

Ethics and The Other: An Interpretation of The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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Abstract

This thesis aims to present a reading of Levinas that defends his philosophy against criticisms that it is ultimately idealistic or quietist, made by thinkers like Gillian Rose and Alain Badiou. This understanding of Levinas is founded on a misreading of his texts, and as such I present a new reading of Levinas work which provides a basis for political thinking. In doing so, I explore the role of the Other in Levinas' philosophy, and how the Other relates to communities. Using this reading, I show how the objections made to Levinas made by Rose and Badiou do not actually apply to Levinas' work as he presents it. After this, I present a model of how communities come together on the basis of Levinas work.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In her book *Mourning Becomes the Law*, but also throughout her work, the philosopher Gillian Rose offers a sustained critique of what she calls “exalted ethics.”¹ Rose presents this kind of philosophy, which she identifies with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, as being one of two extremes, contrasting with what she calls “degraded power.”² Levinasian ethics represents for Rose a “phantasy of the local or exclusive community,”³ which is governed purely through a sense of duty to the Other, without the need for a formal government structure. As a result, Rose charges Levinas with positioning his ethics as “the sublime Other of modernity;”⁴ opposing absolute duty to moral authority backed by force. For Levinas, all ethical thought is derived from a fundamental experience of what he calls the ‘Face of the Other’⁵ which signifies the Other’s capacity for, and one’s responsibility to, normative assessment.⁶

Levinas focuses on the Other to such a degree that Rose claims he ignores “the third city buried alive beneath the unequivocal opposition of degraded power and exalted ethics.”⁷ In other words, Levinas ignores the concept of justice as distinct from ethics, a concept embraced by philosophers as diverse as Hume, Kant, and Hegel which remains central to much of modern political philosophy. In Rose’s reading of Levinas, his framework has no room for law or the rights-based discourse of the modern state, because he “does not acknowledge the predicament

¹ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). p. 11.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.* p. 39.

⁴ Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 2017). p. i.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 194, p. 197.

⁶ Steven Crowell, “Why Is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2015): 564–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00550.x>, p. 20

⁷ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). p. 11.

of universal and local jurisprudence,” instead stressing absolute duty to the Other, which requires no political mediation.⁸

I suggest that this view is based on a misreading of Levinas, both of his individual claims and his overall project: Levinas is not offering an ethics in terms of a guide to action, but rather a meta-ethics, which seeks to explain where norms come from, and the basis for ethical discourse. In the first chapter I will present a general outline of the important ideas and concepts present in Levinas’ philosophy, to provide a framework for later discussion. Continuing from this, chapters two through four consist of presentations of major objections to Levinas, and my replies to these objections. Finally, in chapter five, I will provide a more detailed account of how Levinas’ ethical philosophy leads to the development of communities, followed by a short conclusion.

My project is made clearer by listing a few things that I am *not* doing. In this piece my goal is not to vindicate Levinas, or to uphold all aspects of his thought. There are aspects of his argument I reject, either based on the critiques of Rose, or where I personally find his argumentation to be lacking. Nonetheless, I believe that I remain faithful to the spirit of Levinas’ works, if not to the letter. I also am not attempting to present a case for why one should take up Levinas’ ethics as opposed to any other, or to otherwise compare and contrast his system with other ethical systems, except for wherein doing so makes clearer what Levinas thinks. My goal is modest: I want to show that one can construct a community on the *basis* of Levinas’ works that does not require retreating to any exclusive or exalted notion of community and is at least plausible as a basis for a functional society, *pace* Rose. In other words, by the end of this thesis I hope to have presented a case that Levinas’ ethics is worthy of taking seriously in contemporary

⁸ Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 2017).

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philosophy, and that it does not deserve the reputation it has gained as an idealistic and quietist philosophy that cannot account for the problems posed by political mediation.

Chapter 2: The Other and The Outside

To begin, I will present an outline of Levinas' philosophy, focusing on *Totality and Infinity* and to a lesser extent *Otherwise Than Being*. Specifically, I want to highlight the role that alterity --the presence of the Other as the 'outside' of the subject-- plays in his work, particularly in the development of the Face of the Other. In doing so, I hope to provide a context for the debate that will follow concerning how to interpret the various statements that Levinas makes throughout.

The Other, more specifically the Face of the Other, is the most important concept one must understand in order to grasp Levinas' philosophy. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas' goal is to develop ethics as a first philosophy, in much the same way that Descartes and Heidegger both set out to create philosophical foundations out of the metaphysics of perception or primary ontology, respectively.⁹ That is, Levinas stakes all of philosophy on the face-to-face encounter with the Other, which provokes a sense of duty which ruptures the totality of our self-interested existence by presenting us with a standard for evaluation outside of ourselves. Levinas calls this experience the 'Face of the Other.' The Face of the Other is not a material face: for Levinas, the Face exceeds all representation,¹⁰ the material face represents the inability of *any* image to represent alterity.¹¹ For the Other to be *absolutely* an Other there must be something that they hold in reserve, and you can form a representation of a physical face both when you see it and in your memory. In other words, when we observe a person, we do not experience them merely in

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 42 cf. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1989). p. 75 and *passim*.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 194, p. 197.

