboard: 'Wer nur den lieben Adorno läßt walten, der wird den Kapitalismus sein Leben lang bewalten' [Whoever gives dear Adorno control will preserve capitalism for the rest of his life]. Then three female students in leather jackets came forward, tossed tulips and roses at Adorno, exposed their breasts to him and tried to kiss his cheek. The seats were strewn with flyers declaring 'Adorno as institution is dead'. The stunt split the student movement, for there were people who thought that, rather than disrupt lectures completely, they should be turned into venues for political discussion. The leather-jacket fraction of the SDS was indulging in action for action's sake. Anyway, Adorno had had enough, and cancelled his lecture series" (Leslie, "Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence," 121).

¹⁰⁸ Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," *New Left Review* 233, no. 11 (1999): 125.

into praxis.”¹⁰⁹ Nor were they under any illusions about the limited potentials of the student movement and its dim prospect of success in the non-revolutionary context of the advanced capitalism of Europe and North America in the 1960s. Nevertheless, they hold distinct positions with regard to the movement.

Highlighting his support for the left-wing student activism, Marcuse writes to Adorno that despite his emphatic rejection of the direct translation of theory into praxis, he believes that “there are situations, moments, in which theory is pushed on further by praxis – situations and moments in which theory that is kept separate from praxis becomes untrue to itself.”¹¹⁰ For Marcuse, the student movement exemplifies one such moment. Moreover, he argues, the recognition that the situation is neither revolutionary, nor even “pre-revolutionary” should not be taken as a justification against political praxis for “this same situation is so terrible, so suffocating and demeaning, that rebellion against it forces a biological, physiological reaction: one can bear it no longer, one is suffocating and one has to let some air in ... It is the air that we (at least I) also want to breathe sometime, and it is certainly not the air of the establishment.”¹¹¹

Adorno concedes that there might be situations in which theory could be pushed on further by praxis. However, he strongly rejects the idea that the student movement could exemplify such a situation.¹¹² In fact, he argues that such possibilities do not objectively exist in late capitalism.¹¹³ Although at one point Adorno admits that the student movement “has interrupted the smooth transition to the totally administered world,”¹¹⁴ throughout the correspondence he expresses a highly negative assessment of the violent form it has taken in Germany. Moreover, he refers to Marcuse’s characterization of the current situation as so terrible that necessitates an attempt to engage in action despite the recognition of the objective impossibility of success as self-

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 127.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 136.

delusion, for, Adorno recalls, they have been able to withstand the much more dreadful times of National Socialism without “proceeding to praxis: simply because it was blocked for us.”¹¹⁵

Marcuse in turn emphasizes the difference between the thirties and the sixties, which he characterizes as “the difference between fascism and bourgeois democracy.”¹¹⁶ According to Marcuse, it is precisely in the present form of democracy, in which qualitative change cannot be achieved through “the parliamentary democratic process itself,” that “extra-parliamentary opposition becomes the only form of ‘contestation’: ‘civil disobedience’, direct action.”¹¹⁷ Expressing his condemnation of many aspects of such direct action, Marcuse nevertheless finds it necessary to support the student movement against the establishment “simply because the defense and maintenance of the status quo and its cost in human life is much more terrible.”¹¹⁸ He identifies this as their “deepest divergence.”¹¹⁹ Adorno agrees and characterizes “the crux” of their controversy in the following words: “you think that praxis – in its emphatic sense – is not blocked today; I think differently.”¹²⁰

In accordance with this view, Adorno denies “that the student movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting social intervention.”¹²¹ He even endorses Jurgen Habermas’s characterization of the movement as “left fascism”¹²² and argues that in this situation the movement’s resort to violent tactics would transform it, “by the force of its immanent antinomies,” into its opposite, i.e., fascism.¹²³ In sharp contrast, Marcuse defends the student movement as “the strongest, perhaps the only, catalyst for the internal collapse of the system of domination today,” which, in the United States for example, has effectively intervened “in the development of political

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 128.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 128.

consciousness, in the agitation in the ghettos ... and, most importantly, in the mobilization of further circles of the populace against American imperialism.”¹²⁴

Adorno’s negative assessment of the student movement could be partly explained by recognizing that, unlike Marcuse, he was almost exclusively concerned with the student movement in the specific context of Germany. While Adorno saw fascism as a latent tendency that continues to threaten all modern democracies, he also believed that in Germany, where democracy was merely formal and extremely fragile, the return of fascism was a more serious threat than in a place like the United States in which democracy had penetrated into the level of the everyday life of the people.¹²⁵ In this situation, for Adorno the students’ resort to violent and authoritarian tactics had completely compromised even the tiniest emancipatory potentials that it might have had otherwise. Marcuse, on the other hand, seems to approach the student movement from a more global perspective, for throughout the letters he refers to the student movements in Europe and the US indiscriminately. He does not of course deny the specificity of the German situation; nevertheless, he seems to allow for such a global approach because of what the movements have in common: “it seems to me that, despite all the differences, the driving motivation [of the student movements] aims for the same goal,” that is, “a protest against capitalism.”¹²⁶ So, it could be said that Marcuse’s rather positive assessment of the emancipatory potentials of the student movements stems from his concern with capitalism, while it is also understandable that Adorno, who seems to have been more concerned with the return of fascism in Germany, adopts a harsher position.

But it would be misleading to reduce the disagreement between Adorno and Marcuse on the student movement to the specificity of the German context. For, as we have seen, Adorno’s negative assessment of political action extends well beyond the

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 239-40.

¹²⁶ Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 133.

German student movement and applies to almost all forms of praxis that are objectively possible in late capitalism. It is on the fundamental question of the relation between critical theory and political practice that the two thinkers diverge. What Marcuse demands is that critical theory must be able to adopt concrete political positions and this demand cannot be met as long as it generally regards the existing forms of praxis (save critical thinking) as false. Relying on such a radical view of praxis, Marcuse argues, the Institute has become guilty of political abstention, a position that is not acceptable according to the "internal political content"¹²⁷ of critical theory itself. In the letters, Adorno's only response to this charge is that the Institute "has certainly exercised no more political abstention than was the case in NY."¹²⁸

The difference between the two thinkers' views on the relation between critical theory and emancipatory praxis could be further demonstrated if we consider their positions on violence. In the letters, Adorno seems to equally condemn all forms of existing violence, be it the violence of the bourgeois establishment, the student movement, the imperialistic warfare of the United States in Vietnam, or the "Chinese-style torture of the Vietcong."¹²⁹ To be sure, he does not categorically reject the use of political violence in all historical circumstances. "To real fascism," says Adorno elsewhere, "one can only react with violence."¹³⁰ Nevertheless, for him violent resistance does not seem to have any place in the struggle against the liberal democracies of the 1960s, where "the sole adequate praxis [is] to put all energies toward working our way out of barbarism."¹³¹ In this context, the crucial task of critical theory is to reject "the eternal circle of using violence to fight violence."¹³²

Marcuse, in contrast, makes a sharp distinction between the violence that is exercised for the maintenance of oppression and the one that comes out of the struggle

¹²⁷ Ibid., 129.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 136.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹³⁰ Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?" 18.

¹³¹ Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 268.

¹³² Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?" 18.

against it. In "Repressive Tolerance," an essay written in 1965 and dedicated to his students at Brandeis University, Marcuse writes, "in terms of historical functions, there is a difference between revolutionary and reactionary violence, between violence practiced by the oppressed and by the oppressors."¹³³ He emphatically distinguishes between the violence of the protesting students and that of the police and between the violence of American Imperialism and that of the Vietcong. Needless to say that Marcuse does not prioritize violent protest over non-violent praxis; rather, what these distinctions highlight is his crucial disagreement with Adorno who regards non-violent action as the "the *only* meaningful transformative praxis" in the circumstances.¹³⁴

The point is that the adoption of concrete positions with regard to the existing forms of praxis relies on distinctions of the sort¹³⁵ that Marcuse makes between the oppressor and the oppressed. These are precisely the sorts of distinctions that Adorno refuses to make, for it would, he confesses, "deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency."¹³⁶ What I take this confession refers to is the incessant negativity of negative dialectics – for what is negative dialectics if not, precisely, the only form of critique that could preserve the primacy of the object, that is, the only form of critique that Adorno finds adequate for the analysis of the objective social reality in late

¹³³ Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 103.

¹³⁴ Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?" 18 (emphasis is mine).

¹³⁵ The qualification 'of the sort' is intended to highlight that the distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed is not by itself adequate. The mere identification of violence as the violence practiced by the oppressed against the oppressors would not legitimize it – as Marcuse was well aware. Besides the origin and the goal of violence, one needs to also differentiate between the various forms of violence practiced by the oppressed. In fact, in the context of practical politics, the clear-cut dichotomy of violence and non-violence is never by itself adequate for the assessment of concrete situations. For violence manifests itself in a plethora of forms and with various degrees of intensity. Therefore, insofar as any action (even critical thinking) necessarily involves some sort of violence, a discussion of the legitimate forms of political practice cannot be pursued without the characterization of thresholds and norms in accordance with the historical contingencies of the objective social reality. In the context of the student movement, for example, Marcuse characterizes what he considers to be the condition in which the violence of the students would have legitimized Adorno's resort to the police in the following terms: "with reference to the university (and nowhere else) ... 'if there is a real threat of physical injury to persons, and of the destruction of material and facilities serving the educational function of the university,' which lead him to consider the occupation of the buildings and disruption of lectures as "legitimate forms of political protest" (Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence," 129). In the discussion that follows I highlight the distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed as only one distinction – a crucial one indeed, but by no means the only, as the example of Marcuse's definition of legitimate violence in reference to student activism shows – that is required if transformative praxis is to be imaginable.

¹³⁶ Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence," 131.

capitalism? The identification of the Vietcong or the students as the oppressed and the establishment as the oppressor would turn into a reified affirmation if it is not dialectically negated by the immediate recognition of the unacceptable forms of violence that are exercised by the oppressed themselves. In short, the problem is that Marcuse's demands – that the Institute must explicitly support the student movement against the establishment and adopt “a clear position against American imperialism and for the liberation struggle in Vietnam”¹³⁷ – require a form of positivity that Adorno's negative dialectics could not allow.

Critical-Practical Politics

What the exchange of arguments between Marcuse and Adorno brings to the fore is in fact a dilemma. While Adorno's position seems to consistently follow the requirements of negative dialectics, it does not release the Institute from the charge of political abstention – the charge that Marcuse raises without rejecting negative dialectics as such. The reference to the “internal political content”¹³⁸ of critical theory is not of much help, for, in defending the Institute's position, Adorno does not deny that content, but in fact affirms it. The aporetic structure of this dilemma cannot be fully accounted for insofar as we do not attend to the ethical demand that, without being explicitly articulated, is the underlying theme of the debate. In the letters, Marcuse comes close to this theme when he asserts that the equal rejection of the violence of imperialism and the violence of the struggle for liberation is “somehow inhuman.”¹³⁹ In “Repressive Tolerance,” he more explicitly highlights the ethical character of the problem and, in a rather rudimentary fashion, refers to the irresolvable tension between ethics and history (i.e., politics, in the Levinasian sense of the term) as its origin: “in terms of ethics, both forms of violence [that is, the violence of the oppressed and that of the oppressors] are inhuman and evil

¹³⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 129.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

but since when is history made in accordance with ethical standards? To start applying them at the point where the oppressed rebel against the oppressors, the have-nots against the haves is serving the cause of actual violence by weakening the protest against it.”¹⁴⁰ Adorno, who has already characterized negative dialectics as “the morality of thought,”¹⁴¹ seems also to appeal to an ethical principle when he rejects the vicious circle of violence. In this sense, it could be said that the debate between Adorno and Marcuse is dominated by the fact that they both appeal to ethics – which demands a rejection of violence in all its forms but also demands a rejection of this rejection lest it provides an apology for the oppressor – but do not have the means necessary for articulating the tension between ethics and politics.

This tension is not fully comprehensible from within critical theory because the ethical is not the *content* of negative dialectics, but rather the fixed point that dominates its operation from beyond. The demand of ethics is an impossible demand. The self-criticism of reason must never cease to be negative for any affirmation would exclude the other in its totalization. At the same time, negative dialectics must suspend its negativity in order to be able to differentiate between the violence of imperialism from the violence of the struggle for liberation. Ethics could not determine the right position, for that would amount to a regression to the tranquility of prescriptive politics. But it cannot leave negative dialectics to take comfort in its negativity either. The demand that ethics poses on negative dialectics is that it must remain in a state of permanent tension with the affirmation it so thoroughly rejects but is necessary for forming concrete political positions with regard to the existing forms of praxis. The paradox of Thesis Eleven – the wound – must be understood precisely in terms of the irresolvable tension that permeates the debate between Adorno and Marcuse.

¹⁴⁰ Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 103.

¹⁴¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 74

The morality of negative dialectics consists in the preservation of the distance between history and eschatology through its incessant negativity; however, insofar as its negativity leads to the rejection of all forms of existing political praxis, that is, to political abstention, it also becomes the source of its immorality. Negative dialectics must thus reconsider its relation to Thesis Eleven and modify its view of praxis accordingly. The pragmatism of Thesis Eleven is not, however, a resolution. Its enduring *ethical* truth is the impossible content of the question of justice, which demands a constant (re)turn of negative dialectics to existing political praxis, despite the *ethical* necessity to preserve the autonomy of critical thought with regard to praxis. The impossibility of this (re)turn must not be taken as a deterrent, for it originates in the infinity of responsibility for the other. After all, it belongs to the demand of justice to perpetually pose an impossible task that nevertheless must be approached.

Contrary to Horowitz's conviction that "ethics as first philosophy could pretty much leave negative dialectic[s] to operate as it already does,"¹⁴² I thus argue that ethics calls for a correction of negative dialectics' view of praxis. Such a correction would not leave negative dialectics intact for an ethically informed negative dialectics would need to incorporate the priority of responsibility for the other over the primacy of the object into its operation. Truth or falsity of praxis could no longer be determined based merely on its capacity to follow the neediness of the object, for that would undermine the primacy of responsibility. The happiness of a thinking spirit could not be justified based on a theoretical rejection of the possibility of emancipatory political praxis, for theory would no longer have the upper hand. Critical intellectual praxis could no longer maintain its privileged position over political action based on its claim to objectivity, for, in light of its own objective impotency, theory would be obliged to give emancipatory actionism the benefit of doubt. That would not, to be sure, justify actionism or silence critical thought; rather, it would prevent negative dialectics from confidently rejecting

¹⁴² Horowitz, "By a Hair's Breadth," 237.

the existing forms of emancipatory praxis, even though it might not be able to identify their potentials through analysis.

The ethical correction of negative dialectics would have significant implications for Adorno's position on the concrete political matters that were discussed in his correspondence with Marcuse. Of course, ethics could not with certainty determine which political position is right, for politics cannot be directly deduced from ethics. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the primacy of responsibility for the other could help us identify where Adorno's position might be failing to meet the requirements of ethics.¹⁴³ If, as we have argued, ethics obliges critical thought to respect the possibility that praxis might lead into something new, then neither the conviction that true praxis is objectively impossible, nor the resort to the division of labour, nor even the worry about the probable negative outcomes of the student movement, could justify Adorno's dismissal of the student movement throughout his career. An ethically informed critical thought cannot disregard a movement that aspires to fight the injustice of the status quo; rather, without suspending its critique, it must welcome it and actively engage with it. Marcuse puts the point succinctly in the following words:

The student movement today is desperately seeking a theory and a practice. It is searching for forms of organization that can correspond to and contradict late capitalist society. It is torn in itself, infiltrated by provocateurs or by those who objectively promote the cause of provocation. I find some stunts, such as those that I hear word of from Frankfurt and Hamburg, as reproachable as you do. I have fought publicly enough against the slogan 'destroy the university', which I regard as a suicidal act. I believe that it is precisely in a situation such as this that it is our task to help the movement,

¹⁴³ I should like to clarify that I do *not* consider matters such as the decision to summon the police as a case in point. While Marcuse emphasizes the necessity of taking the side of the left-wing students against the police, which represents the establishment, they both agree that the police must not be "abstractly demonized" (Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence," 127 and 129) and that in certain situations, depending on the severity of violence and the intensity of the damage to the Institute – which they both defend as an indispensable educational facility – the resort to the police force could be justified. The disagreement here is on whether or not the conditions that would justify the presence of the police were met. Adorno explains that it was his personal judgment at the time that they have to call the police in order to protect the Institute and its members and insists that Marcuse would have done the same thing if he had seen the severity of the situation himself. So, while one could sympathize with Marcuse that, as a principle, the ethically preferable position is to take the side of the protesting students against the establishment, Adorno's decision to involve the police would not necessarily contradict that principle for it is dependent on the contingency of the situation. Therefore, on this matter, no final judgment could be made based on the sort of analysis that we are engaged with.

theoretically, as well as in defending it against repression and denunciation.¹⁴⁴

This does not mean that critical theory should or could give “practical advice” to the students, as Adorno thought Marcuse was trying to do.¹⁴⁵ In response to Adorno’s accusation, Marcuse explicitly denies that he has ever done or meant to do that.¹⁴⁶ An active engagement with the movement requires critical theory to stand somewhere between pure negativity and prescriptive positivity. Alongside critique, theory must also be able to recognize the emancipatory potentials of the movement and articulate the ways in which those potentials could be preserved. This cannot be done insofar as negative dialectics adopts so radical a notion of praxis that could be truly maintained only in critical intellectual praxis. Ethics does not allow for such a notion of praxis. Adorno’s own insight that a theory that is “too radical ... [is] not radical enough”¹⁴⁷ needs to be applied to negative dialectics’ notion of praxis as well. It is one thing to recognize the limitations and dangers of what exists; it is quite another to dismiss the potentialities of the present on the basis of their failure to meet the requirements of objectivity. If it is ultimately responsibility for the other, rather than the primacy of the object or truth, that can legitimately determine what counts as a sufficiently radical praxis, then a notion of praxis that justifies such a dismissal is indeed too radical.

The postponement of the objective possibility of true emancipatory praxis to an unforeseeable future is not ethically acceptable as it harbors the danger of providing an apology for the status quo. ‘Too radical’ neighbors conservatism. The notion that, in advanced industrial societies, true praxis is objectively blocked becomes complicit with the platitudes about the necessity to protect democracy against the return of barbarism. This necessity is not, to be sure, undermined by the recognition that bourgeois democracy inherently contains barbarism and dialectically moves toward it. But, even

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno, “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower?” 18.

¹⁴⁶ Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 129.

¹⁴⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 155.

then, we have to realize that the existing democracies depend on and sustain the barbaric domination of global capital. "The system is," Marcuse writes, "global, and it is its democracy, which, with all its faults, also carries out, pays for, and arms neo-colonialism and neo-fascism, and it obstructs liberation."¹⁴⁸ The declaration of the relative, moral superiority of democracy over barbarism should not be asserted in isolation from the question, whom does this democracy serve? Who would benefit from its maintenance and whom would its collapse harm? Insofar as Adorno's exaltation of the threat of fascism relies on the necessity to protect Western bourgeois democracy, and insofar as his equal rejection of the violence of imperialism and the violence of those who fight against it belittles the role of global capitalism as the dominant exploiter, his politics becomes a politics of the same. Politics of the other cannot but think and act globally. An ethically informed negative dialectics, in which the primacy of the object is properly subordinated to the responsibility for the other, would thus need to engage with the critique of capitalism in its global operation. This would not undermine the significance of the analysis of the local context. What it means is that the local must only be approached via the global and in relation to it.

Enrique Dussel's planetary ethics of liberation does indeed move in this direction. Nevertheless, his resort to the positivity of praxis against the negativity of critical theory does not adequately address the irresolvable tension between the negative and the positive. The return to praxis cannot take the form of a positive *solution* for a problem that the Frankfurt School failed to solve. Critical theory's distrust of political praxis was not merely an outcome of its historical attachment to the liquidated social agent of the center which could be remedied by a turn toward the victim of the periphery. The incessant negativity that characterizes negative dialectics reflects a specific historical condition in which no project of emancipation could be positively postulated without being fetishized. In this situation, the element of positivity cannot be simply recovered

¹⁴⁸ Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence," 134.

by a turn toward the positive dialectic of latter-day Schelling (or Feuerbach or Engels, or even Marx, for that matter).

As a historical form of critique proper to ethics, negative dialectics is indispensable. The identification of its inadequacies would not alter this recognition. The same ethical necessity that pushes negative dialectics to incorporate the positivity of praxis, also demands the preservation of its critical negativity. The positivity of praxis, that is to say, could never be isolated from the critical force of negative dialectics. The recourse to praxis that is ethically necessary could only be formulated as a *tension* between negative dialectics and Thesis Eleven. Ethics of liberation, which defines itself as a critical-ethical theory that is “strictly, an introduction to ... the eleventh of *Theses on Feuerbach*,”¹⁴⁹ is not exempt from this limitation.

Moreover, Dussel seems to too hastily accuse the first generation of the Frankfurt School of pure negativity and lack of praxis, dismissing the fact that the tension between theory and praxis was, as we have seen, indeed an essential part of their critical theory. Even if he is partially justified in objecting to Adorno and Horkheimer for their refusal to concretely engage with political praxis, he apparently fails to recognize that Marcuse – if not in *Eros and Civilization*,¹⁵⁰ at least in his later writings such as “An Essay on Liberation”¹⁵¹ and *Counterrevolution and Revolt*¹⁵² – did in fact explicitly engage with the existing communities of the oppressed and their concrete praxis of liberation. While it is true that, by situating himself within the struggles of liberation in Latin America, Dussel’s ethics of liberation stands in a relation with global capital that is different from that of the Frankfurt School (and this is indeed its virtue), his characterization of critical theory as a whole as just another version of the “ontology of the center”¹⁵³ is an unfair

¹⁴⁹ Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 398.

¹⁵⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

¹⁵¹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

¹⁵² Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

¹⁵³ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 14.

exaggeration, for at least Marcuse did approach the question of liberation in the West from a global perspective.

A politics proper to ethics could thus be characterized as a critical-practical politics that is situated within the irresolvable tension between negative dialectics and practical politics. Such a politics would not be immune to the charge of the transformation of *eschaton* into a historical power. But it is critically aware of it. Faced with the suffering of the global oppressed and their emancipatory praxis, critical-practical politics is ethically obliged to suspend its dialectical negativity and affirm its concrete political position in support of the oppressed and against the oppressors. However, it also recognizes that, in this affirmation, it fails to safeguard the necessary distance between history and eschatology – for the distance could only be preserved negatively. The transformation of *eschaton* into a power thus appears as the inevitable injustice of praxis that is paradoxically demanded by ethics itself.

It would be a mistake to think of the simultaneous necessity of critique and political practice as two possible alternatives. Ethics blocks that freedom of choice. For, a critical theory that too strongly clings to negativity and refuses to engage with the forms of praxis that are presently feasible harbors the danger of turning into an apology for the status quo. Departing from the reality of oppression, critical-practical politics is faced with the fact that *eschaton* is *always already* appropriated as a power within history. The appropriation of ethics is not specific to critical theory and the praxis of liberation. The right-wing proponents of market fundamentalism (e.g., Milton Friedman), the centrist advocates of liberal democracy (e.g., John Rawls), the populist ideologues of the leftist State (e.g., Hugo Chavez), and the theocratic guardians of the divine law (e.g., the ayatollahs of the Islamic Republic of Iran) all appeal to some ethical value – the greater good, social justice, the poor, or the *ummah* – to justify their politics.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Although the notion of ethics that is appealed to in each case is distinct from the others, it could be argued that they all originate in Levinas' notion of ethics as first philosophy, which is, strictly speaking, an

In this situation, the impossible task of critical-practical politics consists in engaging with a *critique* of the existing forms of the appropriation of the ethical by politics at the same time that it strives to reclaim, i.e., *re-appropriate*, the ethical according to the needs of the oppressed, knowing that any re-appropriation would inevitably involve a form of injustice. It is not possible, i.e., ethical, to resolve the tension between critique and re-appropriation into a happy co-existence. Rather, critique and re-appropriation must be situated as two indispensable and necessarily conflicting moments of critical-practical politics. The tension between critique and re-appropriation must be kept alive so that critical-practical politics is able to partake in praxis and contribute to the process of the re-appropriation of the ethical for the sake of the other, at the same time that it remains at a sufficient critical distance from that praxis so that it could also recognize the injustice of its own re-appropriation. It must be kept alive so that critical-practical politics' "power to doubt" would not be relegated into either "a lack of conviction"¹⁵⁵ or – and more importantly – of action.

ethics of ethics. For, all ethical values, even – to use Levinas' own example – the simple "after you sir!" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 89), ultimately originate in responsibility for the other. An example can further illuminate my point here. A brief look at the propaganda of the murderous US-led War on Terror could show how *eschaton* is appropriated as a power, in this case in the name of the security of the nation. In 24, one of the many right-wing American TV series that took on the task of providing an ethical justification for the War on Terror, Jack Bauer – a patriotic high-ranking agent of the Counter Terrorism Unit – is repeatedly presented in the position of an I who alone in his singularity can see the tears of the other. Time and again he is put in a position that highlights the inadequacy of the law to appreciate the complexity of concrete ethical questions (even though throughout it is emphasized that the law in question, i.e., the US Constitutional law, is the best and the most just law. This is the role of president Palmer, the representative of the people, of the society, whose heroism lies in his refusal to acknowledge the singularity of concrete cases insofar as they require a betrayal of the law which belongs to the people). Jack Bauer has to face the ethical question alone and act against the law when the universality of the law is incapable of appreciating the singularity of the situation. In an extreme case, he executes another patriot, agent Ryan Chappelle, despite the latter's innocence and despite his tears, in order to save the lives of the millions of Americans. To 'save the lives of the millions,' the disturbing logic of war that nourishes on ethics and continues to justify the massacre and torture of the people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Abu Ghraib prison, and Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

¹⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990), 69.

Chapter V

Sacrifice as Remembrance

The ego involved in responsibility is me and no one else, me with whom one would have liked to pair up a sister soul, from whom one would require substitution and sacrifice. But to say that the other has to sacrifice himself to the others would be to preach human sacrifice!¹

The analysis of ethics as first philosophy repeatedly returned us to a tension. We argued that this tension is irresolvable as it corresponds to the disproportionality of the other's infinite demands and the I's finite being. Instead of striving, in vain, to resolve it, we examined its various manifestations along a path of concretization. It appeared first as the tension between metaphysics and ontology, then between ethics and politics, and, eventually, between critique and re-appropriation, which, we argued, presents the historically concrete form of the tension. So far, our analysis has been mainly theoretical, focused on clarifying the structure of the tension between critique and re-appropriation. The content of this tension is, however, context-dependent, and can only be demonstrated through an engagement with the contingent details of each case separately.

It is the task of the remaining part of the dissertation to examine the implications of our theoretical analysis in the context of a specific historical case, i.e., 'Alī Shari'atī's (re-)appropriation of ethics for revolutionary politics. As we shall see in the next chapter,

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 216.

in Sharī'atī's thought the ethical and the political come to meet through a politicization of sacrifice. Therefore, before we could proceed to the analysis of Sharī'atī, we have to once more appeal to theory in order to clarify the significance of the notion of sacrifice from the standpoint of ethics as first philosophy. This is what this chapter aims to provide. As an ethical notion, we define sacrifice as *dying* for the other, or the *giving* of life to the other. The chapter is structured accordingly. It begins with an analysis of giving in which Levinas' notion of pure giving is explicated through a comparison with Derrida's well-known aporia of the gift, continues with an examination of the question of death from the standpoint of ethics as first philosophy, and, finally, ends with a demonstration of the ethical meaning of sacrifice and its conflictual relation to politics.

Is Giving Possible?

Responsibility for the other disrupts the I in its being and renders its enjoyment² of the world unjustified. The face of the other, as destitution, puts the I under an ethical obligation to give up what it possesses and what it enjoys. The I is, that is to say, responsible to *give* to the other and provide her with what she needs. The giving proper to responsibility must have the character of pure giving, that is, a giving without return. Like responsibility itself, ethical giving must be asymmetric and nonreciprocal, beyond the logic of exchange and calculation. Is such a pure giving possible? According to Levinas, it is, given that the notion of possibility should itself be problematized. But, even then, the 'possibility' of giving owes to the priority of ethics over ontology. It is thanks to the face of the other, the otherwise than being that approaches me from the dimension of height, that I have the possibility to move beyond my solitary being in the

² The notion of enjoyment should not be taken lightly, as it is an essential part of Levinas' original contribution to phenomenology. His critique of Heidegger was not limited to the (meta)phenomenological analysis of the ethical relation as a relation that transcends ontology. He also corrected Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world, as it were, *from below*, by situating it at the deeper level of enjoyment. As 'living from ...' or nourishment on the elemental, enjoyment signifies a fundamental relation to the world that is prior to Dasein's encounter of the objects as either the objects of representation or means to an end. The notion of enjoyment is fundamental for Levinas' formulation of radical separation as a precondition of the ethical relation (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 110-4).

world and its economy, and take part in pure giving. "In order to be able to ... refuse both enjoyment and possession," Levinas writes, "I must know how *to give* what I possess. Only thus could I situate myself absolutely above my engagement in the non-I. But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question."³ Such a pure giving, whose possibility is from the outset opened up by the epiphany of the face, signifies the structure of the proper response to the infinite demand of the other.

Derrida's analysis of the gift has become so widely dominant that it is all but impossible to develop a discussion of Levinas' notion of pure giving without clarifying its relation to the Derridean gift. For Derrida, the gift signifies the unthinkable. On the one hand, the gift is, by its very definition, a gift only insofar as it is not an object of exchange; on the other hand, it could not be thought in separation from a relation between the giver and the receiver, and this relation necessarily turns the gift into an object of exchange. For, how could one give a gift if the mere intention to give or the very awareness of giving as an act of goodness would compromise the gratuitous character of the gift? Moreover, how could one accept a gift if the mere acknowledgement of its acceptance – whatever its form may be, gratitude, rejection, and so on – would indicate a sense of a return, thereby reverting back into the reciprocity of exchange? The consideration of such dilemmas leads Derrida to write, "[the] conditions of possibility of the gift (that some 'one' gives some 'thing' to some 'one other') designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift."⁴

Derrida's insistence on the impossibility of the gift must not, however, hastily be taken as a rejection of Levinas' view of the possibility of pure giving. In fact, Derrida does not completely rule out the possibility of the gift. Rather, the gift, he argues, has the structure of an *aporia*: while it is impossible in the order of being, it is possible as a

³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 12.

remainder, an excess of being. The gift is “the secret of that about which one cannot speak, but which can no longer silence.”⁵ As a being, the gift can never be pure for it appears as a surprise to the other who receives it and thus overtakes the other by placing a hold upon her. The generosity of the gift undermines itself at the very moment that it presents itself to the other. Derrida thus concludes:

So as not to take over the other, the overtaking by surprise of the pure gift should have the generosity to give nothing that surprises and appears *as* gift, *nothing that presents itself as present*, nothing that is; it should therefore be surprising enough and so thoroughly made up of a surprise that it is not even a question of getting over it, thus of a surprise surprising enough to let itself be forgotten without delay. And at stake in this forgetting that carries beyond any present is the gift as remaining ... without memory, without permanence and consistency, without substance or subsistence; at stake is this rest that is, without being (it), beyond Being.⁶

Considering Derrida’s characterization of the gift in this passage, one could argue – as did Robert Bernasconi,⁷ for instance – that for both Levinas and Derrida the gift, or the pure giving, is possible only as the interruption of the order of being that ensues from what is beyond being. However, despite the partial validity of this observation, there are still significant differences between Derrida and Levinas on the question of giving, the consideration of which could overshadow their apparent similarities.

As is common in Derrida’s writings, his analysis of the gift departs from the presupposed meaning of the word gift, that is, from its status in language, or, more precisely, in certain languages. It is through an obsessive engagement with the internal contradictions of language that Derrida is able to detect a reference to what is beyond being in the aporia of the gift. The recognition of Derrida’s obsession with language is hardly news. Nonetheless, it reveals a certain directionality in his analysis which has

⁵ Ibid., 147.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robert Bernasconi, “What Goes Around Comes Around: Derrida and Levinas on the Economy of the Gift and the Gift of Genealogy,” in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 259.

significant consequences for his view of the gift in comparison with Levinas' notion of the pure giving.

In short, unlike Levinas, for whom pure giving becomes an issue as the proper response to the infinite demands of the other, Derrida's deconstructionist analysis begins from the order of being and only later discovers the necessity of a passage to its beyond. This is not simply a methodological matter regarding the starting point, either being or beyond being, the same or the other. For, according to Levinas, from the outset, it is the other who opens up the possibility of pure giving. Without the putting into question of the same by the other, of being by the otherwise than being, there would be no pure giving. Without ethics, that is, there would be no gift. The very presence of the word gift in language, i.e., in the said, is already a testimony to the priority of the ethical saying. The internal contradictions of the gift reflect the fundamental tension of ethics and must thus be examined in the context of this tension. Let me elaborate.

The notion of the pure giving appears in Levinas' thought as the proper response that the face of the other solicits from the I. In this sense, it is an integral part of ethics as first philosophy. In "The Trace of the Other," he approaches the idea of such a giving proper to the ethical demand of the other through his analysis of the notion of the 'work,' in which he employs a language reminiscent of Derrida's analysis of the gift.⁸ For Levinas, the notion of the work does not refer to an interaction with the world, either as "an apparent agitation of a ground which afterwards remains identical with itself" or as "negativity" that through changing the world transforms it into an object of thought.⁹ Both these conceptions operate within the framework of being and thus return the I to itself. "A work radically conceived," Levinas writes, "is a movement of the same unto

⁸ It is crucial to note that, in this essay, Levinas uses the term 'work' in a different sense as compared to other texts such as "The Ego and the Totality" and *Totality and Infinity*. We will examine this distinction later in this chapter.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 348.

the other which never returns to the same."¹⁰ A movement without return could not, however, be conceived as "pure loss," i.e., from the same to nothingness; nor can it receive the other's gratitude. While pure loss would "affirm the same in its identity circumvented with nothingness,"¹¹ gratitude would betray the work by returning the movement to the same. A work as a "departure without return" that nevertheless does not vanish into the void is possible only as pure giving, that is, as "a radical generosity."¹²

As a movement of the same unto the other without return, the work does not affirm being, but rather disrupts it. However, the significance of the work does not primarily stem from its capacity to disrupt the order of being. Quite the contrary, the disruption of being that is accomplished in the work is significant because it is *for* the other. For Levinas, the work is essential because without it "goodness is but a dream without transcendence, a pure wish (*blosser Wunsch*), as Kant put it."¹³ The question of the possibility of the work thus takes on a primarily ethical status in Levinas: not only does the work owe its *possibility* to the dimension of alterity that is opened up by the face of the other, the break up of the totality of being through the movement without return of the work also acquires its *significance* from its being for the other. This is different from Derrida's view of the gift in that for Derrida the aporia of the gift is primarily an ontological problem, concerned with the impossibility of the gift within the framework of being, even though the movement beyond being of the gift is later necessitated by the ethical demand not to place a hold on the other.

The question of the possibility of the work must thus be examined in light of its ethical, i.e., for-the-other, status. In the giving of the work, it is indeed an ethical necessity not to place a hold on the other. But responsibility for the other demands more and could not be satisfied with the characterization of the gift as the giving of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 349.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 348.

“nothing,”¹⁴ even if that is what releases the other from the hold that the surprise of the gift would place on her. Derrida, that is to say, stops his analysis too soon.

The inadequacy of Derrida’s account could be explained if we note that he approaches the ethical dimension of the problem of the gift from the standpoint of generosity rather than responsibility. The recognition that generosity could not prevent the overtaking of the other by the giving of the gift¹⁵ thus for him takes on the status of the last word. To approach the ethical sense of the problem of the gift from the standpoint of generosity is not adequate for it still has the I, rather than the other, as its ultimate reference point. In the absence of the transcendence of the other, Derrida’s analysis of the gift thus becomes an obsession with linguistic contradictions that still belong to the totality of the same. What is lacking here is the realization that linguistic contradictions do not constitute the ultimate origin of the aporia of the gift, for they in turn refer to the more fundamental paradox of ethical responsibility – that is, the paradoxical situation of a finite I who is confronted with the demands of an infinite responsibility.

Levinas’ analysis of the work points beyond Derrida’s aporia of the gift in its recognition of the primacy of responsibility over generosity. In contrast to the giving of the gift which presupposes the freedom of the generous giver, the pure giving that characterizes the movement of the work is not animated by the freedom of the same, but rather necessitated by responsibility for the other. In other words, if the aporetic structure of the gift derives from the limitations of generosity, the paradox of the work originates in the irreconcilable demands of responsibility. The other who faces the I in the ethical relation manifests herself simultaneously as a naked – i.e., abstract and absolute – face and a concrete human being.¹⁶ She is both contextualized and naked, a body and more than a body, a phenomenon and more than a phenomenon.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Given Time*, 147 (see the full quotation above, note 6).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 354.

Responsibility for the other thus requires the I to not only respect the absoluteness of the other's radical alterity, but also attend to her concrete needs. This is why the imperative of responsibility cannot be thought of "outside economy;"¹⁷ this is why generosity is "incapable of approaching the other with empty hands."¹⁸

The work proper to ethics must thus meet the requirements of responsibility at two levels, both formal and economic. The giving of the work must not take the form of the reciprocity of exchange, for that would betray the asymmetry of responsibility. But the characterization of the work as a movement without return is not by itself enough either, since ethical giving must also account for the other's concrete needs and could not therefore be thought of as a formal movement outside the economy of being. These two requirements are, to be sure, irreconcilable for as soon as the work entails the giving of *something* to the other, that is, as soon as it becomes a movement within being, it returns to the same and thus turns into a form of exchange. The paradox of the work thus originates, not in the linguistic contradictions that the term gift brings to the fore, but rather in the irreconcilability of the formal and economic requirements of responsibility.

Based on this formulation, we could say that Derrida's depiction of the gift as a disruption of the order of being converges with Levinas' characterization of the work as a movement without return to the extent that they both concern the formal structure of pure giving. However, while Derrida's recognition of the limitations of the generosity of the same forces him to stop his analysis at this level, Levinas' consideration of the concrete demands of responsibility entails the insight that the characterization of pure giving as merely a disruption of being could not be taken as the final formulation of the aporia of giving. It is ethically necessary that giving does not take the form of exchange; but it is also necessary that I do not approach the other with empty hands. The other is

¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

hungry, homeless, and cold; I have to feed her, welcome here to my home, and provide her with shelter. “Nothing”¹⁹ could not fill my hands. The characterization of the aporia of giving as a mere disruption of being would turn ethics into an abstract gesture in which the other’s concrete needs are reduced to mere metaphors. Such an ethics would ultimately leave politics – that same unjust politics that has left the other hungry and cold – to itself.

What this means is that the paradox of giving is in fact rooted in the fundamental tension between ethics and politics. In this sense, the subtle difference between Derrida’s aporia of the gift and Levinas’ notion of the work, which we have been at pains to explicate, could be seen as a reflection of their different views of the relation between ethics and politics. As we have seen in Chapter III, Derrida formulates the idea of permanent interruption as the final structure of the relation between ethics and politics. While Levinas does seem to affirm Derrida’s interpretation in his characterization of the relation between ethics and politics as “a perpetual duty of vigilance,”²⁰ he could at least be given the credit that his ethics also points to the inadequacies of the idea of permanent interruption. Levinas’ ethics, that is to say, calls for an ethical politics that goes beyond mere disruption, even though his (meta)phenomenological analyses are incapable of providing such a politics. We shall consider the implications that this limitation will have for Levinas’ analysis at the end of this chapter. For now, however, let us concern ourselves with the notion of sacrifice that comes out of his view of giving.

The Question of Death

According to Levinas, the work could become a departure without return only if its outcome is not achieved at the same time as the act of giving. For, if giving is recompensed “in the immediacy of its triumph,” that is, if the work becomes “the

¹⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 147.

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 30.

contemporary of its outcome,” the movement of the work would return to itself and giving would take the form of reciprocity.²¹ The departure of the work must thus point to a future beyond the future of the giver, a future that does not belong to the time of the same. The opening up of the dimension of temporality prompts Levinas to link the work to death as the limit of my time: “the future for which the work is undertaken must be posited from the start as indifferent to my death. A work, distinguished from games and calculation, is being-for-beyond-my-death.”²² Therefore, for Levinas it is in the work as sacrifice that the thought of giving is pushed to its limit because through the giving of my life in sacrifice, I move toward a time that is not my time, a time that is without me. Sacrifice thus acquires a central place in Levinas’ ethics for, as the ultimate form of giving, it brings the structure of the proper response to infinite responsibility to the fore. “To go beyond one’s death is,” Levinas writes, “to sacrifice oneself. The response to the Enigma’s summons is the generosity of sacrifice outside the known and unknown, without calculation, for going on to infinity.”²³

However, it would be a mistake to hastily conclude that the significance of sacrifice in Levinas’ thought owes solely to the ultimacy of death as the limit of ontology. That conclusion would ignore a crucial distinction between Levinas’ ethical interpretation of sacrifice and the commonplace ontological view of sacrifice. It is well known that the tradition of philosophy as ontology has granted death a lofty position.²⁴

²¹ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 349.

²² Ibid.

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 76.

²⁴ From Socrates who sees philosophy as “the practice of death” (Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Six Great Dialogues*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2007), 58), to Hegel for whom “[spirit] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself” (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19), and to Heidegger who characterizes the being of Dasein as a “being-toward-death” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 311), there has been a long tradition in which death is thought of as a determining element of what makes human beings human. Levinas’ account of death contests this tradition. In developing his view of death, he is particularly in a dialogue with Heidegger. In what will follow, I will highlight Levinas’ opposition to Heidegger on the question of death wherever necessary. However, a fair examination of the relation between their contrasting views on this point would require a detailed and comparative analysis, including an elaboration of Heidegger’s view of death. Such a comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation and, even in its condensed form, would perhaps be more distracting than productive for the development of my argument. On the relation between Heidegger and Levinas on

Accordingly, sacrifice has acquired a sense of ultimacy as it involves the offering of life, which is, ontologically speaking, the most one can offer. But, strictly speaking, this is not Levinas' view. His account of sacrifice breaks with the philosophical tradition by overthrowing the primacy of death from the standpoint of ethical transcendence. He does not, to be sure, altogether dismiss the peculiarity of the question of death. But for him the significance of death does not stem from its reference to the finitude of human existence. Rather, it owes primarily to its radical unknowability, as though the relation with death signifies a "modalit[y] of the relation with the Other."²⁵ The uniqueness of sacrifice is not derived from death as my ultimate possibility, but rather from that in the being-for-death of sacrifice the I goes to the limit of "the passage to the time of the Other."²⁶ Let me elaborate.

Death has always been thought in the whole philosophical and religious tradition within the alternatives of being and nothingness, in terms, that is, either of the possibility of an afterlife or the annihilation of being in nothingness.²⁷ However, according to Levinas, neither the idea of the continuation of being in another existence nor the notion of a passage to nothingness as the absence of being could adequately account for the peculiarity of the question of death. It is a banal fact that we are unaware of what comes after death, but the question of death is more profound than the question of afterlife. The unknown of death presses us with the fact that we are not in a position to even pose the question of afterlife. We are absolutely incapable of knowing whether the words 'beyond' or 'after' could be meaningfully applied to death at all. It is impossible to come to know the status of death because, as Epicurus famously said,

the question of death, the reader may refer to: Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 140-88; Robert Bernasconi, "A Love that Is Stronger than Death: Sacrifice in the Thought of Levinas, Heidegger, and Bloch," *Angelaki* 7, no. 2 (2002): 9-16; Richard A. Cohen, "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death—Contra Heidegger," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2007): 21-39; and Iain Thomson, "Rethinking Levinas on Heidegger on Death," in *Horizons of Authenticity in Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology: Essays in Honor of Charles Guignon*, ed. Hans Pederson and Megan Altman (New York: Springer, 2014), 239-62.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 234.