¹¹ Diane Perpich, "Figurative Language and the 'Face' in Levinas's Philosophy," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38, no. 2 (2005): 103–21. p. 103-21 La figure vs. le visage

terms of our shared membership in the human genus.¹² In both our immediate perception of the Other and moreover through our conversation with them, we encounter what Levinas calls a ‘numinous’ quality or ‘holiness’ which overflows any inclusion of the Other in categories defined by what is shared.¹³ In concrete terms, this holiness is found in the epistemic challenge that the Other presents. Experiencing the Other is recognizing that one’s perspective is not totalizing: the Other offers a brief experience of the infinity that exists *sub specie aeternitatis*.¹⁴ In other words, the Other is a being who can provide alternative testimony concerning a shared experience, or --crucially for ethics in particular-- evaluate our actions by a standard which is not our own. As Levinas writes, the experience of the Other “puts the I into question”¹⁵ because it introduces a perspective that is inaccessible to our own. It is this relation between the totality of one’s experience and the infinity that exceeds all possible perspectives to which the title *Totality and Infinity* refers. While we can explore the Other’s perspective through dialogue, and in this way assimilate their experience, what we might call the ‘orientation’ of their perspective is always inaccessible. So, while we might represent another person in our memory by means of their material face, this representation cannot capture their alterity completely. This alterity is signified by capitalizing the ‘F’ to render Face a proper noun, as is done with Other. So, while one begins with the material face, for Levinas that face functions as a symbol which indicates the greater alterity of the Other’s consciousness.

The Face of the Other signifies the Other’s consciousness which is inaccessible through any direct, unmediated method: this is what is meant when the Other is called the subject’s ‘outside.’ Our relation to this alterity is central to Levinas, as it is necessary not only to ethical

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 194.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 196

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 195

life, but to human life in general. In fact, Levinas paints a disparaging image of humans apart from the Other. Levinas refers to the lone ego as “the stomach with no ears”¹⁶ which assimilates the world for the sake of its own enjoyment, deaf to communication and the Other. The things that this stomach “lives from”¹⁷ are also not represented, like the Face of the Other, but instead are incorporated into the subject as a part of themselves. One can represent a loaf of bread, but in the act of eating it --living from it-- the loaf is not represented to us, but instead forms a part of our Being. The notion of ‘living from’ is drawn from Heidegger’s concept of the-ready-to-hand: when one is aware of something as ‘equipment’ or “something-in-order-to,”¹⁸ it is not experienced in the same way it is when one simply observes it. If I am sufficiently skilled with a hammer, I do not actively observe its motion, I simply use the hammer as though it were an extension of myself. I still *see* the hammer and, in that sense, represent it to myself, but I do not actively consider each blow --the hammer ‘disappears’ into the act, phenomenologically speaking. The bread one eats, and the air one breaths are like the hammer: they are assimilated into one’s being through their use. This incorporation into our being is much more complete than the hammer in Heidegger’s understanding, as the bread and the air are *consumed* in addition to their use, and this illustrates the way that, save for the Other, the whole of the world appears to us as something that exists potentially for-us. The Face of the Other differs from all other things in that it cannot be represented because one cannot make a representation of the Other’s consciousness, *and* it cannot be incorporated into one’s being, because of the absolute Otherness possessed by the Other’s perspective. As Hegel makes note of in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 134

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 129

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 1962). p. 97

killing the Other one simply destroys that Otherness, gaining nothing.¹⁹ In the same way, the perspective of the Other cannot be incorporated into our being through any amount of effort. To kill the Other is to destroy their perspective, and their capacity to judge us. It is for this reason that Levinas says that the Face compels us not to kill: if the judgement of the Other is the foundation for the possibility of ethics, then to destroy the Other is to reject ethics all together.²⁰

Levinas holds that receptivity to the Other through their Face is an essential human trait. An animal is just as capable as a human of living off food, drink, and air; of incorporating these things into its being as a human. However, it is a peculiarly human trait to recognize the Other as possessing the capacity to meaningfully judge our actions. This uniquely human kind of experience can only emerge, for Levinas, through the Face of the Other. As Stephen Crowell writes,

It is only because I have welcomed the Other --interdicted my behavior 'before' understanding why-- that I attribute world-constituting rationality to the Other. And I do so by ... taking responsibility for speaking and acting in light of the Other's moral authority -- not by perceiving it or by transferring to the Other a sense of myself that I already possess.²¹