²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 50.

²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 232.

“where death is, I am not, where I am, death is not.” Properly speaking, it is not the ‘I’ who encounters his death in the last moment; rather, “it is death alone which travels the last part of the route.”²⁸ The ‘I’ who is supposed to ask the question of death could never become co-present with that ‘beyond’ in order to be able to pose the question in any meaningful way. The other alternative, that is, nothingness, also poses a problem, because the ‘outside of being’ that nothingness is supposed to signify remains inside. Negation or annihilation are functions of ontology and could only be played out in the very scene of being that they are supposed to leave behind. That is to say, the passage from being to beyond being cannot be achieved ontologically. Nothingness is not an exit from being. In fact, insofar as death is thought from within the alternatives of being and nothingness, being weighs upon human beings as an obsession, an inescapable trap.

Both of the ontological alternatives of being and nothingness fall short of appreciating the inherent unknowability of death. Death is unknown in a unique way, “otherwise than any unknown.”²⁹ The unknown of death is more profound than a mere unknowability of knowledge. It is utterly unknown, ungraspable, even unassumable. The unknown of death does not refer to a lack of knowledge that could be compensated by further analysis or the advancement of thought. Rather, death is, and will always be, a mystery: “death is the menace that approaches me as a mystery; its secrecy determines it – it approaches without being able to be assumed, such that the time that separates me from my death dwindles and dwindles without end, involves a sort of last interval which my consciousness cannot traverse, and where a leap will somehow be produced from death to me.”³⁰

The relation with death thus places the I before a category upon which it has absolutely no power. The I, that is to say, encounters death in absolute passivity. This

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 235.

view stands in direct opposition to Heidegger, for whom death is Dasein's "ownmost"³¹ and ultimate possibility in which its uniqueness is truly appreciated. According to Heidegger, it is in thinking of death as my death that 'anticipation' becomes authentic.³² Moreover, as the ultimate possibility, that is, as the possibility of impossibility, death marks the finitude of Dasein's existence, upon which its finite temporality is founded. In sharp contrast, for Levinas, in the face of death, the I is divested of all possibilities. Unlike Heidegger who identifies death as the content of the experience of *Angst*, in which Dasein comes face to face with its utmost possibility, i.e., its being-able-not-to-be, Levinas approaches the relation with death through a phenomenological analysis of suffering. According to Levinas, suffering, or pain, includes death as "a paroxysm."³³ In the experience of suffering, death does not approach "straight off as nothingness," but rather as "correlative to an experience of the *impossibility* of nothingness."³⁴ While suffering, "despite the entire absence of the dimension of withdrawal that constitutes [it],"³⁵ still retains some space for freedom, the approach of death pushes the I to a state of absolute passivity, where the possibility of withdrawal is utterly removed. The approach of death that is brought forth in the experience of suffering highlights that the relation with death cannot take place in light, as knowledge or experience.

Strictly speaking, therefore, death is not one of my possibilities – be it my ultimate possibility or the possibility of impossibility – for it is utterly beyond my reach, situated in a future ever future. Death signifies "an instant whose exceptional character is due not to the fact that it is at the threshold of nothingness or a rebirth, but to the fact that, in life, it is the impossibility of every possibility."³⁶ During the time that separates me from my death, I live, not as being-toward-death, but rather, as being prior to death

³¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 303.

³² *Ibid.*, 304-11.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.* (emphasis is mine).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 235.

and against it. My time is the meantime of the postponement of the inevitable violence of death: while I still have time.

This analysis already unfolds some central aspects of Levinas' view of death – that is, the characterization of death as impossibility rather than Dasein's utmost possibility, the peculiar dimension of futurity that is associated with the unknown of death, and the characterization of time as the meantime of postponement – and thereby highlights the crucial differences between Levinas and Heidegger on the question of death. Nevertheless, it captures only half of the picture, for it is yet an ontological analysis of death. It would be a mistake to think that Levinas follows Heidegger principally in deriving time from death and departs from him only in his characterization of these concepts, that is, death as impossibility rather than possibility and time as postponement rather than the finite temporality of being-toward-death. His proposal is much more radical: "to think death on the basis of time, and no longer time on the basis of death."³⁷ Such a reversal cannot, however, be accomplished as long as the analysis of death remains ontological, that is, as long as it does not account for the primacy of ethics over ontology.

The absolute unknowability of death owes to the fact that the mysterious violence of death threatens me from a region that is utterly beyond my reach, as though death approaches from a dimension of absolute exteriority, "as though," that is, "the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other."³⁸ This statement – which may sound rather puzzling at first glance – refers to Levinas' crucial claim that "in death, all relationship to the other person is not undone."³⁹ This characterization is motivated by Levinas' critical obsession with Heidegger's view of death, in whose emphasis on the mineness of death he reads an ignorance of the other.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 104.

³⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 234.

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Dying for ...," in *entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 215.

The priority of ethics over ontology implies that I cannot close myself up in relation with my own death, as if to exclude the other, as if, that is, my death comes before the death of the other. In fact, it is in the relation with the death of the other (rather than my own) that the question of death is posed in its most emphatic sense, for it is here that the ethical meaning of death is explicitly brought forth: “the death of the other: therein lies the first death.”⁴⁰ A proper analysis of death must thus begin with the death of the other. Only then the death of my own could be properly understood.

Levinas’ most comprehensive analysis of the relation with the other’s death is presented in his 1975-6 lecture notes, from which we extracted the last quotation. Being in a constant dialogue with Heidegger, Levinas clarifies that unlike Heidegger he does not consider my experience of the death of the other as first and foremost an empirical experience of a person’s demise. True, one experiences the death of another person as the termination of all movements and expressions. Human life is “the attiring of physiological movements,” a “hiding,” a “dressing” and it all comes to a halt in the “no-response” of death.⁴¹ But this does not mean that the death of someone strikes the ‘I’ solely as an empirical facticity. The experience of attending to someone’s death is not exhausted in the disappearance of vital activities, whose interpretation as death, by the way, relies on induction alone. This would be the case if the identity of the same with itself were the source of all meaning. Another person’s death affects me by orienting me toward another source of meaning, that is, the ethical relation and the infinite responsibility it solicits from me. As Levinas put it, “dying, as the dying of the other, affects my identity as ‘I’; it is meaningful in its rupture with the Same, its rupture of my ‘I,’ its rupture of the Same in my ‘I.’”⁴²

⁴⁰ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

The dressing up of the biological movements is, to be sure, a hiding; but it is at the same time a “denuding.”⁴³ In the expressiveness of the behavior of the other something, or rather *someone*, shows herself. This hiding denudes the other “beyond all nudity: to the point of making of [her] a face.”⁴⁴ In the total disappearance of expression in the no-response of death, something happens: “the face ... becomes a masque.”⁴⁵ My relation with the death of someone is a relation with the disappearance of the face of the other, who holds me responsible for her death. The experience of the death of the other is not a mere empirical facticity because it “affects me in my very identity as a responsible ‘me’; it affects me in my nonsubstantial identity which is not the simple coherence of various acts of identification, but is made up of an ineffable responsibility.”⁴⁶

My relation with the death of someone is thus neither a knowledge of her demise, nor an experience of death annihilating a being. The relation with death, from which death receives its “depth,” is neither a seeing – “to see being” – nor an aiming – “to aim at nothingness.”⁴⁷ It is rather “a purely emotional rapport.”⁴⁸ The emotion with which we are concerned here is not, however, an emotion in the common sense of the term. It does not have a representational content, whether sensual or cognitive. Rather, it is a non-intentional “nonstate”⁴⁹ that nevertheless affects. It is “a disquietude within the *unknown*,”⁵⁰ with which the question of death, in its original sense, is born. “The word *mystery*,” says Levinas elsewhere, “is fitting here. Death is the site of this category: mystery. An unknown that poses a question. A question without givens.”⁵¹ The question of death is an original question in the sense that it is a question without posing a

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵¹ Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?* 123.

question. It does not have a thesis or a theme. It is “a pure question that raises itself; a question that is the pure raising of a question.”⁵²

The disquiet of emotion in the nearness of death is thus not an anxiousness over the possibility of nothingness, but rather the disruption of the same by the other, of the finite by the infinite. Death is not the mark of the finitude of the human being upon which Dasein’s finite temporality could be founded. “Time,” Levinas writes, “is not the limitation of being but its relationship with infinity. Death is not annihilation but the question that is necessary for this relationship with infinity, or time, to be produced.”⁵³ Properly understood, then, death is not the basis upon which time could be understood. Rather, it is death that has to be thought on the basis of time, for, according to Levinas, the characteristic restlessness of time is a reflection of the status of a finite being that is in relation with the infinite.

Having hinted upon the formal similarity between the structure of time and that of the ethical relation, Levinas then elaborates by providing a series of preliminary observations with regard to the meaning of this similarity. Levinas’s proposition is a human more human than *conatus*. It is a human that is a hostage of the other: “the human *esse* is not primordially *conatus* but hostage.”⁵⁴ Hostage is “the held-in-awakening ... or vigilance.”⁵⁵ It is an awakening, a relentless vigilance, that is produced as an incessant call to responsibility and disrupts the for-oneself of the same. The situation of hostage is thus the situation of absolute passivity, or “patience,” in the relation with the other. This patience is the length of time.⁵⁶

The sense of incompleteness and emptiness that accompanies temporal phenomena such as questioning, searching, and desiring is not to be relegated to a lack of content. Rather, temporality refers to a mode of relationship with the uncontainable, the infinite.

⁵² Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 106.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

The nonrest of time is a disquietude of the same by the other-*in-the-same*, that is, by the infinite-*in-the-finite*. But this *in* does not refer to presence. It is a nonpresence, but a nonpresence that is not a nonrelation, a nonpresence that is not a pure absence. A relation remains. This relation is diachrony.⁵⁷

The always of time is produced in the metaphysical desire of the same for the other. The impossibility of the identification of the desiring 'I' and the desired other disrupts the intentional consciousness. In this disproportion between desire and the desired the always of time is engendered.⁵⁸ This disproportion of desire – that is, the impossibility to receive a response from the desired, the necessary incompleteness of desiring – does not merely refer to a lack. It also signifies an “excess.”⁵⁹ But, again, here *signifying* does not imply a proportionate relation between the act of signification and what is signified. It signifies what is beyond signification, beyond the intentionality of consciousness. The infinite cannot be received, that is, contained, within the finite. But it nevertheless affects the finite. The impossibility of the other entering into the same, or being received by the same, amounts to a patient endurance on the side of the same. This passive, patient enduring is an awaiting: it is the duration of time.⁶⁰

In this way, both death and time are understood as modalities of the more fundamental relation with the infinite that originates in the face of the other. The sense of inadequation that belongs to both the essence of time and the question of death originates in the fundamental inadequacy of the same to contain the infinite within its totality. The blow of time cannot be fully received by the I since it comes from what cannot be grasped by consciousness. The duration of time, properly speaking, is a receiving and standing still, a receiving without receiving, an awaiting. Similarly, the I does not, to be precise, experience the death of another person, but is rather *affected* by it in its identity as an infinitely responsible I. “Thou shalt not kill” is the call that disrupts

⁵⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 115.

the identity of the I in the nearness of the death of the other for whose death the I is infinitely responsible. What shows itself in my relation with someone who dies is an infinite culpability, that is, “the culpability of the survivor.”⁶¹ The unknown of death is the very nudity of the face in whose nearness my relation with the infinite is inverted into culpability.⁶² In this sense, death is not the end that marks the finitude of time and time is no longer understood on the basis of the nothingness of the end that death was supposed to mark. Rather, it is death that is understood as “a function of time” without including in it “the very project of time.”⁶³ What I ‘experience’ in my relation with the death of the other is the infinite culpability of a survivor that takes place during the patient endurance of time.

With this interpretation of the relation with the death of another person and the preliminary sketch of the structure of temporality that followed, we can now return to the problem of my own death in order to supply our previous ontological analysis with an examination of the dimension of alterity which gives the question of death, even my own death, its mysterious depth. Here too the dilemma of death is closely linked to time, i.e., the time of psychism or interiority as patience, which must be distinguished from the time of history.

In *Totality and Infinity*, in a section titled “The Ethical Relation and Time,” Levinas engages with the discussion of the relation between my death and time, starting from the time of interiority. The relation between the same and the other requires first of all their separation. The absolute alterity of the other implies that this separation must be a radical separation rather than a mere opposition. The same and the other are not merely antithetical as thesis and antithesis. Terms in opposition are not truly separate, as they are internally related to each other and, therefore, mutually dependent. Dialectical relation cannot adequately describe the ethical relation because for a synoptic gaze that

⁶¹ Ibid., 12.

⁶² Ibid., 117.

⁶³ Ibid., 113.

observes the dialectical relation, the poles in relation are still encompassable within a totality. For transcendence to be possible, correlation is not enough: the terms should be absolutely non-integrateable. A radical separation of the same with regard to the other is thus a presupposition for the relation between them.

The adequate separation of the same is produced in psychism.⁶⁴ Psychism is not a mere reflection of being; it is rather an event in being, a way of being, which is resistant to totality. Psychism is in itself a logical absurdity, a posteriority of the anterior. It is an effect of being, but, at same time, it is older than being in the sense that the cause of being could only be known by thought. The cause of being comes only after its effect. Psychism is thus the improbable phenomenon in being that extends beyond being. It is a revolution in being that resists the totalizing force of being: "it is," Levinas writes, "the feat of radical separation."⁶⁵

Psychism, or interiority, thus makes the relation with the otherwise than being possible. It resists the totalizing force of being. Interiority has its own order and its own time, distinct from the order and time of universal history, which is the ontological ground in which the singularity of the I is denied. Interiority is "the very possibility of a birth and a death that do not derive their meanings from history."⁶⁶ By virtue of interiority, I am more than the interval between my birth and my death as they are marked in the time of history. This means that mortal existence unfolds in a time otherwise than the time of history. Death is thus not an end.

Absolute separation is a precondition for true pluralism. Separated beings could come, and remain, in relation only if their independence is not dissolved in a totality. In the metaphysical relation the terms are independent yet in relation. "A being independent of and yet at the same time exposed to the other is," Levinas writes, "a

⁶⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 54.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 55.

temporal being."⁶⁷ Its time is the postponement of the inevitable violence of death. Levinas's attempt here is not only to rethink the relation between death and time, but also to invert the relation between time and freedom. It is not a will whose freedom is limited by entering into a relation with another will. Rather, freedom itself is the possibility to postpone the primordial fact of death. As he puts it, "such a being is exposed, but also opposed to violence. Violence does not befall it as an accident that befalls a sovereign freedom. The hold that violence has over this being – the mortality of this being – is the primordial fact. Freedom itself is but its adjournment by time."⁶⁸

The skill to postpone death is "inscribed in the very existence of the body."⁶⁹ Corporeity is the mode of existence of a being who is the very simultaneity of presence and absence. My bodily existence consists in the ability to postpone the present at the very moment of my presence. The fact that I am a body does not, however, fix me as a self-identical corporeal being who then enters into a relation with the other. As Levinas puts it, "such a distension in the tension of the instant can only come from an infinite dimension which separates me from the other, both present and still to come, a dimension opened by the face of the Other."⁷⁰ The concept of the body is paradoxical. It is not a mere thing, but nor is its concept exhausted by the meaning of a 'lived body.' My body is not a mere thing, but at the same time it does not completely coincide with *me*. According to Levinas, this paradoxical character of the body signifies the temporality of human existence: "the will is affected as a thing by the things ... but gives itself a reprieve and postpones the contact by the against-death of postponement."⁷¹

Death is the instant at which my skill to postpone ceases to apply. This does not mean that the unknown of death is reducible to an end of being. It does not belong to the alternatives of being and nothingness. The instant of death is ungraspable and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 224.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 225

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 229.

unassumable not due to empirical ignorance but because of the impossibility to situate it within any horizon. Death is the absolute violence that strikes me as “murder in the night.”⁷² The inherent unknowability of death, its impossibility, situates it in the same region from which absolute alterity approaches me. The unwonted moment of death does not strike me as my ownmost private experience, for in the absurdity of death, “an interpersonal order”⁷³ is maintained. In the solitude of death, there remains a sense of murder, a “consciousness of hostility.”⁷⁴ It is as though death approaches me from a foreign and hostile other: “in the being for death of fear I am not faced with nothingness, but faced with what is *against me*.”⁷⁵ Thus, behind the threat of my death there lurks a reference to an other whose signification would not be annihilated by death. Insofar as an absolutely other is behind the threat of my death – however hostile and however malevolent – there remains open, precisely due to its absolute alterity, the possibility for me to appeal to her friendship and medication. “Death,” that is to say, “approaches in the fear of someone and hopes in someone.”⁷⁶

Behind the nothingness of death there lurks another will in my will, in the sense of the other-in-the-Same, or the infinite-in-the-finite. It is because of this relation with the infinite, affecting me from behind and beyond the nothingness of death, that death cannot render life meaningless. As Levinas puts it, “the will ... on the way to death but a death ever future, exposed to death but not *immediately*, has time to be for the other, and thus to recover meaning despite death.”⁷⁷

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that in both cases of the death of the other and the death of one’s own, it is the relation with the other that gives the experience of death its mysterious depth. This appears in the experience of the death of the other as an infinite culpability and in the case of my own as an absolute violence

⁷² Ibid., 234.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 236.

coming from a hostile other. In a sense, in both cases, the meaning of death is derived from murder. If my own death appears to me as “murder in the night”⁷⁸ that can never be received or assumed, the death of the other affects me as a responsible me in the call against murder: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’

Faced with the question of death, it is thus impossible to ignore the relation with the other. That is why suicide cannot offer a way out of the hold that the other has on my will. The suicide of the will who prefers death to servitude is doomed to failure because “refusing to serve the other by one’s life does not preclude serving her by one’s death.”⁷⁹ In annihilating its own existence in order to break free from every relation with alterity, “the sovereign and self-enclosed will confirms the foreign will it means to ignore, and finds itself ‘made game of’ by the Other.”⁸⁰ Suicide that is hoped to reveal the absurdity of servitude will never succeed because in the last moment it is inseparable from the pain of “losing” the other and thus recognizes the other in its denial.⁸¹

The tragic character of suicide is indeed rooted in the radicality of the love of life. As Levinas puts it, “the primordial relation of man with the material world is not negativity, but enjoyment and agreeableness.”⁸² The question then is: how is it that suicide appears as a possibility and becomes thinkable? Levinas’s answer is that it is a possibility for a being that is not limited to being, that is, for an existence already metaphysical. Only a being who is “capable of living for the Other and of *being* on the basis of the Other who is exterior to him” is capable of the self-annihilation of its being. Only a being, that is to say, “already capable of sacrifice is capable of suicide.”⁸³ If suicide in the last instant recognizes the other, it is because the being who commits

⁷⁸ Ibid., 234.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 230.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 231.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 149.

⁸³ Ibid.

suicide is a being who *is* already *for* the other. If death is rooted in murder, suicide is rooted in the possibility to die for the other, that is, in sacrifice.

Dying for the Other(s)

The notion of sacrifice signifies the ultimate *form* of pure giving. For, it is in dying for the other – in which the I renounces being contemporary with the triumph of its work and approaches a future that is not its own future – that the logic of exchange is truly transcended. If the time of interiority is the postponement of the inevitable violence of death, sacrifice constitutes a fundamental break because in it the I embraces this violence and goes beyond the time of postponement. Sacrifice is a movement without return in which the I leaves its time for the future of the other. As dying for the other, sacrifice is “to be for death in order to be for that which is after me.”⁸⁴ In sacrifice, the I goes to the limit of the passage to the time of the other.

Sacrifice, as an act of dying for the other, does not, however, exhaust the demands of ethics. For, the I who gives his life for the neighbor would be betraying his responsibility for other others. The correction that the third introduces to the face to face relation implies that the future that the I approaches in sacrifice should be conceived as the future of the other(s) in the collective, rather than the neighbor alone. Sacrifice, that is to say, could be properly understood only as a work of justice. Strictly speaking, then, the movement without return of sacrifice must be understood as a movement toward the infinite, or toward God, that is, “toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.”⁸⁵ “To the idea of the Infinite,” Levinas writes, “only an extravagant response is possible.”⁸⁶ Sacrifice is such a response. The relation of the finite with the infinite is an approach of the infinite by the finite and “sacrifice is the norm and the criterion of that approach.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” 50.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸⁶ Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” 76.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The possibility of meaning despite death that sacrifice brings to the fore owes to its reference to the non-phenomenal order that manifests itself in the collective signification of the face – that is, in *illeity*⁸⁸ – and would not be annulled by my death. The ethical meaning of life originates in “the significance of an authority signifying after and despite my death, signifying to the finite *I*, to the *I* doomed to death, a meaningful order signifying beyond this death. Not, to be sure, any sort of promise of resurrection, but an obligation that death does not absolve.”⁸⁹ The coming to the fore of the ethical meaning of life in sacrifice must not, however, be conceived as an endowment of meaning to an otherwise meaningless world, as if life is meaningless and we are responsible, or free, to endow it with ethical meaning. This view, which is still entrapped in the idea of ontology as first philosophy, would be a misinterpretation of ethics as an existential doctrine. Ethics as first philosophy does not begin with the absurdity of life after the death of a certain god, but rather with the ontologically incomprehensible recognition that life *is* already meaningful despite the fact of death. The ethical meaning of life is not, that is, the outcome of ethics as first philosophy, but its point of departure. The coming to the fore of meaning in sacrifice is a *remembrance*; a remembrance that is not a re-presentation: a remembrance of *an immemorial past*, a forgotten experience of peace, from which responsibility for the other ensues and a remembrance of *a future beyond my death*, the future of the other(s), whose signification is not absolved by my death. Sacrifice as remembrance thus indicates that ontology, the language of politics, does not have an absolute hold on the human being. It disrupts the consciousness of ontology by reminding it that the last word does not belong to being.

⁸⁸ Recall Levinas’ characterization of *illeity* (discussed in Chapter I): “this way for the other to come from I know not where ... this non-phenomenality of the order which, beyond representation affects me unbeknownst to myself ..., we have called *illeity*” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150). Levinas’ neologism, which appears in conjunction with the notion of the third party, highlights, among other things, the collective sense of the face with which the question of justice is brought forth (Ibid.).

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” in *entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 172-3.

However, we have to note that, from the standpoint of ethics as first philosophy, the sacrifice that disrupts the ontological order of politics could only be conceived of as *my* sacrifice. The extravagant generosity of sacrifice is an obligation that is demanded from me alone. I – the unique I who alone can see the tears of the other⁹⁰ – am responsible for the other to the extent of dying for the other. The logic of being is disrupted by *my* dying for the other, through which I testify to the primacy of the fear of killing over the fear of being killed, thereby placing myself “under the judgment of God.”⁹¹ Neither I nor anyone else has the right to extend the demand to sacrifice beyond the first person. I cannot invite others to join me in the to-God of my sacrifice: “this religion is impossible to propose to others, and consequently is impossible to preach.”⁹² Levinas is emphatic on this point, and understandably so, because “to say that the other has to sacrifice himself to the others would be to preach human sacrifice!”⁹³

However, one wonders whether the denial of preaching is not nonetheless still a preaching. That is, is it not that the celebration of my sacrifice by itself a preaching of human sacrifice, despite my emphasis on the asymmetry of responsibility? For I, who am currently busy writing these lines and testifying to the duty of sacrifice as *my* responsibility and no one else’s, am still alive. Having recognized my infinite responsibility for the other, I have not yet given my life to the other but am instead involved in preaching sacrifice as *my* sacrifice in my writing. What I write will remain, and, at least if I am Levinas, will continue to be read and reflected upon. It will continue to preach the sacrifice of the I, regardless of what I myself have or have not done, and will or will not do, for the other. My text will acquire an existence independent of mine, and in so detaching itself from me, the I of my writing becomes an I, any I, who approaches the text from a first person perspective. The preaching of *my* sacrifice thus

⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 23.

⁹¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 244.

⁹² Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” 177.

⁹³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126.

turns into a preaching of human sacrifice, despite my refusal to adopt a third person perspective.

This apparent difficulty does not, however, pose a serious challenge to Levinas. It would be naïve to think that a phenomenologist – whose whole project in a sense revolves around the tension between the singular and the universal in language – could have missed to realize that the emphasis on the uniqueness of the I cannot by itself prevent the celebration of *my* sacrifice from taking on a universal status, applicable to the I in general. The claim to universality is inherent in the work of language and does not simply vanish by adopting a first person perspective. This is, in fact, an underlying theme of Levinas' analysis of the possibility of the reduction of the said to saying, that is, the possibility of unsaying the said through the work of language, or – to use Levinas' own word – through the "abuse"⁹⁴ of language.

The decisive move away from preaching human sacrifice in Levinas' analysis takes places in his refusal to confer to sacrifice – even if it is *my* sacrifice – the status of an *act*. For Levinas, the notion of sacrifice provides "the norm and the criterion"⁹⁵ of the proper approach of the infinite by the finite. Never does it refer to an actual event in which I literally die for the other. That is to say, in its extravagance, sacrifice signifies the structure of the ultimate *form* of pure giving, not an ontological response to the demands of ethics.

To be sure, in "The Trace of the Other" Levinas does indeed use the term 'work' as an equivalent of pure giving.⁹⁶ However, it is crucial to note that the work here does not refer to an ontological work, that is, to what I do. This becomes evident if we compare the notion of the work in this essay with Levinas' quite distinct use of the term 'work' in "The Ego and the Totality"⁹⁷ and in *Totality and Infinity*.⁹⁸ In sharp contrast to

⁹⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁹⁵ Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," 76.

⁹⁶ Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 347-50.

⁹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Ego and the Totality," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 37-9.

“The Trace of the Other,” in these texts the term ‘work’ is taken in its literal sense to refer to ontological activity. The work is the product of the I or the will, through which the will maintains its separation, i.e., its independence, in history.⁹⁹ As we saw, the independence of the will is a necessary pre-condition for the relation with infinity, which can only figure between separated beings. Separation is fundamentally produced in interiority. But the ethical relation requires beings that are separate, not merely as interiority, but also as independent beings in the reality of politics, that is, in history. For, the other “is not satisfied with a ‘good intention’ and a benevolence wholly platonic ... [which] are only the residue of an attitude assumed where one enjoys things, where one can divest oneself of them and offer them.”¹⁰⁰ It is through its work that the will could secure its independence in history.

Unsurprisingly, the passage to politics brings with it the tension between the I, whose uniqueness is confirmed in interiority, and the particular subject of history, whose interiority is lost in the externalization of its labour in the work. “In its work,” Levinas writes, “the will remains unexpressed ... since works take on the anonymity of merchandise, an anonymity into which, as a wage-earner, the worker himself may disappear.”¹⁰¹ As the subject of the work, the will becomes detached from its unique existence as an I, from, that is, the inwardness which is the locus of the relation with the other. Nevertheless, it cannot shut itself up in its independence as a subject of history either, for it “delivers itself to the Other in its work,” be it a foreign or even a hostile other.¹⁰² The work, which, in the anonymity of its objective status, denies the will that produced it, nevertheless exposes the will to the other for “it lends itself to the designs of a foreign will and allows itself to be appropriated.”¹⁰³ In the separation of the will from its work, there originates the possibility for the other to appropriate the work, be it by

⁹⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 226-32.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 225-6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 227.

buying, usurping, or stealing, and, through this appropriation, to lay hold of the will itself: “gold and threats force [the will] not only to sell its products but to sell itself.”¹⁰⁴ This is, Levinas writes, “the part of the eternal truth that materialism involves.”¹⁰⁵

For Levinas, the notion of the work refers to the product of human labour in the most general sense of the term. It includes, not only material things, but all sorts of human activities from which “the world of realities-results”¹⁰⁶ is produced. For Levinas, the inevitable separation of the will from its work refers to an ontological alienation, which begins by the very fact of corporeity. Corporeity, “as the very insertion of [the] body in the world of things,”¹⁰⁷ is the first work of the will. It describes “the ontological regime of a primary self-alienation.”¹⁰⁸ The general possibility of laying hold of the will in its work originates in the possibility of the appropriation of its first work, i.e., its body, which appears as coercion, enslavement, or servitude.

The ultimate instance of the domination of the body is, however, its absolute violation, that is, death. Mortality thus represents the possibility of the absolute domination of the body, i.e., its annihilation, by a hostile other. This is another way of saying that murder belongs to the essence of death – that, even in one’s own death, the relation with the other is not undone. This also explains why suicide, as the work of a courageous will who prefers death to servitude, fails. The will cannot refuse the other by willing the absolute violence of death, for in willing to die, suicide becomes the will’s work, lending itself to be exploited by the other, who may will that very death.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 229.

¹⁰⁵ In his analysis of the work, Levinas at times uses a terminology that is reminiscent of Marx – for example, the characterization of “the worker” as “a wage-earner” (ibid., 226) and the reference to the “market value” of the product of labour as a positive expression of the possibility of its appropriation or alienation (ibid., 228). In this context, it would be tempting to construe his mention of “the eternal truth of materialism” (ibid., 229) as an appreciation of Marx’s dialectical materialism. However, I think this temptation must be resisted. For, Levinas’ analysis of the work lacks the element of history that characterizes Marx’s critique of political economy. His notion of alienation, for instance, seems to be more Hegelian than Marxian, as it refers to an ontological alienation that results from the externalization of human labour in all its forms and applies to history as a whole – rather than, that is, to the specific form of the alienation of labour in market economy. What Levinas cherishes as the *eternal* truth of materialism is perhaps more the achievement of Hegel’s idealism than it is of Marx’s materialism.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 228.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 226.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 226.

Sacrifice as an act, that is, as an ethical work, is subject to the same threat. As soon as sacrifice is conceived of as the work of the will, it would detach itself from the will and its ethical intentions. Dying for the other(s) as work would lend itself to appropriation by other others, who might turn it against the very other(s) the will intended to serve by its sacrifice. Ethics must not thus preach sacrifice as the ultimate ethical work of a will who is exposed to the other as a responsible subject. Insofar as ethics is concerned, the sense of the ultimacy that dying for the other(s) conveys must not be taken as anything beyond providing “the norm and the criterion,” that is, the formal structure, of the proper response to responsibility. The ethical injunction against preaching human sacrifice demands nothing less than an unconditional rejection of sacrifice as work, even in the case of *my* sacrifice. Levinas’ analysis of sacrifice responsibly follows the requirements of this demand.¹⁰⁹

The Return of the Tension

The virtue of Levinas’ characterization of sacrifice as the criterion of the proper approach to the infinite, rather than an ontological act, is twofold: it articulates the ethical significance of sacrifice, while, by unconditionally rejecting sacrifice as work, it ensures that its celebration of *my* sacrifice could not be read as an ethical justification for some sort of prescriptive politics of sacrifice. Nevertheless, this virtue is not an absolute virtue for it comes at a price. The irresolvable tension between ethics and politics does not ever permit ethics to be content with its absolute principles. Just as in the case of the absolute rejection of violence – which we discussed in the previous chapter in the context of the Adorno-Marcuse debate – the unconditional rejection of sacrifice reveals its inadequacy when it confronts the concrete reality of politics, in which sacrifice is, time and again, appropriated by politics for both ethical and unethical purposes. The

¹⁰⁹ It is worth noting that, instead of sacrifice, Levinas’ discussion of death and suicide in *Totality and Infinity* leads to patience, the against death of postponement, during which the will has time to be for the other (ibid., 232-40).

absolute injunction against actual sacrifice, that is to say, could, and must, be problematized in the same way that the absolute rejection of violence was. Just as an unconditional rejection of violence would disregard the ethically significant distinction between the violence committed by the oppressors for the sake of maintaining or extending oppression and the one that is exercised by the oppressed and toward their praxis of liberation, the absolute denunciation of sacrifice as act would fail to adequately engage with the appropriation of sacrifice in politics.

If it is an ethical necessity to appeal to ontology for the sake of the other, then a truly ethical account of sacrifice must be able to adopt concrete political positions with regard to the actual instances of sacrifice that take place in the form of ontological action. For that to be possible, ethics needs to do more than disrupting politics. It needs for a politics that would be able to distinguish between emancipatory and oppressive actualizations of sacrifice in history. To be sure, no actual sacrifice can ever claim to be purely ethical or emancipatory. But imperfection and contingency belong to the question of justice. It would be unjust to place an absolute 'no' against the sacrifice of the oppressed and that of the oppressors alike. For, not only would such an equalizing 'no' risk inadvertently providing an apology for the status quo, but it also has the danger of depriving the oppressed from the emancipatory potentials of sacrifice.

The ethically-justified injunction against human sacrifice must thus be situated within the context of the tension between critique and re-appropriation – if, that is, it is to be non-indifferent to the suffering of the oppressed. We have clarified the structure of this tension and argued that it represents the historical form of the tension between ethics and politics. It is now time to leave the secure realm of theory and engage ourselves with the uncertainties of an actual politics of sacrifice. The (re-)appropriation of sacrifice in 'Alī Sharī'atī's revolutionary ideology exemplifies one such politics – to its analysis we shall now turn.

Chapter VI

The Principle of Martyrdom: Sacrifice Politicized

The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living. At the very time when men appear engaged in revolutionizing things and themselves, in bringing about what never was before, at such very epochs of revolutionary crisis do they anxiously conjure up into their service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battle cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in such time-honored disguise and with such borrowed language.¹

Ali Sharī'atī: a Biographical Sketch

During the years preceding the Iranian Revolution of 1979 – which was posthumously called the Islamic Revolution – Iran was a fertile scene of emerging discourses of dissent. In reaction to the rapidly changing socio-economic conditions, numerous oppositional camps were formed, appealing to a variety of resources – including, but not limited to, Shi'ism, Marxism, anti-colonialism, and nationalism – in order to voice their discontent and articulate their demands. Despite their fundamental ideological differences, they nevertheless were unified in the struggle against the Shah's regime, unanimously regarded as a servant of Western imperialism, betraying the nation's cultural pride and sabotaging its political and economic autonomy. In this amalgamation of conflicting alliances, Sharī'atī's revolutionary thought occupied a central place.

¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008), 1.

Sharī'atī was born in 1933 in a religious family. His father, whom he later proudly acknowledged as the most influential figure in the development of his thought,² was a progressive cleric who believed that religion has to be reformed according to the needs of the time. From very early in his life, Sharī'atī studied the Quran and other Islamic texts with his father. It was also through his father that he was first exposed to Western thought – in particular, Socialism, which the reformist cleric considered to be compatible with Shi'ism. Sharī'atī's first book – a rather modified translation of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Judat al-Sahār's *Abūzār: the God-Worshipping Socialist*, published in Persian in 1955 – attested to the formative influence of his father, while already foreshadowing mature Sharī'atī's revolutionary reformulation of the relation between Shi'ism and Socialism.

Having studied at the teacher's college and taught in elementary schools for a few years afterwards, Sharī'atī entered Mashhad University in 1958 for a Master's degree in Arabic and French. Right after finishing his MA in 1960, he moved to Paris to begin his Ph.D. in sociology and Islamic history at the Sorbonne. There he avidly studied contemporary radical political thought. During this time, he also translated Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Poetry?* and Ernesto Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*. In particular, he was fascinated by the thought of Frantz Fanon – though he challenged him on the question of the relation between religion and revolution – and also began a translation of his *Wretched of the Earth* and *The Fifth Year of the Algerian War* (better known as *A Dying Colonialism*). Beside his academic activities, during the few years he spent in France Sharī'atī was also directly engaged with politics. He joined the Liberation Movement of Iran, collaborated with the Algerian National Liberation Front, and immersed himself in revolutionary student organizations.

² Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," MERIP Reports, no. 102, Islam and Politics (January 1982), 25.

Convinced of an urgent need for revolution, and with a full baggage of political knowledge and experience, Sharī'atī returned to Iran in 1964. The conceptual apparatus that he produced in the remainder of his short life utilized this eclectic knowledge in service to his revolutionary agenda. Sharī'atī's instrumental use of theoretical and religious categories created a seductive language in which everyone could hear their own voice. It facilitated the much-needed dialogues between the opposing revolutionary camps and provided a theoretical justification for their strategic alliances. Bringing a wide range of audiences together, Sharī'atī's provocative writings and fiery speeches played a crucial role in the mobilization of the Iranian revolutionary youth against the Shah's regime and secured his position as one of the main theoreticians of the Revolution.³

Sharī'atī's arbitrary mixture of Western and Islamic resources, in which depth and precision are often compromised in favor of an instrumental pragmatism, has made him an easy target for devastating academic criticism. But, just as Sharī'atī's admirers tend to ignore the inconsistency and superficiality of his thought, hasty academic rejections often reductively attribute the seductive character of Sharī'atī's ideological construction to its social or psychological function. My conviction is that these oversimplifications miss the more fundamental, philosophical aspects of Sharī'atī's thought, which were crucial in the creation of its unique appeal. If Sharī'atī's mixture of Shi'ism and Marxism succeeded in attracting the revolutionary youth, it was because he identified a link between them that was not utterly illusory. The originality of Sharī'atī's 'ideology,' I argue, consisted in the specific way he utilized a religious discourse to articulate the ethical content that Shi'ism and Marxism shared, which then allowed him to use Marxist categories in order to formulate a revolutionary interpretation of Shi'ism – though, admittedly, both ethical content and revolutionary politics were ultimately

³ Yann Richard's summary conclusion is hardly an exaggeration: "Ali Shariati did the most to prepare Iranian youth for revolutionary upheaval" (Yann Richard, "Contemporary Shi'i Thought," in *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, by Nikki R. Keddi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 200).

betrayed in the instrumental and undialectical product that came out of this juxtaposition. My goal in this chapter is to examine this complex process and demonstrate how and where Sharī'atī's revolutionary politics betrayed its own ethical aspirations. With this in mind, I will formulate Sharī'atī's attempt as an emancipatory re-appropriation of ethics, but one that ultimately failed – i.e., turned into an ideology – due to its undialectical politicization of sacrifice.

The Movement and the Institution

Sharī'atī makes a distinction between a movement (*nihzat*) and an institution (*nahād*).⁴ A movement emerges as a response to “the needs of the time,”⁵ that is, the needs of a particular group of people, which could be defined as a class, an ethnic group, the followers of a faith, and so on. It relies on “an ideology,”⁶ “a young mobilizing faith,”⁷ which could critically reflect on the existing conditions of the society and determine the ideals and goals of the movement according to the needs of those who are oppressed or disadvantaged under these conditions. A social movement is therefore fundamentally revolutionary. It is necessarily critical of the status quo and, having a claim to “the now,”⁸ is committed to change it. The notions of “strife, struggle, and combative action” are, Sharī'atī concludes, inseparable from the definition of the social movement.⁹

The situation drastically changes if a social movement succeeds, that is, if it rises to power, either after achieving its goals or on the path toward it. As the new ruling body, its function changes. Struggle and critical action give their place to the preservation of power and the building of institutions. In this process, the youthful and progressive spirit of the movement gradually dies. Assuming the position of power, the

⁴ Ali Sharī'atī, *Tashayyu'-i 'Alavī va Tashayyu'-i Safavī*, vol. 9, *Majmu'-i Āsār* (Tehran: Chāppakhsh va Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Ali Sharī'atī, 2007), 41-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.* Note that for Sharī'atī the notion of ‘ideology’ has a positive connotation. In numerous occasions, he refers to his own thought as an ideology.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

dynamic and revolutionary movement turns into a static, conservative, and anti-revolutionary institution.¹⁰

According to Sharī'atī, history is filled with revolutionary and emancipatory movements that followed this path and after victory, eventually, metamorphosed into an oppressive political institution. The history of Zoroastrianism exemplifies one such process.¹¹ Zoroastrianism began as an emancipatory movement, opposing the ruling power of the time. Later, during the Sassanid period, it triumphed and became the dominant religion. But then, at the height of its political power, it began to transform. Zoroastrianism, which once ruled over "the hearts and ideals" of the people, became the sovereign religion, now dominating only "the minds," that is, "the appearance of life."¹² Detached from the real needs of the people, it ceased to be an emancipatory ideology and regressed into a conservative state religion. A dynamic movement turned into a static institution, a "progressive faith" into a "regressive" one.¹³

The history of Marxism, Sharī'atī suggests, serves as another example of such a transformation. In the second half of the nineteenth century, he argues, dialectical materialism emerged as the philosophy of the labour movement, a genuine emancipatory "faith" that developed as communism, engendering "new forces and new faiths" all over the world.¹⁴ Communism continued to more and more attract the youth, the intellectuals, and the lower and oppressed classes until eventually, during the period between the two World Wars and as a result of the victories of the communist revolutions, it politically prevailed. It thus became the ideology of the ruling powers. As a result, it began to gradually transform into a lifeless institution, no longer capable of begetting fresh thoughts and inspiring revolutionary actions. Writing in the 1970s, Sharī'atī argues that with the failure of communism to satisfy the needs of the oppressed

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴ Ibid., 49.

people, recent time has been ripe for the emergence of fresh and dynamic movements to fill the gap. As he puts it:

In the last fifteen or twenty years, in Africa and Latin America (Algeria, Egypt, Congo, Syria, Libya, Cuba, Brazil, etc.), national movements (progressive, anti-colonial nationalisms) have been more progressive than communist ones, because contemporary anti-colonial nationalisms are [fresh] movements, while, after the second World War, the ideological communism of the nineteenth century has turned into a ruling system, a political power of its own – and this is a sign that its mobilizing force has faded. This explains why those communists, who felt this sickness after Eastern European movements and anti-colonial revolts in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, distanced themselves from this [i.e., the communist] global power, withdrew from its official organizations, and created independent groups or joined the progressive national movements.¹⁵

With this background, Sharīʿatī turns his attention to the history of Islam in order to formulate his well-known distinction between *ʿAlavī* and *Şafavī* Shiʿism.¹⁶ The history of Shiʿism is, according to Sharīʿatī, divided into two distinct periods which have led to the development of two opposing kinds of Shiʿism. Roughly speaking, the first period (*ʿAlavī*) begins with the death of the Prophet Muhammad and ends in early sixteenth century, when the Safavid Empire rose to power, and the second (*Şafavī*) extends from the time of the Safavids to the present. During the first period, when Shiites – i.e., the followers of Ali Ibn Abī Ṭālib¹⁷ – represented a powerless minority opposing the ruling power of the Sunni caliphs, Shiʿism was a genuine revolutionary movement. With the Safavid Empire’s appropriation of Shiʿism as the official religion of the state in the beginning of the sixteenth century, Shiʿism gradually lost its emancipatory potentials and turned into a static institution.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

¹⁶ Before making this move, however, Sharīʿatī secures his claim to the status of a faithful Shiʿa intellectual by clarifying that he considers the examination of Shiʿism on the basis of the distinction between movement and institution and on a par with Zoroastrianism and Marxism to be legitimate only because at the moment he is approaching the issue from a purely sociological dimension, temporarily leaving aside its philosophical and theological aspects (ibid., 50).

¹⁷ *ʿAlavī* literally means related to Ali.

¹⁸ Ibid., 50-1.