For Levinas, we enter an ethical relation with the Other before we understand the reason why we do so. Asking the question 'why do I feel as though I have this responsibility?' leads to the conclusion that Other can evaluate your behaviour, but it *also* leads to the realization that you can evaluate other's behaviour as well. Thus, we only gain our ability to evaluate once we first

¹⁹ Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Revised Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). p. 127

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 87

²¹ Steven Crowell, "Why Is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2015): 564–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00550.x>, p. 21.

comprehend it in the Other. Prior to this, the idea of judgement would be meaningless, as we would not be aware of any frame of judgement other than our own, and so we would relate to the world in the form of sense-certainty. We would have no reason to doubt that the world is exactly as it appears to us. It is only once we are aware that there is another perspective on the world than our own that the possibility of error, and thus judgment, becomes meaningful. It should be noted that while we are concerning ourselves with ethical judgements here, Levinas believes that this holds for *all* judgements; hence he identifies the face-to-face relation with the Other with the birth of human subjectivity.²² As it concerns ethics, this is the process through which one discovers their *duty* to the Other. The precise nature of one's duty to the Other in Levinas is the crux of many of the debates that will be had in the following chapters, and as such I will leave it for now and move into some of the objections that have been posed to Levinasian thought.

²² *ibid.* p. 21

Chapter 3: The Kantian Objection

Given Levinas' focus on the individual's duty to the Other, there have been a great many questions and objections concerning what, exactly, this duty consists of. If it concerns only one individual's duty to another --as often seems to be the case-- then how can we extend this theory to deal with political mediation, or relations to a *specific* other, not just the Other in general? Clearly, these issues need to be addressed, which I will do by responding the ways in which these objections are presented in the works of philosophers like Gillian Rose and Alain Badiou in the following two chapters. However, before we answer this question and its corollaries, I first must address a much more immediate objection that might be raised against Levinas, which comes in the philosophical language of Immanuel Kant.

Objection

At first glance, Levinas' ethical philosophy appears similar to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. They both hold solemn invocations of 'duty' as the most important aspect of an ethical theory. However, the source of that duty is substantially different. Both Kant and Levinas see ethics as imposed by something outside of the will of the subject, but Kant places it beyond subjectivity in general.²³ As we saw in the previous chapter, Levinas regards the Face of the Other as the source of ethics --and indeed, human cognition more generally. The Face, insofar as we are concerned with it as the source of duty, is what I will call an 'unconditioned subject.' That is, we are not concerned with any particular aspect of the Other in determining our duty to them, but the experience of their alterity itself, a fact that goes beyond any aspect of their *esse*.²⁴

²³ Gabriela Bastera, *The Subject of Freedom: Kant, Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39855>. pp. 125-126

²⁴ I am using the language of Thomas Aquinas' *On Being and Essence* here to describe the way in which Levinas sees the alterity of the Other as exceeding their being. What is important is not even the raw existence of the Face in the world, but the sheer fact of its Otherness, which exceeds any present aspect of it.

Kant, by contrast, would reject Levinas' abstract use of the empirical to ground ethics. The Face is tied to the empirical perception of the Other, and for Kant the only stable foundation for ethics is transcendental duty that exists outside of the empirical realm. Even the fact of the Other's existence or alterity is contingent, so ethics must be founded on something else. In other words, the source of ethics must lie outside the subject.

For Kant, given the proper "determination of the will"²⁵ by universalizable moral maxims, the actions that are willed by a subject will remain within the bounds of a moral law that is both universally applicable *and* given to them by the subject's own reason. Following Kant's famous 'categorical imperative' to "act that the maxim of your will could ... hold at the same time as a principle of a universal legislation"²⁶ one can determine the acts that one is duty-bound to perform through the utilization of their own reasoning capacities. If one wants to know why stealing is wrong, they merely have to ask 'could I will it that everyone should steal, at all times, as a universal law?' The answer is, of course, no: we cannot make a universal law based on one person's desire to take what belongs to someone else. The Other only enters into Kant's philosophy after this abstract duty has been established: if universal morality holds for all rational agents, then for ethics to be possible at all it must be assumed that other people are rational, moral agents who are also bound by it.²⁷

The difference between Kant and Levinas at this point is large, but it is mainly methodological: Levinas is concerned with the existential foundations of ethics, Kant with rationally accessible, universal maxims. Both still arrive at the idea that there are absolute duties owed to those we recognize as possessing moral standing, whether that be in their capacity as

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002). p. 29

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 45

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 167 cf. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* p. 36

fellow rational actors or in the vulnerability represented by their alterity. The Face remains, at this stage, a pure reminder of one's duty to the Other in general, with no concrete specificity. While Kant and Levinas obviously differ in their approaches, which might generate different duties, the Kantian critique of Levinas would be confined largely to the latter's method, arguing that the moral law cannot be derived from experience. Regardless, in order to establish the validity of Levinas's approach, I will need to provide justification for his existential-phenomenological method. In doing so, I will suggest that Levinas does not replace Kant, but instead provides valuable supplement to the latter's work.