The construction of binary oppositions, such as the ones between the movement and the institution and between 'Alavī and Ṣafavī Shi'ism, is in fact an essential part of all of Sharī'atī's writings. Everything for him eventually returns to a transhistorical, ethical distinction between the oppressed (*mazlūm*) and the oppressors (*ẓālim*), which allows him to, sometimes quite carelessly, conflate what is historical and contingent with general ahistorical abstractions. In the brief sketch that is presented above, such conflations are already apparent in his equal application of an abstract theoretical distinction between the movement and the institution to three quite distinct historical cases, i.e., Zoroastrianism, Marxism, and Shi'ism. But he would not stop there. In fact, Sharī'atī goes to the extent to divide all human societies and all religions throughout history into two groups: the wealthy nobility and their false religions and the poor working class and the true religions that have come to their rescue.¹⁹

For Sharī'atī, the truth or falsity of religions and schools of thought is also directly reflected in the sociohistorical status of the prophets, which he again divides into two groups: those who belonged to the lower class, both socially and economically, and those who belonged to the upper class. He refers to the first group of the prophets, i.e., those he considers to be the messengers of true religions, as the Abrahamic prophets, for Abraham, he contends, was the "universal founder" of this tradition, even though the movement actually predated him.²⁰ The second group of the prophets, i.e., the harbingers of institutional religions, includes those who belonged to the nobility, such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, Buddha, Zarathustra, Mani, and Mazdak, or even the founders of moral and philosophical schools in Ancient Greece, i.e., Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.²¹

According to Sharī'atī, the immediate consequence of this difference in social status has

¹⁹ Ali Sharī'atī, "Ali va Haiyāt-i Bārvarash Pas az Marg," in *Ali*, vol. 26, *Majmu'-'i Āsār* (Tehran: Qalam and Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Ali Sharī'atī, 2011), 589-590; see also, Ali Sharī'atī, "Shahādat," in *Husayn Vāris-i Ādam*, vol. 19, *Majmu'-'i Āsār* (Tehran: Qalam and Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Ali Sharī'atī, 2016), 138-9.

²⁰ Sharī'atī, "Shahādat," 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139-140. As we saw, in *Tashayyu'-'i 'Alavī va Tashayyu'-'i Ṣafavī*, Sharī'atī considers Zoroastrianism as initially an emancipatory movement. Here, he includes Zarathustra among the second group of the prophets, whose ties with the nobility seem to have undermined the emancipatory potentials of his religion. These kinds of ambiguities and inconsistencies are in fact quite prevalent in Sharī'atī's writings, to the extent that it could be seen as a defining characteristic of his thought.

been that the prophets of the nobility appealed to the existing authorities for the propagation of their ideas, while the Abrahamic prophets delivered a promise of emancipation that enabled them to mobilize the power of the people against the status quo.²²

For Sharī'atī, it is precisely this fundamental characteristic of 'for-the-oppressed-people' and 'against-the-oppressive-state' that defines the Abrahamic tradition. This characterization leads him to treat the Abrahamic religions as the various manifestations of a single movement throughout history, whose last representative was Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Islam, Sharī'atī thus concludes, is not simply a religion among others and should not be conceived of as the exclusive religion of Muhammad or the Quran. Rather, it is the culmination of a universal movement that long predated Muhammad.²³

In "Husayn Vāris-i Ādam," Sharī'atī elaborates on what he considers to be the universal message of Islam and how it is conveyed in the Quran. According to Sharī'atī, insofar as we are concerned with "historical, social, political, and economic contradictions" and struggles rather than theological and philosophical issues, Allah and the people stand on one side.²⁴ In fact, he goes further and suggests that in the "social verses" of the Quran, one should replace the word Allah with 'the people' in order to reveal the "objective meaning" of the verse.²⁵ In order to elucidate this point, he appeals to a *hadīṣ*²⁶: "on the day of resurrection, God says to the person who stands before the divine judgment: I was sick and you did not pay me a visit. The person asks, with wonder: Oh God! You, the great transcendent God! How could you have become sick? God responds: such and such a person was sick and you did not care. And God says: I was hungry and thirsty, and you did not care. The person asks: How come? Oh

²² Ibid., 142.

²³ Ibid., 142-143

²⁴ Sharī'atī, "Husayn Vāris-i Ādam," in *Husayn Vāris-i Ādam*, vol. 19, *Majmu'-'i Āsār* (Tehran: Qalam and Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Ali Sharī'atī, 2016), 61.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ In Islamic thought, *hadīṣ* refers the sayings of the Prophet and the twelve imams.

God! You are free from wants. And God responds: such and such a person was thirsty and hungry and you did not think of his needs. God then continues to put Himself in the position of all the people, one by one, and holds everyone responsible."²⁷ Sharī'atī thus concludes that the *political* message of Islam is nothing but the emancipation of the people, or, more precisely, the oppressed from their fetters and suffering. Consequently, he rejects the classification of the people based on ethnicity, race, class, social status, etc. and contends that the same binary structure that determines the movement of history eternally divides the people into two groups, oppressors and the oppressed, sinful and pious. "In [Allah's] eyes," he writes, "all ethnicities and races are but one: the people! And in His religion the people are but two: pious and sinful."²⁸

According to Sharī'atī, words such as slave, servant, peasant, serf, and the proletariat are all just different names for the same thing: the oppressed. It was, he argues, Marx's shortsightedness that led him to read too much into the differences between these various categories of the oppressed and confer a privileged status to the proletariat as its historical representative.²⁹ For Sharī'atī, the notion of the class struggle signifies nothing but the eternal struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed. Such dehistoricization allows Sharī'atī to make extensive use of Marxist terminology throughout his writings, without giving up his monotheistic conception of history. Just as in the case of the notion of the class struggle, in each case he generalizes the Marxian categories to fit his own conceptual framework. The opposition between class society and classless society, for instance, is for him the social manifestation of the opposition between monotheism and polytheism.³⁰ Accordingly, he construes the classless society that Marxists are after as the utopian goal of the great universal revolution that the monotheistic religions had already promised. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of the Marxist revolutionary discourses of the time, Sharī'atī makes a distinction between the

²⁷ Sharī'atī, "Husayn Vāris-i Ādam," 61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

primitive, or pre-historical, classless societies and the classless society that is supposed to come out of the last revolution at “the end of the history of contradictions and discriminations.”³¹ The former were “unconscious,” “instinctual,” “static,” “lifeless,” and “missionless,” while the latter will be “conscious,” “progressive,” “dynamic,” “alive,” and will convey the ideal of the rule of God over nature.³²

A Revolutionary Politics of Martyrdom

‘Alavī Shi’ism represents that faction within Islam which was able to preserve the revolutionary spirit of Muhammad’s movement. Like all other progressive movements, however, the triumphant Islamic movement was subject to the process of transformation into a regressive institution of power. Its metamorphosis, which began right after the Prophet’s death, initially manifested itself as a fissure, an angle of deviation between “the ideology of Islam” and “the [political] history of Islam,” between, that is, “truth and reality.”³³ For Sharī‘atī, this gap gradually widened until, at the time of Uṣmān Ibn ‘Affān, the third of the Rashidun Caliphate (AD 644–AD 656), pre- and anti-revolutionary forces resurfaced and claimed the movement.³⁴

The first victim of this transformation was Ali Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the fourth Rashidun caliph and the first Shi’a imam (AD 656–AD 661). Determined to revitalize the true message of the revolutionary faith that Muhammad had brought, Ali opened a new battlefield, this time against a hypocritical force that was threatening to undermine the religion from inside.³⁵ He heroically fought this holy war until he was assassinated by a member of the extremist group, Kharijites. Ali’s martyrdom marked the end of the Rashidun Caliphate, which was soon to be replaced by the Umayyad Caliphate (AD 661–AD 750). His legacy, however, was destined to be kept alive by the eleven Shi’a

³¹ Ibid., 43.

³² Ibid.

³³ Sharī‘atī, “Shahādat,” 147.

³⁴ Ibid., 147-8.

³⁵ Ibid., 149.

imams that emerged from his kinship. The second imam was Ali's elder son and the Prophet's grandson, Hasan Ibn Ali (AD 661–AD 670). He inherited the position of the *imāmat* at a time when “hypocrisy had penetrated into the most intimate levels of [his] army,” the strategic sections of the land were being controlled by the Muslim enemy (i.e., the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'āvīah), and the people were corrupted by “ignorance and frailty.”³⁶ Hasan was thus bitterly forced to sign a peace treaty with Mu'āvīah in order to protect what was left of Shi'ism and its community – a peace which for Sharī'atī means a defeat as it signifies the victory of “aristocratic Islam” over the “Islam of justice.”³⁷

It is in this historical condition that Ali's younger son, Husayn Ibn Ali, receives the position of the third Shi'a imam (AD 670–AD 680 AD). He became the inheritor of a movement from which practically nothing had left: “no army, no armor, no resource, and no organized power ... nothing!”³⁸ But there was still hope. For, the faith was still alive, still breathing in “the hearts [and] the minds”³⁹ of the people. It was the final target of the enemy, who had hid behind the veil of the Quran and the Islamic tradition (*sunnat*), to conquer the hearts and the minds and cut the last breath of Muhammad's faith. It was, Sharī'atī writes, one of those rare moments in history, when the fate of a faith and of a people depended on the action of a single man, that is, Husayn.⁴⁰ He must do something. He must protect this faith, the irreplaceable heritage of Muhammad, the last remnant of a light that was soon to die out. But, with empty hands, he could not. Husayn had entered the scene of history in an impossible situation, with an unbearable responsibility: on the one hand, he could not remain silent and give in to the tyrannical rule of the new Umayyad caliph – Yazīd Ibn Mu'āvīah (AD 680–AD 683) who had recently replaced his father – that threatened to wipe out the true spirit of Islam; on the

³⁶ Ibid., 150.

³⁷ Ibid., 151.

³⁸ Ibid., 152.

³⁹ Ibid., 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 152.

other hand, he did not possess the means necessary to initiate a jihad (*jihād*), the holy war, to defend the religion of his grandfather.⁴¹

It was in this impossible situation that Husayn appealed to the principle of martyrdom, a principle that for Sharīʿatī is independent and superior to the principle of jihad.⁴² According to Sharīʿatī, the greatness of “Husayn and Husayns [i.e., the likes of Husayn]” consists in their courage to place themselves under “the judgment of God and the people” and testify to the righteousness of their responsibility “with their lives and with their deaths.”⁴³ The significance of their heroism goes beyond the history of Shiʿism and affects the humanity as a whole, for it upholds the very humanity of human beings. Therefore, Sharīʿatī argues, in order to fully appreciate the significance of the historical event of Husayn’s martyrdom in the desert of Karbalā, we have to understand the principle of martyrdom, which is “greater than Husayn himself” but is revealed in the glory of his martyrdom.⁴⁴

According to Sharīʿatī, jihad is the principle of the time of strength, when the followers of a faith possess the means necessary to fight and protect their lives and dignity. Martyrdom is, however, the principle of the time weakness, when a people is utterly deprived, incapable of engaging in battle.⁴⁵ Husayn, “the great teacher of martyrdom,”⁴⁶ stood up at the time of weakness, the time of the impossibility of victory. He revolted with empty hands and sacrificed himself to remind those who understand jihad in the context of “possibilities,” “those who conceive of victory only as the overcoming of tyranny,” that martyrdom is not “defeat,” but rather an “election” in which the martyr becomes “victorious ... before the court of freedom and in the temple of love.”⁴⁷ The martyr is a “witness”⁴⁸ in a double sense: through sacrifice, the martyr of

⁴¹ Ibid., 170-171.

⁴² Ibid., 214.

⁴³ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 203-204.

martyrdom⁴⁹ becomes the witness of truth, of the truth of the history of humanity, which is the struggle against tyranny; but his martyrdom also testifies to – i.e., lets people witness – the message of hope in a world bereft of possibilities.

The significance of Sharī'atī's interpretation of martyrdom could not be fully appreciated if we disregard the historical context in which it developed. Sharī'atī formulated his principle of martyrdom in direct opposition to the contemporary views of Husayn's martyrdom, which he thought had neutralized its revolutionary force. In particular, he was concerned with the apolitical narratives that dominated the popular culture of Karbalā and the political, though not revolutionary, interpretations that had gained prominence under the social and institutional authority of the Shi'a clerics.

In Shi'a scholarship, Husayn's martyrdom is commonly approached as simultaneously a historical event and a religious and theological issue, a topic, that is, of concern to both the science of history and the science of Islamic scholastic theology (*kalām*). Any study of the event of Karbalā would thus need to examine the available historical documents alongside the existing religious sources, in particular the Quran and the *hadīṣ*. In this context, the meaning and significance of Husayn's martyrdom would be contingent upon the interpreter's position on the relation between the historical and the theological. A central point of divergence between history and *kalām* on the topic of Husayn's martyrdom could be summarized as follows: as a purely historical event, the confrontation between Husayn and Yazīd seems to have been a struggle over the rule of the Islamic sovereignty, which ended by Husayn's defeat. However, according to the *hadīṣ*, imams were in possession of a knowledge of the past and the future. Consequently, Husayn must have known beforehand that his revolt would lead not only to his defeat, but also to the death of his own, his kin, and his

⁴⁸ Note that the literal meaning of the word *shahādat*, i.e., the Persian equivalent of martyrdom, is to witness or to testify.

⁴⁹ Sharī'atī makes a distinction between "the martyrs of jihad" and "the martyrs of martyrdom" (Sharī'atī, "Shahādat," 228). For example, Hamzah – Muhammad's uncle, sometimes referred to as 'the prince of the martyrs,' who fought alongside the Prophet and was killed in the battle of Uhud, was a martyr of jihad. Husayn, however, was "the prince of the martyrs" among the martyrs of martyrdom.

followers. The task of the interpreter of Karbalā would thus consist in explicating the meaning of Husayn's decision to engage in an already lost battle. Depending on which source, *kalām* or history, is given priority, interpretations of Husayn's martyrdom could roughly be divided into two main categories, martyrdom theories and sovereignty theories. The former would include those theories that portray martyrdom as the central theme of the event of Karbalā that has a divine meaning beyond the historical fate of the battle. The latter would be those theories that, in spite of Husayn's knowledge of the future, consider his original intention to be the establishment of an Islamic sovereignty and portray martyrdom as the unwanted (though still holy) outcome of the event of Karbalā.

Despite its evident reductiveness, the dichotomization of the accounts of Karbalā into two main groups has the benefit of providing a general framework that could help us situate Shar'atī's position with regard to the contemporary alternatives. The analytical utility of this binary classification could be further illuminated if we take a brief look at another, more sophisticated, taxonomy. In a recent historical review, Muhammad Isfandiyāri distinguishes eight different interpretations of Karbalā: 1) the defensive jihad theory,⁵⁰ according to which Husayn was simply forced to engage in the battle in order to protect himself and his followers; 2) the sovereignty-martyrdom theory,⁵¹ which argues for a transition in Husayn's intention, from establishing an Islamic sovereignty in the early stages of the revolt to choosing martyrdom when he eventually realized that victory is impossible; 3) the mystic martyrdom theory,⁵² which highlights the gnostic element of Husayn's martyrdom, such as the love of God and the intention to return to God through sacrifice; 4) the mandatory martyrdom theory,⁵³ which considers martyrdom as a singular duty of the person of Husayn (commanded by God for reasons

⁵⁰ Muhammad Isfandiyāri, *Ashūra'shināsi: Pazūhishī Darbārah-'i Hadaḡ-i Imam Husayn* (Tehran: Nay, 2014), 55-63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 64-5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 65-71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 71-6.

unknown to ordinary minds and applicable only to Husayn); 5) the redemptive martyrdom theory,⁵⁴ according to which Husayn knowingly sacrificed himself so that in return God would give him the power to redeem the Shiites on the day of resurrection; 6) the political martyrdom theory,⁵⁵ which highlights the emancipatory social and political dimensions of Husayn's martyrdom (Sharī'atī's interpretation would belong here); 7) the sovereignty theory,⁵⁶ which emphasizes the establishment of the Islamic sovereignty as the main goal of Husayn's revolt and denies that his suprahuman knowledge included the details of earthly matters, such as the exact date and place of his martyrdom; and 8) the sum theory,⁵⁷ which is a modified version of the sovereignty theory that departs from it only in its account of the limits and range of Husayn's knowledge.

Except the first, i.e., the defensive jihad theory that outright denies Husayn's engagement in any act of revolt, the rest could be seen as either martyrdom theories (nos. 3, 4, 5, 6 above) or sovereignty theories (nos. 2, 7, 8 above). In the 1970s, when Sharī'atī was formulating his account of Husayn's martyrdom, the prevailing alternative views were the popular redemptive martyrdom theory (no. 5), whose classical representative would be the sixteenth-century elegy, *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*,⁵⁸ and the sovereignty theory (no. 7), which had regained prominence among the Shi'a clerics after the publication of Ni'mat Allāh Ṣālihī Najaf'ābādī's *Shahīd-i Jāvīd* in 1970.⁵⁹ It was specifically against these two interpretations that Sharī'atī positioned his revolutionary reading.

The redemptive martyrdom theory was – and indeed still is – the most influential view in the Iranian popular culture. The basic tenet of this theory, shared by all its variations, is that mourning for Husayn's martyrdom is a highly redemptive activity for

⁵⁴ Ibid., 76-83.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 84-100.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 100-8.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 163-74.

⁵⁸ Mullā Kamāl al-dīn Husayn Vā'iz Kāshifī Biyhaqī and Muhammad Rushan, *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā* (Tehran: Ṣidā-yi Mu'aṣīr, 2011).

⁵⁹ Ni'mat Allāh Ṣālihī Najaf'ābādī, *Shahīd-i Jāvīd* (Tehran: Umīd-i Fardā, 2003).

Shiites, which will be rewarded by Husayn's favorable intercession on the day of resurrection. This view is the underlying theme of the practices of mourning, which are an essential part of the Shi'a culture. Every year, the rituals of mourning reach their height in Muharram, 'the month of mourning,' the tenth day of which, the day of Āshūrā, once witnessed the most tragic of all deaths: the martyrdom of Husayn. But the memory of Husayn's martyrdom is not absent during the rest of the year. In each and every mourning practice, from the commemoration of the holy deaths down to everyday funeral ceremonies, the preachers would always make a detour to remind the audience that no tragedy, no suffering, is comparable to what Husayn and his comrades went through. In fact, the general title of a mourning preacher is *ruzah'khān*, which literally means one who recites *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*.⁶⁰ Written in AD 1502 by Mulā Kamāl al-dīn Haysayn Vā'iz Kāshifī Biyhaqī, *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā* is a classic Persian elegy devoted to the commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom.⁶¹ Although the book has been the target of bitter criticisms by scholarly Shi'a clerics for its extensive use of unauthenticated resources and its distorted account of the event of Karbalā,⁶² its crucial role in the popularization of the redemptive martyrdom theory is hardly ever denied.⁶³

⁶⁰ 'ruzah'khān' literally translates as 'reading the ruzah,' which is short for 'reading the book *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*.'

⁶¹ *ruzah* means 'garden' and *shuhadā* is the plural of *shahīd*, i.e., 'martyr.' The title of the book thus translates as "The Garden of Martyrs."

⁶² Speaking about *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*, Murtaza Mutahharī – a respected and influential cleric who played a significant role in the Islamic Revolution and was highly praised by ayatollah Khumaynī – states: "when I first read the book, I realized that even the names are fake. There are people among the followers of imam Husayn who did not actually exist. There are also many fake names among the enemy. [Vā'iz Kāshānī] has transformed the [historical] stories into myths. Since this was the first book [i.e., the first elegy of Karbalā] written in Persian, preachers, who were mostly uneducated and could not refer to Arabic books, started reading this book in the ceremonies ... *ruzah'khānī* means reading *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*, this very book of lies. Since this book became popular, no one studied the real history of imam Husayn and the business of the clerics became the mythologizing practice of reading *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*. We [i.e., the clerics] thus became *ruzah-khān* ... quoting the myth and disregarding the [real] history of imam Husayn" (Murtazā Mutahharī, *Hamāsah-'i Husaynī*, vol. 1: Sukhanrānī'hā (Tehran: Šadrā, 2000), 88). In a recent study of the misinterpretations of Āshūrā, Siyyid 'Abd al-Hamīd Ziyārī refers to *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā* as "the most famous and the most untrustworthy work in the literature on Āshūrā" and "the original source of [all] the distortions of [the history of] Āshūrā" (Sayyad 'Abd al-Hamid Ziyār, *Jamī'ah"shināsī Tahrīfāt-i Āshūrā: Negarishī Intiqādī bah Rūzah'khā, Maqātil, va Adabiyāt-i Manzūm* (Tehran: Hizārah-'i Quqnūs, 2013), 172).

⁶³ Ayatollah Shaykh Abul Hasan Sha'rānī, for instance, goes to the extent to write that "*Rūzāt al-Shuhadā* has penetrated the thought and belief of the people and affected their hearts more than any other Persian book" (Shaykh Abul Hasan Sha'rānī, "Rūzāt al-Shuhadā," in *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā* (Tehran: Šidā-yi Mu'āšir, 2011), 29).

In *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*, the relation between the finite (i.e., human) and the infinite (i.e., God) revolves around the theme of “suffering.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the book as a whole could be seen as a preaching of suffering as God’s way of testing the truthfulness of those who claim to love him: “suffering is the measure of the living and the criterion which determines the state of [mind of] the people, such that whoever has a claim to God’s love will be tested in the crucible of suffering.”⁶⁵ True believers, true lovers of God, are those who never lose sight of God, even in the midst of the most unbearable situations; those who patiently endure their painful lives without questioning the fate that is ordained for them by God, without, that is, even for a moment doubting the divine plan. An agonizing destiny should in fact be embraced and cherished, for “God inflicts suffering upon those who holds dear.”⁶⁶ The severity of suffering is a reflection of the intensity of God’s love so that “whoever is ahead on the path toward the love of God should [be expected to] accordingly endure greater pain and harsher torment.”⁶⁷

The book begins by recounting the suffering of the prophets, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Job, Zechariah, and Muhammad. The narrative then leads to the conclusion that Muhammad was *the* chosen Prophet, God’s most beloved, because he suffered the most. Muhammad’s pain, however, reaches its height when he foresees the future event of the murder of his grandson, Husayn, in Karbalā. Here, there is an interesting play between the divine position of Muhammad and that of Husayn. Throughout the book, the tragic event of Karbalā is presented as the pinnacle of human suffering. Accordingly, Husayn, the sufferer of Karbalā, is sometimes ranked even above the Prophet.⁶⁸ At other times, however, it is Muhammad who receives a unique place among God’s beloveds because of the pain he endures in witnessing the future murder of his cherished grandson without for a moment doubting God’s benevolence. In any

⁶⁴ The Persian word is *balā*, which could be translated as suffering, woe, torment, misery, catastrophe, or calamity.