The issue becomes more complicated if one wants to argue, as I do in the following section, that there is more to the face-to-face relation than abstract duty --that the concrete particularity of the Other provides shape to the duties that we owe. Introducing the particular empirical data of an experience --the Other as slave, as beggar, as colonized-- is obviously discordant with the universalizability of maxims stressed by Kant. Kant writes in the *Groundwork For the Metaphysics of Morals* that the kinds of empirical considerations introduced by the specificity of the Face --that is, the idea that we have specific duties to a beggar, for example, that we can intuit by experiencing the beggar *as* a beggar-- cannot tell us what we *ought* to do. These empirical concerns can only tell us what we do already --which may be done for purely prudential reasons-- but they cannot lead us to any moral principles. Such principles must come from outside the experience of any particular rational creature if they are to hold for all of them in general. Kant writes that "every other precept which is founded on principles of mere experience ... insofar as it rests in the least on empirical grounds ... can indeed be called a practical rule but never a moral law."²⁸ This problem is already present in the

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Third edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). pp. 2-3

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experience of the abstract and unconditioned Face discussed above and is only intensified by the addition of concrete determinations. So, to construct a coherent ethical and political philosophy on Levinasian grounds, I will have to demonstrate not only the validity of his existential-phenomenological method but also my inclusion of the concrete elements of the Face as relevant to determining one's duty, the latter of which will also provide a solution to some of the problems with Kant's ethical theory while not replacing it.

Reply

In the previous section, I noted two aspects of my interpretation of Levinas that I will have to defend in order to address the Kantian objection concerning the empirical. These aspects are:

1. A justification for Levinas' existential-phenomenological method.
2. A defense of the use of the empirical particularities of the Other's condition

Since Levinas does not answer either of these questions in his own work, I will be looking outside his work toward the broader phenomenological tradition to respond to these issues. In doing so, I will present Levinas as providing a theory that despite having substantial tension with Kant, nevertheless can supplement a broadly Kantian approach to ethics.

First, the methodological difference: as discussed in the previous section, both Levinas and Kant believe that you can arrive at ethical duties from a source external to a subject. However, the difference arises as to whether this source is the alterity of another subject, as it is for Levinas, or if the source is a set of universal maxims that exist apart from any subject, accessible using practical reason, as it is for Kant. The classical Kantian objection to the Levinasian method of getting at one's moral duties is that the empirical fact of the Other's existence and alterity is

too contingent to be the basis for duty.²⁹ If the moral law was based on an empirical fact --here, on the existence of the Other-- then it could not be applied universally.³⁰ While the specific problem of the universalizability of Levinas' ethics will be handled in response to Gillian Rose's objection concerning individual and general wills, I do have something to say here concerning the validity of the Face as the source of ethical duties in general. I am not interested here in 'disproving' Kant's method for determining duty, I am instead aiming to provide reasons *for* the admission of the empirical fact of the Other's alterity despite what we might presume would be his reproach.

As discussed above, Levinas approaches philosophy from a phenomenological perspective. It has been typical of phenomenology to 'bracket' concerns about the epistemological status of perceptual experience, and to begin one's philosophical explanation from that experience. Questions about the real existence of --and our correct perception of-- a given object are suspended in order to investigate experience *as* experience. This has been the case since its foundations in the work of Franz Brentano³¹ and explicitly stated since Edmund Husserl.³² Levinas takes this approach as concerns his ethical philosophy as he is exploring the *experience* of intersubjectivity. To make the case for Levinas' investigation of intersubjectivity, I will turn to the experience of dialogue with the Other.

Levinas writes that dialogue with the Other "is preeminently [sic] the presence of exteriority" because it provides a way of contacting exteriority; discourse is "not simply a

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Third edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). pp. 2-3

³⁰ Jochen Bojanowski, "Kant on the Justification of Moral Principles," *Kant-Studien* 108, no. 1 (March 20, 2017): 55–88, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2017-0001>. p. 72

³¹ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from An Empirical Standpoint*, trans. Linda McAlister, Routledge Classics (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). p. xviii

³² Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Heidelberg: Springer Netherlands, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-9997-8>. pp. 20-21

modification of [thought], but an original relation with exterior being.”³³ This is obvious when one considers that conversation is the most effective way of giving and receiving information, and thus receiving a description of the perspective of the Other. Thus, as was discussed in the first chapter, this dialogue is not only the foundation of ethics, but also of philosophy itself, because all of philosophy is founded on the mutual evaluation of claims by subjects who are radically exterior to each other.

As the philosopher Edith Stein writes, we are faced with an immediate certainty in our own existence, simply because we experience our own continued persistence in the world.³⁴ While we might entertain Cartesian doubts, we cannot escape a practical faith in the certainty of our being. It is worth noting, for example, that Descartes’ own worries are resolved in a renewed certainty of his own existence. However, as Stein goes on to say, we rarely need the ‘I think, *therefore* I am,’ as we tend to live by the much more certain axiom ‘I think, I am.’³⁵ Any intentional act that we perform assumes our existence and continued existence into the future. This is especially true when the act in question is participation in dialogue: as W. Norris Clarke writes, engaging in sincere dialogue entails a number of epistemological implications, chief among them is that I exist because I am aware of myself communicating.³⁶ However, it also entails a commitment to the reality *and* alterity of the Other because it would be futile to engage in dialogue with someone who you believe does not exist, or is a product of your own consciousness and is in that sense a part of you. You might be mistaken about this --your conversational partner might be a

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 66

³⁴ Edith Stein, *Potency and Act*, trans. Walter Redmond (Washington: Ics Publications, 2009). p. 9 Ironically, given her concern for the phenomenological experience of empathy in her other work, and her fusion of Saint Thomas and phenomenology, Stein provides an almost perfect middle ground between Clarke and Levinas.

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 9.

³⁶ W. Norris Clarke, *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person*, First edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). p. 34

dream entity or the product of an illusion-- but to the degree that you are seriously and sincerely engaging in dialogue you *must* believe that the Other exists and is in principle capable of giving you information that you do not possess already in some capacity. The alterity of the Other that we are committed to recognizing in dialogue is the Face, which Levinas describes as 'putting the I into question' by introducing information that exceeds the supposed totality of its experience. The information communicated to you in dialogue is outside of this totality, and so requires you to accept the incompleteness of your perspective in order to engage with the Other. It is because these epistemological implications of dialogue must *necessarily* be accepted for dialogue to be meaningful that Levinas' bracketing is justified. The experience of the Other may be a contingent fact, but it is a fact nonetheless and carries a number of necessary beliefs along with it that must be accepted --at least implicitly-- to live a public life. Levinas is merely describing the consequences that fall out from the fact of human coexistence.

So, to return to Kant: his claim against the use of empirical data like the Face is that it would prevent ethics from being universalized since it was based on some contingent fact. However, it seems clear that some kind of dialogue with the Other is a universal experience of all rational beings --that is, it is an experience common to all those that Kant considers to be bound by moral law. By extension from this universality of dialogue, the various epistemological implications that are connected to it are *also* universal. If this is the case, then there is no reason to suggest that such empirical foundations would not permit universalizability, at least in principle. While I will explain the process of universalizability in more detail in chapter four, it is sufficient for now to say here that if dialogue is universal, then it is possible to arrive at universal duties by discovering in communication where our experiences overlap. It should be noted here that one does not need to abandon the Kantian perspective if one agrees with the argument that I

have given to this point. Rather, one can accept the Levinasian bracketing as a way of proving the rationality of the Other through the assumptions of dialogue, within a broadly Kantian system. That is to say, Levinas provides us with another reason to treat the Other as an end and not a means: we can find that the Other is a rational, moral agent by engaging in dialogue with them. Kant jokingly remarks in *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* "...how much and how correctly would we think if we did not communicate with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!"³⁷ indicating that he sees the value of dialogue in the arrival at correct judgement, even if he would not agree with Levinas' specific methodology.

It is at this point that we move on to the second of the two aspects of the Kantian Objection: the use of the empirical particularities of the Other to determine particular duties based on the particularities in question. I cannot use the same argument I have used above because where dialogue with and experience of the Other is universal, dialogue with a beggar is not. I will show how these concrete qualities do not fall victim to the Kantian problem expressed earlier, because they are not universalizable. Thankfully, it is not difficult to show how this pitfall is avoided, as it follows naturally from Levinas' phenomenological methodology. If I am correct in saying that perception and dialogue are universal, then it follows that such perceptions and dialogues will be filled with all sorts of particulars. Experience is not a single monochrome block, so while it may be universal it is by no means homogenous. This is obvious, as anyone can see any number of discernible traits about a person just by looking at them, and many more by speaking to them. If one is beginning from the fact of experience as Levinas is, then they will

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking? (1786)," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, trans. Allen W. Wood, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814433.003>. 8:144

have to investigate the kinds and qualities of particulars that make up this experience. So, while we are beginning from something universal like human perception and dialogue, we are quickly faced with particulars that we must interpret, and through dialogue arrive at an understanding about them. Conflict over the interpretation of particulars --how they should factor into our decision making, such as whether we should give to a beggar-- is the source of much of the ethical disagreement that one finds, but it does not erase the possibility of universalization through dialogue.