⁶⁵ Vā’iz Kāshifī Biyhaqī, *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā*, 32.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

case, it is the uniqueness of the catastrophe of Karbalā, as the utmost possibility of human suffering, that testifies to the righteousness of Shi'ism. And it is Husayn's martyrdom that has privileged the Shiites, the followers of the ultimate religion, with a passage to eternal happiness.

However, it is all contingent upon mourning: "one who weeps for Husayn today would be happy on the day he will come to redeem [the people]."⁶⁹ Husayn offered his blood; Shiites must in turn offer their tears. One who "sheds tears for Husayn would deserve to be taken to heaven."⁷⁰ Karbalā demands the tear of the Shiites, for in its soil, "the seed of martyrdom is planted, a seed that needs the tear [in Persian, the water of the eyes] of the lovers [of Husayn]."⁷¹ The tear of the Shiites is a key condition for redemption. It is a necessary substitute for the blood they failed to offer in Karbalā in support of Husayn. Mourning is Shiites' collective response to this sin, to the guilt of the survivor. Tear purifies the mourners from their sins, making them worthy of Husayn's intercession on the day of resurrection: "God would forgive your sins to the same extent that teardrops would cover your face."⁷² It is because of this central function of tear that *ta'ziyah* – the Shi'a ritualistic theatre of mourning for which *Rūzāt al-Shuhadā* has been a constant source of inspiration – is cherished as "a creed of tear" ("*ā'in-i ashk*")⁷³ and its director as "the conjurer of tears" ("*mu'in al-bukkā*").⁷⁴

Sharī'atī is highly critical of the worship of mourning, which is a constitutive part of the redemptive martyrdom theory. According to Sharī'atī, the worship of mourning divests Husayn's martyrdom of its essential political dimension. Instead of highlighting the message of emancipation that lies at the heart of the event of Karbalā, it encourages a culture of conformism that indefinitely postpones the political responsibilities of the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 477.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 475.

⁷³ Husayn Ismā'īlī, *Tishnah Dar Miqātgah: Matn va Matn'shināsī-i Ta'ziyah (Majmū'ah-i Litten)* (Tehran: Mu'in, 2010), 52.

⁷⁴ Peter J. Chelkowski, "Time Out of Memory: Taziyeh, the Total Drama," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (2005), 21.

Shiites. Kāshifī nicely summarizes what Sharī'atī outrageously rejects in the redemptive martyrdom theory: “[Husayn’s] murder shall not be avenged until the return of Mahdī [the equivalent of Messiah in Shi’ism]. Dear! The thought of this unjust bloodshed has filled the hearts of the people with pain, for which there is no cure except weeping.”⁷⁵

In formulating his version of political martyrdom theory, one of Sharī'atī's main goals was to discredit this highly popular interpretation of Karbalā, which he believed was paralyzing the Shiites' political consciousness. On this point, he wholeheartedly followed Jalāl al-Ahmad, the prominent Iranian intellectual who, a decade before Sharī'atī, had already scorned the culture of mourning: “since the time we forgot the possibility of martyrdom and contented ourselves with merely hallowing the martyrs, we turned out to become the gatekeepers of the graveyards.”⁷⁶ Citing al-Ahmad and building upon him, Sharī'atī writes: “since the time that we, as Jalāl [al-Ahmad] said, ‘forgot the tradition of martyrdom, and occupied ourselves with merely enshrining them, we inevitably submitted to the black death,’ and since the time our women and men, instead of being the true Shiites of ‘Alī, Husayn, and Zaynab, that is, instead of being ‘the followers of the martyrs,’ became ‘merely the mourners of the martyrs,’ eternal mourning has become our destiny.”⁷⁷

For Sharī'atī, the culture of mourning that has dominated the popular understanding of Husayn’s martyrdom and, thereby, subtly and effectively neutralized the political message of Karbalā was a Safavid invention. As a new Islamic power, the Safavid Empire needed to establish its identity by differentiating itself from its powerful rival, the Ottoman Empire. In order to do this, Sharī'atī argues, the Safavids appealed to Shi’ism and the Iranian national identity against the Sunni caliphate of the Turks.⁷⁸ But Shi’ism, which had historically developed as the religion of the minority and guided the

⁷⁵ Vā'iz Kāshifī Biyhaqī, *Rūzat al-Shuhadā*, 105.

⁷⁶ Jalāl al-Ahmad, *Gharb'zadigī*, ed. Husayn Khurram (Tehran: Khurram, 2006), 44.

⁷⁷ Ali Sharī'atī, “Pas az Shahādāt,” in *Husayn Vāris-i Ādam*, vol. 19, *Majmu'-'i Āsār* (Tehran: Qalam and Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Ali Sharī'atī, 2016), 249.

⁷⁸ Sharī'atī, *Tashayyu'-'i 'Alavī va Tashayyu'-'i Safavī*, 139.

struggles of the underdog, had not ever had the opportunity to establish social rituals, symbols, and slogans of its own.⁷⁹ Safavids thus embarked on the transformation of Shi'ism into an official state religion that could fulfill its new task. The rituals of mourning were one outcome of this transformation. They created a “ministry of *ruḏāh'khānī*,” whose task was to forge new rituals, rites, and costumes based on the Western, Christian forms of depicting the passions of Jesus.⁸⁰ Sharī'atī thus contends that ritualistic practices such as *ta'ziyah'gardānī*, *shabīh'sāzī*, *zanjīr'zanī*, and *tiq'zanī* were all Safavid creations, with no precedent in either the Iranian culture, or Shi'ism or Islam.⁸¹ The redemptive martyrdom interpretation of Karbalā was another outcome of this process that emerged from the combination of the old mystic martyrdom theory and the Christian view of the sacrifice of Jesus.⁸² This explains the fact that the rapid proliferation of *Rūḏat al-Shuhadā* right after its publication in 1502 coincided precisely with the period of the establishment of the Safavid Empire (AD 1501–AD 1722).

For Sharī'atī, therefore, the redemptive martyrdom theory, the culture of mourning that it promoted, and the conformist politics that ensued from it were all the result of a conscious attempt by the Safavids to *institutionalize* the Shi'a movement. In formulating his political reading of Husayn's martyrdom, one of his main objectives was to free 'Alavī Shi'ism from the castrating spell of Şafavī conformism and revitalize the former's true, revolutionary force.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 222-3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 223.

⁸¹ Ibid., 224. This is, to be sure, another of Sharī'atī's exaggerations. The rituals of mourning were not totally unprecedented in either the Iranian or in the Islamic culture. *Ta'ziyah*, for example, is known to have close affinities with *siyāvashān*, an Iranian pre-Islamic practice of mourning for the mythical figure, *Siyāvash* (see, for example, Shāhrukh Miskūb, *Sūg-i Siyāvash: Dar Marg va Rastakhīz* (Tehran: Khvārazm, 1971), 81-2, and Şādiq 'Āshūr'pūr, *Namāyish'hā-yi Irānī*, vol. 2: *Ta'ziyah* (Tehran: Sūrah-i Mihr, 2010), 39).

⁸² Sharī'atī, “Shahādāt,” 231. Sharī'atī was not alone in highlighting the influence of Christianity in the formation of the redemptive martyrdom theory. His outspoken critic, Mutahharī, also refers to this point. According to Mutahharī, “I do not know which criminal or criminals ... distorted Husayn's goal [in Karbalā] by saying the same nonsense that Christians say about Jesus, that he had himself killed in order to carry the burden of the people's sin on his shoulders, so that we can commit sins and feel secure” (Mutahharī, *Hamāsah-'i Husaynī*, 22); “we do not know that we have borrowed this [i.e., the redemptive martyrdom theory] from Christianity ... we fail to recognize that this is incompatible with the spirit of Islam, incompatible with Husayn's message. I swear to God that this is an insult to Abā Abd-e-Allāh [i.e., Husayn]. I swear to God that if someone who is fasting in Ramadan associates this thought to Husayn Ibn-i Alī, says that Husayn's martyrdom was for this purpose, and quotes Husayn [in order to justify this association], his fast would be vitiated. [Because] this is a lie about Husayn” (Ibid., 103).

The apolitical redemptive martyrdom theory was not, however, Sharī'atī's only target. He was also concerned with the sovereignty theory, which was indeed political but, in his view, not sufficiently revolutionary. The sovereignty theory has historically been one of the oldest interpretations of Karbalā, dating back at least to Sayyad al-Sharif al-Murtazā (AD 965 –AD 1044).⁸³ During the 1970s, it had regained prominence with the publication of *Shahīd-i Jāvīd*, the ground breaking work of the Shi'a cleric, Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī, which had given rise to a plethora of responses and brought the sovereignty theory to the center of scholarly debates on Husayn's martyrdom. Sharī'atī's sympathetic critique of the sovereignty theory is mainly concerned with Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī's modern formulation of this old view of Husayn's martyrdom.

According to Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī, the existence of the Prophet and the imams has two dimensions: divine and human.⁸⁴ While it is true that, as divine beings, they belong to a sphere beyond the comprehension of ordinary people, we should be able to understand their earthly activities, for they were under an obligation to live among the people and lead them according to the limitations of their human existence.⁸⁵ Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī thus argues that Husayn's revolt must be considered as the action of a wise political leader, independent of his suprahuman knowledge of the future. In this framework, he analyzes Husayn's decision to initiate a revolt based primarily on historical records, though constantly reverting to *hadīṣ* in order to resolve the apparent contradictions between the two sources. This analysis leads Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī to the conclusion that Husayn's intention was simply to dismantle Yazīd's oppressive rule and establish a just Islamic sovereignty.⁸⁶ If he initiated the revolt, it was because the evaluation of the facts of the matter had convinced him that victory was not out of

⁸³ Ali Ibn Husayn Mūsavī (Sayyad al-Sharif al-Murtazā), *Tanzīh al-Anbiyā val-'Aimmaḥ*, ed. Fāris Hassūn Karīm (Qum: Būstān-i Kitāb, 2001), 176-9.

⁸⁴ Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī, *Shahīd-i Jāvīd*, xi.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

reach.⁸⁷ Of course, this did not take place and the revolt led to the martyrdom of Husayn and his followers. But that would not undermine Husayn's initial assessment of the possibility of victory, for the failure of his revolt was the outcome of a chain of events. Husayn's decisions were not informed by a foreknowledge of defeat; nor were they wrong or mistaken if we consider his knowledge of the facts on the ground. His actions were based on precisely calculated and wise decisions that could have led him to victory. The historical fact that the revolt failed must be associated with the occurrence of a series of unpredictable – that is, unpredictable for ordinary human beings – events, for which Husayn could not be held responsible.

For Sharī'atī, this view is a step ahead of the redemptive martyrdom theory, since it at least recognizes that Husayn's martyrdom was political in its essence.⁸⁸ He agrees with Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī that it was the imam's duty to stand up against oppression and fight for the establishment of a just Islamic sovereignty, and that it was his attempt to fulfill this duty that led to the tragedy of Karbalā. But Sharī'atī contests Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī's view on one central issue. In contrast to Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī, Sharī'atī insists that, at the time, there was no prospect of victory over Yazīd and, therefore, Husayn's goal could not have simply been the establishment of an Islamic sovereignty.⁸⁹ He reviews the historical records in order to show that Husayn must have been aware of the impossibility of victory in the circumstances. According to Sharī'atī, a rational examination of the facts that were available to Husayn is enough to prove that he had no chance of success in the battlefield.⁹⁰ He did not need to be a clairvoyant to see that. Sharī'atī thus portrays the situation as a deadlock in which instrumental political rationality fails: Husayn has an absolute duty to revolt against the oppressive rule of the caliph but does not have the means necessary for initiating a jihad.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Sharī'atī, "Shahādat," 239.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 172-4.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 175-8.

⁹¹ Ibid., 170-80.

The disagreement between Sharī'atī and Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī on the practical possibility or impossibility of victory, which at the first glance may seem to be a minor scholastic matter, is in fact the crux of their fundamentally different interpretations of Husayn's martyrdom. As we saw earlier, Sharī'atī's account of the event of Karbalā relies on the priority of the principle of martyrdom over the principle of jihad. However, it is precisely 'the question of possibility' that leads him to make the crucial distinction between these two principles in the first place. While jihad belongs to the time of possibility, i.e., the time when the prospect of victory through battle is in sight, martyrdom belongs to the time of impossibility, when reality and duty come into conflict. In Sharī'atī's view, the significance of the event of Karbalā stems from the fact that it testified to the primacy of the principle of martyrdom at the time when political victory was not an option. Husayn, that is to say, was a martyr of martyrdom, not of jihad. As expected, Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī rejects this view. According to him, it was Husayn's recognition of the possibility of political victory that justified his engagement in the battle. His revolt was nothing but a jihad that failed and led to his martyrdom. Husayn's martyrdom, that is to say, was not an end in itself, but rather acquired its significance as "the highest degree of jihad, i.e., fighting to the end."⁹² For Sharī'atī, in contrast, "[martyrdom] is not a means, but an end in itself; it is authenticity, an evolution, a transcendence; it is a great responsibility."⁹³

At the heart of this controversy, there lies a fundamental dispute on the meaning of responsibility and its relation to politics. For Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī, responsibility seems to be intimately connected to the practical possibility of success. For Sharī'atī, in sharp contrast, the essential message of Husayn's martyrdom is precisely that responsibility is unconditional, utterly independent from the contingencies of the realm of politics:

⁹² Ṣālihī Najaf'ābādī, *Shahid-i Javid*, 404.

⁹³ Sharī'atī, "Shahādat," 241.

“responsibility comes out of awareness and faith, not from power and possibility.”⁹⁴ Husayn’s martyrdom, he argues, conveys the message that “the human being is responsible insofar as he is alive, [that is,] not merely when he is capable of action.”⁹⁵ Faced with the impossibility of success, everyone but Husayn said no to action: “all the guardians of reason and religion, all the preachers of religious and social norms (*shar’* and *’urf*), all the rational proponents of prudence and logic – all said No [to action]! And Husayn wants to say, Yes! ... The whole of Husayn’s eschatological philosophy consists in this Yes!”⁹⁶

According to Sharī’atī, the sense of responsibility that Husayn’s “Yes!” conveys belongs to the realm of truth not reality, that is, to the truth of Muhammad’s revolution not to the reality of politics. Husayn’s martyrdom forever separated the institutions of politics from the people. It condemned the injustice of the oppressive status quo and took the side of the oppressed. Its effect has been that of the awakening of the social conscience and public morality of Muslim societies throughout history, Shi’a and Sunni alike, by revitalizing the negative and accusative force of resistance against injustice that was the essence of Muhammad’s movement.⁹⁷ The event of Karbalā, that is to say, was not simply a jihad against Yazīd; rather, it was the manifestation of an eternal struggle against oppression: “martyrdom is not war, but a mission; it is not a weapon, but a message. It is a word pronounced with blood! It cannot eliminate betrayal! Rather, it is the glory of a light, in total darkness, which brightens the space and reveals betrayal!”⁹⁸

In Sharī’atī’s view, the redemptive martyrdom theory is the greatest treachery against Husayn as it trivializes the political dimension of the event of Karbalā under the disguise of a sacred image of Husayn. Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī’s view of Husayn’s martyrdom is more progressive in that it acknowledges that Husayn had a duty to revolt against

⁹⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 196.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 182.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 206 and 226.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 230.

oppression. Nevertheless, by limiting responsibility to the realm of possibility and disregarding the crucial distinction between the politics of movement and that of institution, it too fails to realize that the message of Karbalā was in essence revolutionary. The emancipatory message of Muhammad's movement did not lie in the pursuit of institution-building and the expansion of an Islamic Empire. These achievements were nothing but the side effects of the initial success of the Islamic movement, which was in truth an emancipatory revolt against oppression. In his "Yes!" Husayn attested to the priority of martyrdom over jihad, of responsibility over possibility. With his blood, Husayn verified the superiority of the Islamic movement, as the culmination of the Abrahamic tradition, over the Islamic caliphate. With his martyrdom, Husayn testified to the truth of Muhammad's Islam, that is, the universal message of emancipation which concerns, not only the Muslims, but all the oppressed of humanity throughout history.

Husayn was not simply a political leader, confined to a specific time and place. He was the descendent of Abraham and Muhammad, the carrier of "the red flag of Adam" that had been passed from one prophet to another to reach Husayn.⁹⁹ On the day of Āshūrā, Husayn stood witness to the heritage of Adam, which is nothing less than the truth of humanity. He became a vessel through which humanity could receive this heritage. With his blood, Husayn testified to truth and, by announcing that "every month is Muharram, every day Āshūrā, and every land Karbalā,"¹⁰⁰ he passed on the flag of Adam to those who would come after him, to "all the free spirits who seek justice."¹⁰¹ Husayn's call for help – the bitter irony of his famous cry, "is there any one who would help me?"¹⁰² uttered at the moment when all whom he held dear and trusted

⁹⁹ Sharī'atī, "Husayn Vāris-i Ādam," 24.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 50. What Sharī'atī quotes here is a famous *hadīṣ*, sometime associated with Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Shi'a imam.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰² Quoted in Sharī'atī, "Pas az Shahādat," 250.

had already been slaughtered before his eyes – was a question posed to history, “to the future and to all of us.”¹⁰³

Having highlighted the universal and transhistorical essence of Husayn’s message, Sharī’atī turns his attention to the present: what is the concrete content of the responsibility that Husayn’s martyrdom imposes on those living in the present time? Certainly, Husayn did not ask us to mourn for martyrs. To think of mourning as a proper response to Husayn’s martyrdom is to dishonor the martyrs, because the martyrs are more alive than us, the living. They do not need our tear. To think of mourning as the task of the living is to forget that it is we, the living dead, who are in desperate need of the revitalizing spirit of the martyrs, the dead living. “The martyr,” Sharī’atī writes, “is the heart of history;” just as heart gives life to the body, the martyr brings life to “a society that is dying, a society whose children have lost their faith in themselves ... a society which has forgotten the sense of responsibility.”¹⁰⁴

For Sharī’atī, in every age and time, there exists a scene of battle between the oppressed and the oppressors, that is, between God and evil. Husayn’s martyrdom has left us with the responsibility to recognize the battle of our time, to take the side of God and act, and, if necessary, be martyred. Husayn, Sharī’atī writes, left the holy pilgrimage to Mecca unfinished and rushed toward martyrdom in order to show us that the struggle against oppression is prior to all other sacred duties.¹⁰⁵ Insofar as there is oppression, insofar as the likes of Yazīd are in the positions of power, one must be present in the scene of the battle; one must stand witness to the struggle between God and evil, partake in it and, if needed, die in it. There are only two options: with Husayn or against him. And the choices are clear: one who is absent from the struggle of the time is against Husayn; “wherever Husayn is present—and Husayn is present in each and every age and time— those who do not fight side by side him, whether believer or

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 252-3.

infidel, ascetic or criminal, they are all the same [that is, against Husayn].”¹⁰⁶ Nothing exempts us from the responsibility that Husayn’s martyrdom demands: “you, and I – we must mourn for ourselves if we are not present [in the battle of our time].”¹⁰⁷

“Every revolution,” Sharī‘atī writes, “has two faces: blood and message.”¹⁰⁸ Martyrs, and above all Husayn, the prince of the martyrs, offered their blood to send a message, to testify that the impossibility of victory does not ever release one from responsibility. With their deaths, the martyrs of martyrdom, the martyrs of the time of impossibility, revealed the injustice of the enemies of the people. Their sacrifice forever disrupts the instrumental rationality of politics and places the oppressive status quo under an eternal condemnation. Theirs was a victory more lasting than the victory of jihad: “no jihad, no victorious jihad, has ever had an impact on society, on the depth of thoughts and hearts all throughout history, as broad, profound, and fertile [as Husayn’s martyrdom].”¹⁰⁹

Martyrs, of the past and the present alike, have fulfilled the first mission, the mission of blood. The second mission is the mission of message, the mission of Zaynab, Husayn’s sister, the unrivaled heroine of Karbalā who witnessed the slaughter of her beloveds on the day of Āshūrā and took on the task of delivering the message of their martyrdom. The burden of Zaynab’s mission, Sharī‘atī writes, is even heavier than that of her brother, for martyrdom is “merely a great choice,” but those who remain alive has to live with the never-ending task of propagating the message.¹¹⁰ Zaynab’s role is essential since “if the blood [of the silenced martyrs] does not have a message, it will remain obscure in history; if the message of blood is not delivered to the future generations, [it would mean that] the executioner has succeeded in confining the martyr

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 253.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 254.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 250.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 229.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 255.

to a specific time [and place].”¹¹¹ It is Zaynab who brings the message of Husayn to all who believe in him, all who believe that “life is nothing but conviction and jihad;”¹¹² it is Zaynab who says to those who have faith in Muhammad’s movement that “[only] those who know how to die well can live well;”¹¹³ it is Zaynab who reminds us that every human being has a responsibility, “ordained by religion, for one who believes, and by the essence of the human values, for one who is not religious.”¹¹⁴

Addressing his immediate audience, i.e., the Iranian revolutionary youth, Sharī‘atī asserts that Husayn and Zaynab have illuminated the path and clarified our task, leaving us no excuse for ignoring our mission. However, says Sharī‘atī regretfully, we have so far betrayed our martyrs and escaped our responsibilities by taking refuge in a passive worship of mourning. Intensifying his fiery speech, he plays the card of guilt: it is a shame that the heritage of Husayn and Zaynab is now in the hands of a “devilish, pitiful, and despicable”¹¹⁵ people like us. He thus calls on to everyone to correct this wrong. We, the inheritors of the most precious resources that history has ever fostered, must wake up from the night of ignorance and embrace Husayn’s message. Husayn, he cries, did not demand mourning from us; his call was “an invitation to martyrdom.”¹¹⁶ “If you can,” says Sharī‘atī, “take the life [of the oppressors], and, if not, offer your life.”¹¹⁷ As the inheritors’ of Karbalā, he concludes, the urgent task before us is to actively take part in the holy struggle of our time and determine which side we are on, for Zaynab has made everything clear for us: “those who left [i.e., were martyred] joined Husayn; those who are still alive must follow Zaynab, otherwise they would belong to the camp of Yazīd!”¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Ibid., 256.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 256-257.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 245.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 250.