The way each person's ethical judgements can be made universal will be explicated in more detail in chapter four. I will conclude this section by showing how the Levinasian approach as I have described it is a solution to a vexing problem with Kant's deontology. As was made famous in his *On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concern*, Kant believes that since all maxims that can truly be called moral laws must hold in *all* cases, lying must *always* be wrong. In the essay, Kant suggests that lying is impermissible even if it would save a friend from murder.³⁸ If we allow for concrete empirical facts about the various people in question, we can get around this problem. We can come to include the obvious facts of the situation: that one is a murderer, and the other is the one being threatened --we owe something to them both, but what it is that we owe to them varies based on the particular characteristics of their Faces. In other words, we do not have to rely just on transcendental duty and so we can recognize that it would not be good to fulfill our duty to tell the truth to the murderer because he possesses the quality being-a-murderer. I think that it is obvious that violating our supposed duty in this case is far more congruent with our moral intuitions than to abandon our friend. One should take what I have written here not as an attempt to replace Kant with Levinas, but rather to show the way that

³⁸Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Third edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). pp. 63-64

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Levinas provides a system that stands on its own but can also function as supplemental or complementary to Kant. It is important to show that by beginning from the concrete data of experience we can avoid this problem of over-universalization found in Kantian ethics, and as such Levinas provides a helpful supplement to Kant here. With this section I have shown that both aspects of the Kantian objection --the existential phenomenological method and the use of particular elements of experience-- can be avoided by Levinas.

Chapter 4: The Anonymity of the Other

Now that the Kantian objection has been dealt with, I will move on the more specific objections to Levinas. The French philosopher Alain Badiou writes that the ethics of the Other, which he identifies with Levinas,³⁹ “imposes no limit on [the] concept [of the Other].”⁴⁰ Levinas does not specify the character of the Other, only saying that they must be welcomed. Specifically, Levinas writes that the Other’s Face - is what sets them apart from the One --the “radical separation between the same and the other”⁴¹-- all discussion of the Other concerns the Other in general, rather than the Other as conditioned in some determinate way. Badiou then wonders, rightly, what Levinas would say to the colonized person or the slave, who is asked to welcome their colonizer or their slaver. The theologian John Milbank asserts the point more bluntly: for Levinas, “the specific other is always in effect reducible to just ‘anyone.’”⁴² This is problematic, because it proposes a homogeneity or anonymity of the Other which is blind to the concrete differences. These differences, especially power differences, between Others in actual experience often carries important political implications, like the slave and slave-master.

If Levinas is suggesting an absolute duty to the Face as a duty to welcome everyone without any conditions, then the problem of the Other’s anonymity appears unresolvable. If we cannot introduce political mediations into a community --if politics cannot ‘suspend’ the ethical-- then one can only rely on ethical feeling to ensure proper treatment of members of that

³⁹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2013). p. 18

⁴⁰ Alain Badiou, *Migrants and Militants*, trans. Joseph Litvak (Medford: Polity Press, 2020). p. 17 Badiou is talking about Derrida’s ethics here, but Derrida’s claims are drawn from Levinas and are identified as such by Badiou in his *Ethics*.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 36 It is difficult to provide a citation for the claim that the Other is rarely discussed with any kind of specificity, as it is an issue that pervades the whole work, but Badiou and Milbank are correct to point out that the Other is presented as a wholly unconditioned subject.

⁴² John Milbank, “The Shares of Being or Gift, Relation and Participation: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas and Alain Badiou,” October 9, 2006, <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/online-papers/>. p. 7

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community. Ethics ‘swallows up’ politics, presenting an ideal community without the need for political organization. This is problematic for historically subaltern groups, as it paints their resistance to their unjust status as inherently unethical and supplants political resistance with ethical quietism. It would seem to suggest that the oppressed ought to be more concerned with their duties to Others --which includes their oppressor-- than with their liberation from those oppressors. Should it be an ethical imperative to show this radical hospitality to everyone? Is it not better, as Badiou suggests, “to remember here the Madagascan songs set to music by Ravel, where it is said, 'Beware of the white men/You dwellers on the shore'? ... The ethics of welcome cannot be universalized; it must specify the identity of the one who comes as well as his or her intentions, means, and personal relations to the other.”⁴³ On this view, the radical hospitality demanded by Levinas is impervious to the claims of justice.

Reply

Reading Levinas as a idealistic ethical quietist, who cannot address the realities of political mediation is justified, given certain assumptions about what his project is --particularly as it concerns *Totality and Infinity*. Badiou and Rose --and the others associated with their critiques-- take Levinas to be offering a first order ethical theory: that is, they see Levinas as presenting a guide for one’s behaviour in concrete ethical situations. Following from this, if one must be open to the Other in an absolute sense at the level of first order ethics, then the must be required --as Badiou suggests-- to submit themselves to their colonizer or slaver. What I want to suggest, contrary to this reading of Levinas, however, is that he is in fact presenting a second order --or ‘meta-ethical’-- theory. That is, Levinas is not interested in what the answer to the question ‘what ought I to do?’ is, so much as he is instead interested in the how we can ask that question

⁴³ Alain Badiou, *Migrants and Militants*, trans. Joseph Litvak (Medford: Polity Press, 2020). p. 17

in a meaningful way. My re-reading of Levinas in this way is foundational to my critiques of both Badiou and Rose, so while I am presenting my position in response to Badiou, it will be relevant to my response to Rose in the following chapter, as well.

Submission to the Other, on my reading, is foundational to the possibility of ethics rather than being an ethically required action. Submission to the Other in this sense is a general stance towards public behaviour: it is an appreciation for the Other's ability to evaluate your actions. Reading Levinas in this way allows us to dispense with the idea that he is only concerned with abstract, absolute, 'pure' duty and instead use his writings as a foundation upon which we can build first order ethical and political systems. In the following subsection I will provide some reasons to read Levinas in the way that I do, and then I will apply this reading to Badiou's criticism.

Levinasian Meta-Ethics

The reasoning behind accepting Levinas' ethics as second-order is relatively simple. In order to show why, I will draw attention to the lack of positive ethical examples that Levinas gives in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas provides near incessant exhortations concerning the duty one has to the Other, but he provides almost no examples of what that duty entails. The one example he does give seems almost parodically basic: it is one's duty to the Other not to kill them.⁴⁴ I do not mean to say that first-order ethical works ought to consist of lists of which actions are and are not permissible, but they usually present at least some 'guide to action.' If we take the example of Kant, we find that not only does he give us an account of where norms/ethics come from --the exercise of practical reason-- but also a method on how to determine what is

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 87

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truly the product of practical reason, properly applied. Kant writes that his philosophy has produced a “new formula”⁴⁵ for discerning what the right action is, which can be found in --if one pardons my oversimplification-- the universalizability of the maxim expressed in each action.⁴⁶ Levinas does not provide such a method for determining the positive content of one’s duty, beyond vague statements concerning hospitality.

When one is observed by the Other, they submit themselves to a phenomenological experience of *judgement* by the Other, who possesses the ability to evaluate their actions. Steven Crowell writes that the Other is “the evidence which makes evidence possible,”⁴⁷ which is to say --as was discussed in the first chapter-- that because the perspective of the Other is required to make judgement possible, the experience of the Other is required for ethical judgements to exist as well. To be ethical, one has a duty to accept the judgment of the Other as a valid perspective on their action. Thus, one’s duty for Levinas is not a duty to perform an action under specific circumstances but rather one has a duty in general to accept the evaluative capacity of the Other. This is why he never provides any examples of specific duties that we might have: his system is only concerned with this general duty to the Other that we possess. There is no method for separating out our ‘true’ duties to the Other from ‘false’ duties that we mistakenly believe are produced by our relation to the Other but are derived from other sources like our self-interest. It would seem, from this, that the most important part of Levinas’ work is not to develop an account of what one should do, but instead to offer an account of how and why the question “what ought I to do?” can even exist. The experience of the Face of the Other and the evaluative

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002). p. 12

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Third edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). p. 30 Kant famously writes “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 204

capacity of the Other expressed in it makes ethical judgments intelligible. Furthermore, Levinas then builds out from this abstract account of where ethics comes from with a social account of how norms develop beyond this basic duty to the Other.

Ethics is first philosophy for Levinas because it is only in this ethical face-to-face relation with another person that we can come to possess the possibility of knowledge that is not purely subjective: one's subjective experience can be compared with that of the Other, and thus a general consensus about what is true can begin to be formed. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that the existence of human beings implies commonness, a kind of "fraternal community"⁴⁸ which unites them based on their shared capacity to evaluate and to come to agreement. This commonness obviously involves a 'third party,' and even greater numbers of Others than that, beyond the two subjects in the face-to-face relation. Levinas incorporates such additional Others by allowing for the face-to-face relation to be remembered and generalized. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes that the "unlimited initial responsibility" of the Face of the Other "justifies ... concern for justice,"⁴⁹ because one comes to realize that the third party can become the Other in a face-to-face relation, and the Other can become a third party from the perspective of a different face-to-face relation. Concern for the third party is thus a part of the concern for the Other that is revealed in the Face of the Other. Levinas presents the first face-to-face relation as producing an unfurling realization of the complex web of ethical responsibility in which one exists, by proving not only that the Other has the capacity to evaluate you, but also that this capacity is universal among humans. From this discussion we can see that norms emerge from a *community* of observers and evaluators when they arrive at a broad consensus concerning

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 214

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1998), p. 128

what is ethically 'true,' at least for the community. If we jump ahead, we find this expansion of the face-to-face relation confirmed when Levinas writes that "objective judgment is pronounced by the very existence of rational institutions"⁵⁰ which are --at least to the extent that they are rational-- an expression of the common will of the people whom they serve.