¹¹⁷ Sharī‘atī, “Shahādat,” 241.

¹¹⁸ Sharī‘atī, “Pas az Shahādat,” 258.

The Spell of Ideology

The post-revolution, academic reception of Shari'ati has been for the most part negative. Approaching his thought from a variety of different backgrounds, disciplines, and theoretical standpoints, academic criticisms of Shari'ati seems to converge in the characterization of his thought as a prime example of a populist ideology.¹¹⁹ In the aftermath of a revolution gone wrong, it is as though Shari'ati's question begging and polemical writings invite the scholars to articulate their aversion to it, as though denouncing the "ideologue"¹²⁰ of the revolution is something of an ethical obligation.

I do not want to break with the tradition. Insofar as ideology is commonsensically understood as a form of illusion, an intellectually crafted lie, there are undeniably sufficient reasons for calling Shari'ati's thought as a whole an ideology – a dangerously effective one indeed, considering that Shari'ati's political agenda was to mobilize the youth and instigate a revolution. The euphoria of such a consensus should not, however, conceal its limitations. My conviction is that the hasty rejection of Shari'ati's thought as evidently ideological has, for the most part, resulted in ignoring the genuinely emancipatory aspect of his writings, an aspect that was a key to its success as a mobilizing ideology. Let there be no misunderstandings: I am not referring to the man's intentions; whether a "brave," "benevolent," and "devoted" reformist, as 'Abd al-Karim Surush believes,¹²¹ or a charlatan, exploiting the sincere excitement of a generation of young revolutionaries, the question of the intention is not of theoretical

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Asef Bayat, "Shari'ati and Marx: A Critique of an 'Islamic' Critique of Marxism," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Politics*, no. 10 (1990), 32-3; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Ali Shari'ati: The Aspiring Luther," in *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 109; 'Abd al-Karim Surush, "Farbah'tar az Idi'uluzhi," *Kiyān Magazine*, August 1993, 2; Dāryūsh Shāyigān, "Idi'uluzhi Shudan-i Sunnat," in *Āmīzish-i Ufuqā: Muntakhabātī az Āsār-i Dāryūsh Shāyigān*, ed. Muhammad Manšūr Hāshimī (Tehran: Farzān-i Rūz, 2010), 230; Ali Mirsepassi, "Ali Shari'ati: Islamic Ideology as an Authentic Discourse," in *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 114; Hamid Dabashi, "Ali Shari'ati: The Islamic Ideologue Par Excellence," in *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 103-4.

¹²⁰ Abrahamian, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," 25; see also, Mangol Bayat, "Iran's Real Revolutionary Leader," *Christian Science Monitor*, 1977; Mansour Farhang, "Resisting the Pharaohs: Ali Shariati on Oppression," *Race and Class* 21, no. 1 (1979), 31.

¹²¹ Surush, "Farbah'tar az Idi'uluzhi," 10.

interest. Rather, my argument is that Sharī'atī's thought builds upon an ethical impulse and the mobilizing appeal of his ideology stems, at least in part, from his ability to excite the ethical sensibility of his audience. The recognition of this impulse would not, to be sure, release Sharī'atī from the charges raised against him. But it would – and this is my hope – have at least two positive outcomes: first, it would provide us with a more nuanced and fair understanding of the thought of one of Iran's most influential contemporary intellectuals, and, second, it would help us better understand the relation between critique and re-appropriation – which is in fact why we embarked on the analysis of Sharī'atī in the first place.

Before elaborating on the relation between ethics and politics in Sharī'atī's revolutionary ideology, however, it is worth briefly looking at some of the most well known criticisms of his thought that disregard its ethical content.¹²² The sociologist, Asef Bayat, for instance, attributes the appeal of Sharī'atī's thought to its particular function in the Iranian society of the 1970s.¹²³ According to Bayat, Sharī'atī's re-interpretation of Shi'ism through the mediation of modern social scientific concepts was in fact a response to an urgent need that the traditional Islamic clergy were unable to fulfill. He was able to attract “millions of literate Iranian youth” because he provided “a firm and rigorous ideological” discourse that bridged the gap between the Islamic and the leftist revolutionaries – the main two camps at the time who, for tactical purposes such as

¹²² The authors we have selected to examine include 'Abd al-Karīm Surūsh and Dāryūsh Shāyigān, who approach Sharī'atī's thought from a philosophical standpoint and considered to be the pioneers of the field, and Asef Bayat and Mehrzad Boroujerdi, whose mainly sociological approach represents a dominant line of criticism in Sharī'atī scholarship. Our review could by no means be comprehensive; nor would it in any way claim to map Sharī'atī scholarship. Nevertheless, it would provide us with a context that could help situate our analysis and highlight its contribution to the field. For more on Sharī'atī, in English see, Hamid Dabashi, “Ali Shari'ati: The Islamic Ideologue Par Excellence,” 102–46; Ali Mirsepassi, “Ali Shari'ati: Islamic Ideology as an Authentic Discourse,” 114–27; Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000); and Abbas Milani, “Ali Shari'ati,” in *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 359–66; and in Persian see, Murtazā Mutahharī, “Naqd'hāi az Ustād-i Shahīd Bar Āsār-i Duktur Sharī'atī,” in *Ustād Mutahharī va Roshanfekrān*, ed. Akbar Rahmatī (Tehran: Sadrā, 2011), 34–70; Bīzhan 'Abd al-Karīmī, *Sharī'atī va Siyāsāt'zadīgī* (Tehran: Mu'assese-'i Khadamāt-i Farhangī-i Rasā, 1994); Abbas Milani, “Sharī'atī va Nākujā'ābād?” *Iran'shināstī*, no. 3 (2000): 370–84; Rizā Alijānī, *Sharī'atī: Rāh Yā Bīrāhah* (Tehran: Qalam, 2002); and Muhammad Isfandi'yārī, *Shu'lah-'i Bī'qarār: Guftah'hā va Nāguftah'hā'i Darbarah-'i Duktur Ali Shari'ati* (Qum: Sahīfah-i Khirad, 2005).

¹²³ Asef Bayat, “Shari'ati and Marx,” 19–41.

strike-planning and leafleteering, often worked together and engaged in fierce debates.¹²⁴

However, Bayat argues, the phenomenon of Sharī'atī was not unique to the Iranian context. Sharī'atī belonged to a global post-war trend, which Bayat refers to as “Third Worldist populism,” and shared the same approach as public intellectuals ranging from Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire to Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenyatta, and Ben Bella.¹²⁵ Bayat defines Third Worldist populism as “a mixture of nationalism, anti-capitalism, anti-industrialism, and an ambivalent attitude towards Marxism” and argues that it was “largely the product of the objective socio-economic conditions” of the societies in which it developed.¹²⁶ One of the central characteristics of this populism was its opposition to the cultural imperialism of the West, against which it called for a “return to the self” (Sharī'atī's notion of *bazgasht-i bah khīshān*) and, consequently, to religion “as a deep-rooted cultural form.”¹²⁷ This call was, of course, interpreted differently in different contexts. For example, compared to Latin America, in the Middle East, where “modern class formation” had a much slower pace, the idea of the return to the self gave religion a much heavier weight than secular ideologies.¹²⁸ The significance of Sharī'atī's thought, Bayat concludes, stemmed from his ability to offer a religiously-charged Third Worldist Populism that suited the specific situation of the Iranian context at the time. That is to say, Sharī'atī became the most influential theoretician of the Islamic revolution because he provided an ideological construction in which the global and the local concerns of the Iranian revolutionaries were effectively brought together.

In a rather similar vein, Mehrzad Boroujerdi associates the extreme popularity of Sharī'atī with his unique position at the center of the intellectual opposition, while

¹²⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 37.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

belonging to no specific camp.¹²⁹ Shari'ati's polemical appropriation of both Islamic and Western resources enabled him to address "the dichotomy of Iran's cultural life" in a way that neither the establishment clerics nor the secular intellectuals could.¹³⁰ According to Boroujerdi, "if the Iranian intellectual panorama of the 1960s was dominated by [Jalāl al-Ahmad], that of the 1970s undoubtedly belonged to Ali Shari'ati."¹³¹ al-Ahmad's crucial accomplishment was the identification of the phenomenon of *gharbzadigi* (translated as Westoxification or Occidentosis) as the main dilemma that confronted the Iranian intelligentsia during the 1960s. Shari'ati admired al-Ahmad as a pioneer. Nevertheless, he believed that, instead of providing a solution, al-Ahmad had contented himself with condemning the contemporary intellectuals who had failed to distinguish the root cause of the problems (i.e., *gharbzadigi*) from its effects. Shari'ati thus took off from where al-Ahmad had left. He continued al-Ahmad's incomplete project and offered his discourse of "return to the self" as "a more concrete definition of [the intelligentsia's] commitment and mode of praxis."¹³²

Bayat and Boroujerdi exemplify a dominant trend in Shari'ati scholarship in which the appeal of Shari'ati's thought is explained based on its social function. On the one hand, his illusory promise of a practical solution fascinated the confused spirit of the Iranian youth. On the other hand, his alluring, though shallow, mixture of a wide range of intellectual resources crafted a seductive language in which everyone could hear their voice. His ideological construction was particularly appealing at a time when the excited revolutionaries were seeking an immediate justification for their alliance against the Shah.

Without necessarily denying the significance of the unique historical context in which Shari'ati's thought flourished, others have resorted to the general appeal of ideology in order to explain his popularity. A prominent representative of this approach

¹²⁹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Ali Shari'ati: The Aspiring Luther," 105.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹³² *Ibid.*

is the well-known philosopher, ‘Abd al-Karīm Surūsh, who portrays Sharī‘atī’s thought as a whole as an ideological rendition of Islam.¹³³ According to Surūsh, Sharī‘atī’s insistence on interpreting the religion of Muhammad as a movement, rather than an institution, reduces Islam into an ideology of revolution. However, he contends, religions, and in particular Islam, are richer than ideology.¹³⁴ Islam, says Surūsh, is a comprehensive worldview that not only contains materials for resistance and revolt against tyranny, but also teaches about how to regulate and maintain the Islamic state after the victory of the revolution. In place of Sharī‘atī’s notions of movement (*nihzat*) and institution (*nahād*), Surūsh proposes the terms establishment (*ta’sīs*) and maintenance (*istiqrār*) – which in his view are superior because they are “less normatively charged”¹³⁵ – and argues that Islam is a religion of both the time of *ta’sīs* and the time of *istiqrār*.¹³⁶

Surūsh distinguishes at least six characteristics for ideology. Ideologies, he writes, 1) are theories of political struggle and thus require a rigid notion of the enemy; 2) propose definite and clear-cut answers to fundamental human problems such as freedom, God, and history; 3) require a certain class of official interpreters whose views are not to be questioned; 4) are fond of uniformity in thought and thus intolerant of diversity; 5) are in search of mobilizing the masses rather than truth; and 6) have a claim to perfection and autonomy and thus position themselves above critical reason.¹³⁷ This definition of ideology leads Surūsh to designate Sharī‘atī’s thought, alongside Marxism and Fascism, as ideology, as opposed to religion and liberalism that are, in his view, non-ideological and rational.¹³⁸ Relying on such an understanding of ideology, Surūsh associates its popularity, Sharī‘atī’s included, to its anti-rational status. Unlike critical

¹³³ Surūsh, “Farbah’tar az Idi’uluzhī,” 2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

reasoning, which is unsettling and “demands responsibility,”¹³⁹ ideology, whose logic is the logic of “love and hate,” i.e., the logic of “affection,”¹⁴⁰ provides its followers with a prescription for action and fixed values and thus brings tranquility and satisfaction. In short, the appeal of Sharī‘atī’s thought stems from the pleasure of “ideal and dogma.”¹⁴¹

Another significant figure in this regard would be Dāryūsh Shāyigān, according to whom not only does Sharī‘atī reduce Shi‘ism into an ideology, but his ideologization also extends to his appropriation of Western philosophies – and, in particular, of Marxism. In Shāyigān’s view, the formation and appeal of an ideology like Sharī‘atī’s in Iran is an immediate consequence of the general problem of the confrontation of the East and the West. Ideology, Shāyigān writes, is “a bastard child of Enlightenment.”¹⁴² However, while in the context of the West, enlightenment thought has given rise to both ideology and its antidote, i.e., critical and dialectical thinking, the share of the East of this development has been limited to the ideological part. Lacking the historical experience of the technological and scientific revolutions and absent “the eventful path of the dialectic of the mind,” the East has received Western thought only in an ideological form whose inherent dogmatism matches “the religious spirit and mind of the Third World civilizations.”¹⁴³ Vulgar Marxism has thus become “the ideology dispersed in the air,” whose nostalgic, ahistorical, and undialectical rendition of key Marxist categories – such as revolution, relations of production, teleological history, and the utopia of classless society – has resulted in the construction of an abstract, “rigid framework” that can adopt, and be adopted by, any school of thought.¹⁴⁴ It is in this abstract and ahistorical framework that Eastern traditional thought is revived, though only in a similarly reduced and ideological form. The product of such theoretical endeavors has been an amalgamation, which, whether anti- or pro-West, anti- or pro-

¹³⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴² Shāyigān, “Īdi‘uluzhī Shudan-i Sunnat,” 196.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 226.

tradition, relies on an “unconscious Westoxification” and inevitably takes the form of ideology.¹⁴⁵ Sharīʿatī is an exemplary “ideologue” in this sense, for in his thought all the deficiencies of ideology are gathered together in service of providing an immediate recipe for revolution.¹⁴⁶

Despite his rather one-sided and question begging dichotomization of the West and the East, Shāyigān’s analysis of Sharīʿatī’s ideology is fairly nuanced and merits a closer attention. Ideology, he writes, operates “at the intersection of consciousness and unconsciousness,” that is, of reason and myth, though both in reduced forms.¹⁴⁷ On the one hand, although ideology originates from the same “unconscious resource”¹⁴⁸ that at some point in time had given rise to myth, it is a perverted form of myth because in it an essential characteristic of mythical thought, i.e., symbolic mediation, is replaced with “a chain of identifications.”¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, ideology’s appeal to rationality (the conscious part) is also reductive because it is purely instrumental,¹⁵⁰ devoid of dialectical and historical mediations.¹⁵¹

In Sharīʿatī’s thought, the simultaneous degeneration of myth and reason results in the construction of an ahistorical binary opposition between the oppressed and the oppressor, or friend and enemy, which is itself a manifestation of the eternal dichotomy of Abel-Cain, Yazīd-Husayn, Sunni caliph and Shi’a imam, and so on. By freely moving from the circular time of myth to the linear time of history, Sharīʿatī conflates irreconcilable “cultural frameworks,”¹⁵² thereby divesting the concepts from their contents. In Sharīʿatī’s thought, Shāyigān writes, “myth enters history, not through The Fall, or the divine manifestation of the holy in the time of history, but rather by loosing

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 227.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 238.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 239.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 200.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵² Ibid., 240.

its eschatological meaning."¹⁵³ Similarly, by simply identifying the day of resurrection and the return of the Messiah (Mahdī, in Shi'ism) with some global final revolution, "Sharī'atī degrades [the Shi'a notion of] ascension toward the celestial universes of meaning to a [terrestrial] struggle between two sociological orders [i.e., the oppressor and the oppressed]."¹⁵⁴ According to Shāyigān, what this conflation reveals is "Sharī'atī's unawareness of the eschatological meaning of Shi'ism"¹⁵⁵ that prevents him from realizing that the time of eschatology belongs to "the universe of the spirit," which cannot be directly linked to the time of history and is accessible only "through the discovery of the beloved [i.e., God] and leaving the earthly time of history."¹⁵⁶

Sharī'atī's incompetence in Islamic mysticism is matched with "a deficient Hegelianism"¹⁵⁷ devoid of dialectical mediation and a phony Marxism deprived of "the philosophical notion of praxis."¹⁵⁸ The result has been "a nonsensical language"¹⁵⁹ that is nevertheless able to "seduce the hearts"¹⁶⁰ as it provides "easy solutions"¹⁶¹ for the paradoxical situation with which the people in the East have had to deal. In Shāyigān's view, the appeal of a political ideology like Sharī'atī's stems from its "emotional power and influence," which gives it "the sacred position of a myth,"¹⁶² and its perverted juxtaposition of reason and affection, which enables it to simultaneously respond to "two fundamental and vital human needs, the need to believe and the need to justify [that] belief."¹⁶³ Having witnessed the Islamic Revolution, Shāyigān is utterly pessimistic about the potentials of the mass mobilizations that such seductive attraction could engender:

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 245.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 243.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 245.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 246.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 247.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 201.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 196.

The ideologization of religion harbors the horrifying danger of the outburst of irrational impulses of the masses ... Alas, the dead gods cannot be revived. Those whom they want to bring out of the graves are not Elohim, Yahweh, or Allah. They are rather masks behind whose stone faces the lifeless corpse of history is hidden. We would not find the gods in their original innocence, [for,] they are covered with the ornamented disguise of bogus symbols, beads of misunderstandings, and false identities. Behind the fake signs we take refuge. We mistake the delirium of the hysteric masses for a gnostic sense of sympathy – the masses who are no longer the uniform community of believers, but rather the collection of fragmented shreds of the urban and industrial society who have become the puppets of the magicians – magicians who protect the totalitarian discourse[s] of our century and carry the promise of the heaven on earth.¹⁶⁴

Toward a Critique of Sharī'atī

The brief review of Bayat, Boroujerdi, Surūsh, and Shāyigān provides us with an outline of the dominant trends in the academic reception of Sharī'atī's thought, which could roughly be summarized as follows: inaccurate reading of the history of Islam, lack of proper training and knowledge in Islamic mysticism, one-sided and shallow understanding of Western philosophy, conflation of irreconcilable conceptual frameworks, illegitimate jumps from the realm of myth to the realm of reason, and, above all, a purely instrumental approach in mixing all these resources to create a recipe for revolution. These observations should of course each be examined in further details, but, as a whole, they provide a picture that could hardly be contested in its own terms. Nevertheless, it is a one-sided picture, for its negative and reductive approach loses sight of what is positive and ethical in Sharī'atī's thought.

Sharī'atī's ideology is not just any ideology, but an emancipatory ideology that deserves a *critique* rather than an outright rejection, a critique, that is, which could distinguish between the genuinely ethical content of Sharī'atī's thought and its instrumental appropriation for revolutionary politics. The idea of such a critique rests on a Levinasian understanding of the ethical as the fixed point that is prior to the thought of emancipation but gives rise to it. It is Levinas' formulation of the priority of the ethical

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 248-9.

saying over the ontological said that allows us to characterize that fixed point as responsibility for the other. In the absence of a Levinasian analysis of Sharī'atī, it is not surprising that the existing literature on Sharī'atī has been unable to articulate its ethical content, for it lies beyond, or behind, the reach of the language of sociology (e.g., Bayat and Boroujerdi), analytic philosophy (e.g., Surūsh), and even psychoanalysis and dialectics (e.g., Shāyigān).

It is neither by an accident, nor through a simple plagiarism, that Sharī'atī is able to combine Marxism and Shi'ism. They *can* be brought together because, as discourses of emancipation, they share the same prophetic ethical impulse. As an ethics of ethics, Levinas' ethics as first philosophy attests to the affinities between the ethic of Marxism and the religiosity of Shi'ism. It is only upon the recognition of that common ground that we can clarify where they diverge. Without such an understanding, we always stand too far away from Sharī'atī's ideology, whence we can either submit to it or outright reject it, failing to identify where his politics betrays his ethics. However, as we have seen, a purely Levinasian analysis of a political ideology like that of Sharī'atī would also have its limitations. While a Levinasian critique could clarify the general problems associated with Sharī'atī's politicization of ethics – manifested in his illegitimate move from the eschatological time of *imāmat* to the linear time of history – it lacks the historical language that is necessary for the analysis of the *specific* form of the politicization of ethics in Sharī'atī's thought, which consists in his reduction of Marxism into an abstract, undialectical, and ahistorical ideology of revolution.

A proper critique of Sharī'atī's ideology could be attempted if we confront it as a failed re-appropriation of ethics. Sharī'atī's thought, that is to say, emerges as an attempt to appropriate the ethical for the sake of the emancipation of the oppressed, but it fails, i.e., turns into an ideology, by betraying its own promise of emancipation. The appropriate point of departure for such a critique would be Sharī'atī's notion of martyrdom, around which his whole revolutionary discourse revolves. It is in Sharī'atī's

interpretation of martyrdom that the underlying ethical drive of his thought comes to the fore and it is in his subtle back and forth movement from an ethically rich idea of sacrifice to a politically charged notion of martyrdom that the betrayal of the ethical originates.

As we saw, Sharī'atī's reading of Husayn's martyrdom situated itself in opposition to two alternative interpretations of sacrifice, that is, the popular redemptive martyrdom theory and Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī's sovereignty theory. According to the redemptive martyrdom theory, Husayn offered his blood to guarantee the eternal future of the Shiites. In this sense, his martyrdom is precisely a dying for the future of the other(s). It is, that is to say, a sacrifice. In this reading, Husayn is simultaneously the martyr and the redeemer. As the martyr of Karbalā, Husayn belongs to history, to being, and his temporality obeys the laws of the linear, irreversible, and finite time of history. But, as the redeemer, he belongs to a wholly different realm, that is, to the world of God, and his temporality is the circular and infinite time of God. As the redeemer, Husayn thus transcends the limitations of the time of history and disrupts its linear progression. Everyone else is limited to the world of being and its temporality. It is only through the medium of the figure of Husayn, as simultaneously the martyr and the redeemer, that the mourning Shiites could momentarily catch sight of the eternity of the divine time through the substitution of their tear for Husayn's blood. Sacrifice thus takes on the status of an act, of work, only in the case of Husayn's martyrdom. The Shiites are neither expected, nor qualified, to sacrifice their lives. For them, unlike Husayn, martyrdom is nothing but remembrance, that is, a remembrance of the eschatological experience that, through the figure of Husayn, comes to traverse the time of history. The redemptive martyrdom theory thus preserves the essentially ethical character of Husayn's martyrdom and presents it as the ultimate, and perhaps the only genuine, act of sacrifice.

In contrast, Ṣālihī Najaf Ābādī's sovereignty theory disregards the ethical dimension of Husayn's martyrdom and reduces it to a purely political act. Husayn is, to

be sure, a divine figure, but, according to Šālihī Najaf Ābādī, for all earthly – i.e., political – intents and purposes, the divine – i.e., ethical – dimension of his martyrdom should be set aside. Sharʿatī was dissatisfied with both of these readings: with the former because it is purely ethical and ignores the political dimension of martyrdom and with the latter for its reduction of ethics to politics. His alternative interpretation of martyrdom seeks to find a middle ground in which ethics and politics meet, without one eliminating the other.

For Sharʿatī too Husayn’s martyrdom is indeed a sacrifice, but not in the same sense as the redemptive martyrdom theory. Husayn offered his blood in Karbalā not in order to become the redeemer of the sinful Shiites, but rather to preserve the revolutionary message of the Islamic movement as the culmination of monotheism. But the message of Muhammad’s Islam is nothing but justice. For, according to Sharʿatī, insofar as politics is concerned, the to-God of monotheism means to-the-oppressed. Husayn’s martyrdom is a dying for the oppressed, that is, for justice. Nevertheless, Sharʿatī departs from a purely ethical interpretation of martyrdom by emphasizing the concrete responsibility that Karbalā imposes on everyone else. Husayn’s martyrdom is not just a remembrance, a mere disruption of the time history through the singular act of the figure of Husayn. In addition to reminding the mortals of the eschatological truth of peace, it calls on to everyone, especially the Shiites, to follow Husayn’s path and die for the oppressed of their own time.

The obligation to sacrifice that is imposed by Husayn’s martyrdom does not, to be sure, concern the everyday life of the Shiites, for it conveys the *ultimate* sense of responsibility. Rather, it takes on the status of an obligation *to act*, to be martyred, only at the time of *impossibility* – that is, the time when the prospect of victory is not foreseeable, the time when the oppressive order of the status quo has foreclosed the possibility of emancipation altogether, the time when the emancipatory message of the monotheistic movement is threatened to be wiped out from the consciousness of the

oppressed, and so on. At the time of impossibility, the carrying on of the *message* demands *blood*. The responsible Shiites are called upon to actualize the extravagant response of sacrifice with their martyrdom when the situation demands it. The heroism of Zaynab is contingent upon the martyrdom of Husayn. If the historical situation does not permit one to be Zaynab, one must be Husayn, for otherwise one would be Yazīd. Sharī'atī's interpretation of martyrdom, therefore, entails a preaching of human sacrifice, that is, not merely a celebration of the martyrdom of Husayn as a unique event that has taken place at the intersection of history and eschatology, but also a call for sacrifice as a political act, as an ontological giving that must take place in history.

In this way, Sharī'atī commits the sin about which Levinas had already warned us, that is, the sin of eliminating the necessary distance between ethics and politics by directly concretizing the eschatological experience as an ontological force within history. In Sharī'atī's work, God begins to speak the language of politics. The God who speaks is, however, no longer God, for it is ontologized. The God who speaks politics is Evil.

But Sharī'atī has a claim to re-appropriation. For, God, he would say, has already spoken, whether by its absence from politics or through the mouth of the clerical establishment which, at least since the time of the Safavids, has not ceased to utilize Shi'ism for the preservation of the status quo. The God who altogether refuses to speak politics has nonetheless spoken politically in its refusal. The redemptive martyrdom theory, in which sacrifice retains its non-ontological character and enters politics only as a disruptive remembrance of the ethical, does not ultimately succeed in securing the distance between ethics and politics. For, in its refusal to concretize ethics, it leaves it to politics and its puppet clerics to give content to this remembrance according to their own unethical exigencies. The God who refuses to speak politics is already political, for, in its political passivity, it becomes an accomplice with the unjust status quo. The political underdeterminacy of disruption neutralizes ethics and thereby turns it into an instrument of oppression. What opposes the nonpolitical God of the redemptive

martyrdom theory is the political God of the clerics. But their opposition is only a façade, for the latter, who has historically functioned as a justification for the kings and the caliphs, actively performs the role that the former supports in its passivity. In response to the Levinasian objection, Shari'atī could therefore appeal to ethics itself to justify its preaching of sacrifice as an attempt to redeem the emancipatory force of religion, which had already been hijacked by politics either through the conformism of the redemptive martyrdom theory or through the conservatism of the clerical establishment.

Such an appeal does not, to be sure, release Shari'atī's thought from Levinas' ethical objection. Nevertheless, it suspends that objection by revealing its political inadequacy. In its absolute, i.e., abstract, form, ethics fails to differentiate between the appropriation of the ethical for the preservation of the status quo and its re-appropriation for the sake of the other of the system, that is, between dominant and counter ideologies. The injunction against the politicization of God overlooks that an absolute distinction between God and Evil does not hold in the contingent reality of politics. In politics, God and Evil always appear hand in hand. Insofar as justice calls for a politics in which serving the oppressed has priority over the maintenance of oppression, it entails a demand to distinguish between the concrete historical forms that the mutual presence of God and Evil may take in politics. Without a historical critique, ethics would disrupt politics, but only disrupts it, failing to make the required distinctions. Shari'atī's claim to re-appropriation could only be confronted with such a historical critique.

From the standpoint of a critique of re-appropriation, Shari'atī's failure could not be located in his politicization of ethics per se, but rather in his direct, that is, unmediated, translation of ethics to practical politics. In order to examine this translation, let us consider, as an example, the ethical and political status of the category of the oppressed. To be sure, the other summons infinite and unconditional responsibility, regardless of his ontological status, that is, regardless of whether he can be characterized

as the oppressed or the oppressor. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of justice, it is legitimate to say that the struggle against the suffering of the oppressed other has ethical priority over serving the other who is involved in the production of that suffering. In this sense, it could be said that in the passage from ethics to politics, the *absolute* demand of responsibility for the other is transformed into a *universal* priority of the oppressed over the oppressor. But, given that ethics cannot prescribe politics, this transformation would be legitimate only if we recognize that with the statement of the universal priority of the oppressed, we are not yet making a properly political claim. That is to say, with the move from the other to the oppressed, we have not yet quite entered politics, for the categories of the oppressed and the oppressor still lack concrete political content.

With the formulation of the question of justice through the notion of the third party, Levinas comes to the verge of a passage to politics, but does not yet speak politics. He is indeed aware of this limitation and therefore rightly refuses to draw practical conclusions from ethical statements such as responsibility for the destitute, the poor, the hungry, the orphan, the stranger, and so on. While these categories are not without political significance, they are not yet political as such. They are, that is to say, neither purely ethical nor adequately political. Dialectically speaking, these concepts are still abstract, that is, without concrete historical content. While it could be argued – as I have in the previous chapters – that the materiality of responsibility demands that we do not interpret ethical statements, such as the need to feed the hungry and shelter the poor, as purely metaphorical statements, it is not without reason that more often than not Levinas scholars seem to take these concepts as metaphors. The ambiguity of these concepts in Levinas' writings is not a matter of incompleteness or ignorance that could be simply remedied by further elaboration, for it reflects the ambiguity of the space that separates ethics from politics, the space that, as we have seen, could only be traversed in terms of a tension.

The passage from ethics to politics cannot skirt this tension, for it is precisely in this tension that the whole complexity of the problem of concretization originates. Sharī'atī, however, seems to arbitrarily apply universal ethical categories, such as suffering, oppression, justice, emancipation, and so on, to specific historical contexts. He thus jumps from ethics to politics, failing to recognize that the universality of ethics belongs to eschatology and cannot be directly translated into the historical time of politics. Politics is the realm of particularity and contingency and, as such, it would not yield to the absoluteness of ethical principles. The category of the oppressed has a universal significance as an ethical category, which only indirectly applies to politics. It could not be immediately utilized as a universal political category. Such a direct extension would amount to nothing but an empty generalization. The political sense of universality that the category of the oppressed conveys in Sharī'atī's thought does not – as he wishes – derive from its ethical significance; rather, it stems from its lack of content.

The oppressed as a properly political category could only be arrived at as an outcome of a dialectical process of concretization. However, we have to also remember that the relation between the universality of ethics and the particularity of politics is not purely dialectical in the Marxian or Adornian sense. For, the *universality* of ethical categories corresponds to the *absolute alterity* of the other whose face transcends the dialectical context of immanence. The universal sense of ethical responsibility does not, therefore, enter into a relation with the contingency of politics according to the dialectics of the universal and particular. The ethical, that is to say, would not be completely absorbed in the dialectical relation, but, as transcendence, it would retain its exteriority to that relation. Nevertheless, to the extent that it does enter politics, its effect could not be accounted for without the consideration of the dialectical context of politics. An undialectically construed notion of the oppressed would be nothing but an empty generalization of an ethical category. Any attempt to forge it as a political category

would result in a fetishized notion of the oppressed, whose illusory claim to universality rests on mistaking its lack of content for a surplus ethical signification.

This is precisely what happens in Sharī'atī's provocative writings. In the absence of a dialectical analysis of the historical forms of domination and oppression, an abstract concept of the oppressed (*mazlūm*) becomes Sharī'atī's central notion of collectivity, which is in turn vaguely and instrumentally concretized to satisfy the immediate needs of his revolutionary agenda. Marxism, divested of its dialectical and historical character, becomes a shortsighted version of monotheism which had failed to recognize that the proletariat is nothing but the eternal oppressed,¹⁶⁵ and Abūzar, the faithful disciple of Prophet Muhammad, becomes a pioneering socialist,¹⁶⁶ long before the notion of the social acquires any historical significance. Conflating the universality of ethics with the particularity of politics, Sharī'atī provides an unmediated translation of ethics into politics, of theory into practice, and articulates an illusory promise of hope, in which originates the deceptively attractive and annoyingly populist character of his thought.

The betrayal of ethics in Sharī'atī's thought does not thus occur in his celebration of sacrifice per se, but rather in his undialectical characterization of the oppressed for whose liberation sacrifice is preached. In fact, the articulation of the principle of martyrdom, through which Sharī'atī justifies the necessity of sacrifice as a political act, constitutes the ethical strength of his thought. In announcing that martyrdom as an act becomes necessary when the possibility of emancipatory action is foreclosed, Sharī'atī presents an ethical pragmatism. If there is a connection between Sharī'atī and Marx, it lies in this pragmatism, not in his arbitrary utilization of Marxist categories. For, his appeal to martyrdom at the time of impossibility does not merely preach human sacrifice, but also problematizes the very idea of the impossibility of action. The principle of martyrdom radicalizes the notion of impossibility, so that political passivism

¹⁶⁵ Sharī'atī, "Husayn Vāris-i Ādam," 35.

¹⁶⁶ Ali Sharī'atī, *Abūzar*, vol. 3, *Majmu'-'i Āsār* (Tehran: Chāppakhsh va Buniyād-i Farhangī-i Duktur Ali Sharī'atī, 2008), 20-1.

would never be an option – for, sacrifice always remains a possibility, be it an extravagant possibility.

The ethical-emancipatory impulse of Sharī'atī's thought is thus affirmed, rather than undermined, in his politicization of sacrifice. Ethics is not betrayed in the very assertion that sacrifice could become necessary as a last resort at the time of impossibility, when no other emancipatory action is viable. But the characterization of a situation as the situation of impossibility requires a concrete socio-historical analysis of the dominant forms of oppression, without which emancipatory action would be but a hollow promise. In the absence of such an historical analysis, Sharī'atī resorts to a series of abstract binary oppositions, directly modeled on the ethical dichotomy of God and Evil: the oppressed (*mazlūm*) and the oppressor (*ẓālim*), movement (*nihẓat*) and institution (*nahād*), 'Alavī and Ṣafavī Shi'ism, lower-class and upper-class religions, and so on. As empty generalizations, Sharī'atī's concepts are prone to appropriation by politics, which is left to itself to determine their content according to its immediate needs. His principle of martyrdom could thus turn – as it did – into a weapon that could enable politics, be it revolutionary politics, to demand the lives of its subjects by manipulating the notion of the impossibility of action according to its instrumental and tactical rationality. God would always speak politics, but, absent a concrete historical critique, his voice would lend itself to blind, immediate appropriation by politics. The point of *critical* re-appropriation is precisely to prevent such an abuse of the ethical force of God and limit its utilization to a critical-practical politics that would serve the historical oppressed. Sharī'atī's thought of martyrdom began as a genuine re-appropriation of ethics, but it succumbed to the naïveté of its abstract construal of politics.

Afterword

The murderous history of the twentieth-century Europe brought enlightenment rationality face to face with its moral impotence. The terror that the colonies had long before witnessed, with flesh and blood, and Western thought had already glimpsed in Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God, had eventually reached its birth soil. It scarred its mark with a clarity and intensity that the enlightened subject could no longer afford to ignore the coldness of its instrumental rationality. But, instead of reflecting on the fundamental roots of this coldness, the failures of instrumental rationality were, for the most part, interpreted as perversions, haphazard deviations from enlightenment's true essence. The experience of the catastrophe was rationalized away so that the blind urge to dominate and exploit nature would continue to drive the course of history, only this time under the name of new global empires and at an ever-grander scale that would have been unimaginable to the eighteenth-century prophets of enlightenment.

In this context, the significance of both the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Levinas' ethics as first philosophy lies in their recognition of the inherent moral deficiency of the project of enlightenment. Fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer argued, could not be simply pushed aside as a deviation from the moral values of enlightenment, for its emergence highlights the inability of formalistic and calculative rationality of enlightenment to properly deal with the problem of human values. The unsettling truth of enlightenment is that, despite its pretentious aspirations, its rationality is, ultimately,

morally indifferent, incapable of providing “a fundamental argument against murder.”¹ As soon as reason is reduced to a mere “organ of calculation,” it becomes “neutral with regard to any ends,”² moral and immoral alike. But even the appearance of neutrality and indifference is illusory, for beneath the formalistic “purposiveness without purpose”³ of reason, there lurks a fetishistic return to nature, where thought becomes a servant of instinct, a servant, that is, of power. Self-preservation becomes the self-destructive drive of the individual and the society alike. This is “the shocking truth” that the writings of Sade and Nietzsche, “the dark writers of the bourgeoisie,”⁴ pitilessly expressed – the truth that the idea of the survival of the fittest is its pocket-size formulation.

As early as 1934 – in “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,”⁵ the essay with which we began the dissertation – the young Levinas had already pointed to a similar problem in his critique of idealist liberalism’s abstract duality of the self and the body. According to Levinas, the triumphant emergence of the racist ideology of National Socialism went hand in hand with the rise of popular materialism, where the latter’s immediate identification of the self with the body, and the notion of biological inevitability that it entails, was itself a reaction to idealism’s lack of concrete content. What is needed, he suggested, is a return to materiality that, without reducing humanity to biology, could account for the paradoxical truth of the embodied spirit. The mature Levinas reformulated this problem as the need for a relation with the otherwise than being without losing the foothold of being, and argued that this relation is accomplished in the ethical transcendence of the other. In the one-for-the-other of responsibility, the I enters into a relation with being’s other at the same time that it is riveted back to its

¹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 93.

² *Ibid.*, 69.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 62–71.

being in order to be able to provide for the other. In substitution, the I's return to materiality is mediated through its recognition of the needs of the other as prior and more urgent than its own needs.

The crucial accomplishment of Levinas' ethics lies in its articulation of the sensuous character of the ethical relation, a sensuousness that is neither an intentional relation of cognition, nor a receptivity of some non-cognitive content. As soon as the subject is, as consciousness or reason, abstractly detached from the object, it ceases to be ethical. Only an embodied subject can be ethical: "only a subject that eats can be for-the-other."⁶ But ethical sensibility is also lost as soon as embodiment is conceived of as an immediate identification of the subject with the object. A subject reduced to biology, a subject divested of its interiority, could no longer become the site of an ethical relation. For, being primarily concerned with its own being and its own freedom, the biological subject could only come into a relation with the other as an addendum to its self-preservation. Evolutionary – or species – morality is no morality. Neither an abstract separation of the subject from the object, nor their immediate unity, could account for the proper sense of embodiment that is the prerequisite of the ethical relation.

Nor even a dialectical recovery of the moment of objectivity in the subject would suffice for the formulation of ethical subjectivity – and it is here that Levinas' ethics reveals its unique value for today's politics. Dialectical relation is, even in its Adornian, nonidentical form, still a relation of knowledge, of consciousness. True, it was the great accomplishment of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School to recognize that consciousness is a historical development at the cost of rejecting what stands outside its totalitarian gaze – that its unity is founded upon the principle of identity which denies the nonidentical overflow of the object over the subject. But the nonidentity that negative dialectics recovers is still framed within the terms of the dialectic of the

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 74.

universal and the particular, which could neither preserve the singularity of the I – in the uniqueness of whose interiority alone an ethical relation could figure – nor account for the absolute alterity of the other – which is more radical than the exteriority of the object. Levinas' (meta)phenomenological ethics surpasses the critical thought of the Frankfurt School in its capacity to formulate an embodied subjectivity proper to the ethical relation. Today – at the time when the failed attempts to locate morality in either reason or biology have divested the notion of morality of any meaningful significance, at least in the official discourses of politics – the indispensable promise of Levinas' ethics as first philosophy consists in its ability to speak of a human more human than *conatus*, a human subjectivity that is first and foremost an ethical sensibility.

For all its virtues, however, Levinas' ethics falls short of formulating the critical politics that its own question of justice demands. The very phenomenological language that constitutes its strength cripples its passage to politics, for phenomenology alone could not provide the concrete historical critique that is required for such a passage. To be sure, Levinasian ethics, even in its purely phenomenological form, is able to differentiate between a fascistic politics, which outright denies the universality of ethical responsibility and, from the outset, founds its ideology upon the brutal expansion of its forces, and a liberal politics of rational peace, which derives the universality of its laws and institutions from a rationalization of its ethical aspirations. Levinasian ethics is also cognizant of the inevitable injustice of such a rational politics, for, even if its rationality is genuine and perfectly reflected in its operation, its universalism would have no room for the exteriority of the other. Insofar as the notion of peace is founded upon a logic of war, politics would not cease to compromise its peace by an appeal to the urgency of war. But these philosophical recognitions are by no means adequate for a concrete and critical engagement with the existing reality of politics, where the global systems of domination and exclusion continue to shamelessly hide behind the ethical values of

liberalism to justify their operations, even though their sole inheritance from liberalism is the brutal force of its 'free-market' economy.

A concrete critique of the antagonistic reality of (neo)liberal politics requires dialectical categories that could penetrate into the spell of reification that conceals the true state of affairs, categories of the kind that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School operates with. Their social critique moves beyond Levinas' phenomenological critique in its capacity to unearth the structure of domination, its historical character, and its social and economic logic. True, negative dialectics is still ontological, incapable of accounting for the metaphysical transcendence of the other, incapable, that is, of articulating the very ethical drive that motivates its own critique. But it is not just any ontology. Negative dialectics is a critical ontology whose incessant negativity reflects the antagonistic social reality against which it has developed. It is the historical "ontology of the wrong state of things."⁷ As such, it is able to respond to the ethical demand to "use the ontological *for the sake of the other*"⁸ in a way that Levinas' ethics could not. It is a historical social critique that provides a concrete content for the question of justice and makes the measurements, comparisons, and distinctions that it demands possible.

The idea of this project was born out of a simultaneous fascination and dissatisfaction with both Levinas and Adorno, and the conviction that they could be brought into a mutually beneficial dialogue. What I hope the dissertation has been able to show is that despite their fundamental philosophical differences, Levinas's ethics and Adorno's negative dialectics could nevertheless speak to one another, that in reaching their boundaries and limitations, each points to the other, calling for it and recognizing its indispensability. Of course, ethics as first philosophy and negative dialectics operate at fundamentally different levels of analysis and could not be unified under a single, overarching theory. But the impossibility of theoretical synthesis would not undermine

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 11.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 28.

the possibility of a productive co-existence. While Levinas' revitalization of ethical subjectivity could usher in a sense of hope and trust in humanity that Adorno's ruthless critique of society lacks, the latter's negative dialectics could provide the historical critique that the former's ethics calls for but is unable to formulate. However, the co-existence of ethics and dialectics should not be conceived of as a simple addition, an innocent relation of supplementation. They would both need to undergo a qualitative change in accordance with the exigencies of their dialogue. If Levinas' ethics needs to register the implications of the dialectical critique of its abstract passage to politics, Adorno's negative dialectics has to incorporate the priority of responsibility over objectivity into its operation.

With the recognition of the simultaneous indispensability and irreconcilability of ethics as first philosophy and negative dialectics, our inquiry into the relation between ethics and politics, which had begun with the tension between metaphysics and ontology, ended with the tension between critique and re-appropriation. Our analysis was caught up within the paradoxical terms of a series of tensions, haunted, as it were, by the ghostly power of the aporias it dared entangling itself with. In a sense, the whole enterprise signifies a theoretical failure. But, as Asher Horowitz once said to me, it would perhaps be naïve for the thought of ethics to aim at success. The point is to fail, but fail spirally, together, better! For, ethics is not *a* discipline. It is not *a* theory. Ethics is *the* first philosophy. As such, its subject matter is the very aporia of the human existence, the aporia, that is, of a finite being faced with an infinite responsibility. A thought that thinks ethics could not free itself from aporia without becoming irresponsible.

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