This creation of norms through social activity can be made clearer with reference to an analogous concept in the work of Wilfred Sellars: the space of reasons. The space of reasons is, for Sellars, the normative space of reasons and justifications for claims made about matters of fact. Sellars writes in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* that "in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says."⁵¹ For both Sellars and Levinas, intersubjectivity initiates the subject into a space in which they must justify their experience before the judgment of Others, be that justification epistemological or ethical. Robert Brandom points out membership in such a space is constitutive of human sapience itself, as it consists in the ability to give and take reasons for actions or judgements,⁵² just as Levinas' account claims that human subjectivity involves membership in a community of Others who introduce the possibility of false judgements. This is not to say that the two philosophies are identical, but rather that both found the possibility and intelligibility of judgements --ethical for Levinas, epistemic for Sellars-- on the shared agreement and evaluation of a community of judgers. It is this community of judgers, the web of individuals whose judgements one is responsible to, and those to whom one must provide justification, that makes up the Levinasian space of reasons.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 242

⁵¹ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and The Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). p. 76

⁵² Robert B. Brandom, "Study Guide," in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, by Wilfrid Sellars (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997). p.140

How does someone gain membership in this space of reasons? Sellars writes that “Jones’ ability to give inductive reasons today is built on a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations.” That is, Jones acquires the habit of, for example, saying ‘this is green’ when faced with an object bearing a property that he has identified as being related to the word ‘green’ by the community of language users to which he belongs. So, Jones acquires a reason, or set of reasons, to call something green through discourse and dialogue with other people who uniformly identify such objects as ‘green.’ These ideas are similar in that Levinasian ethical judgement also involves the presentation of one’s judgment through language to a community of Others who can judge its accuracy against their own experiences. Even Plato, who is so committed to a distinction between truth and opinion based around objective knowledge of forms still uses the medium of dialogue as a manner of getting at the truth. Plato says in the *Meno* that correct opinion becomes knowledge once it has been “tied down” by “giving an account of the reason why” one has come to hold that opinion.⁵³ The very logic of the Socratic dialogue shows that these accounts are given publicly in such a way that opens them up to the judgement of Others, which leads to the abandonment or revision of these justifications --just as Meno abandons his definition of virtue after considering Socrates’ judgements, and the two begin to search together. Justification only makes sense if there are other subjects to whom you must justify yourself --unlike what Plato may have believed, but as is implied in the logic of dialogue-- knowledge is only possible through the presentation and collective judgement of justifications. Of course, we may make our judgments privately or implicitly, but we have come to acquire them because we have had similar judgments affirmed or denied by a community of Others whose judgements we accept as bearing at least some authority. We have a moral habit or

⁵³ Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). p. 895, e 98.

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custom: we have reason to believe that this moral judgment will be like similar ones, but we lack *knowledge* of the veracity of our judgement.

Returning to Levinas, we can observe an ‘ethical space of reasons,’ where one acquires ethical habits --reasons for performing certain actions or making moral judgments which draw on social agreement about norms-- in the same way as perceptual judgments concerning the colour of objects. We come to hold the belief ‘theft is wrong’ in a large part because of the judgments Others make concerning these actions: when our parents negatively judge us for taking a toy from our sibling, for instance. This does not imply universal assent, there can always be disagreements and mistakes --indeed, the ethical is much less certain than the perceptual-- but it does account for the general agreement found amongst human beings on ethical questions. Returning to the question of the third party, we can see that repeated experiences with the Face of the Other --repeated recognition of the evaluative capacity of the Other-- leads to the development of a habit which allows for recognition of this judgment to become ‘second nature.’ We do not have to be told not to steal; at a certain point it becomes assumed: the capacity for the Other to judge us is accepted without being thought about. We do not often think ‘what will other people think if I do *x*,’ but we take the Other’s evaluation --or the evaluation of third party/’the public’ more generally-- and the social norms we acquired through that evaluation into consideration, nonetheless.

This experience of social norm-making can be generalized and formalized in political and social institutions. Laws are, in a sense, a record or ledger of the social norms in place in a society at the time they were created, especially in democracies where there is some degree of public will behind the decisions of lawmakers. It is thus easy to imagine a relatively smooth account of the transition from the face-to-face ethical encounter to the development of rational

and just political institutions. Face-to-face encounters become universalized as the norms that are socially developed are organized into formal institutions that administer justice based on communal agreement, and a sense of shared duty to the communities' good as expressed in the notion of the third person. However, as Robert Bernasconi notes, Levinas does not make the transition so simple. From *Totality and Infinity* in the 1960's through to his last writings in the early 1980's, Levinas presents ethics and politics as "conflicting aspects of ... the same structure."⁵⁴ In *Totality and Infinity* for example, Levinas writes that his vision of fraternity is entirely separate from a political organization of competing interests, which he calls a "struggle of egoisms [that] results in a human city."⁵⁵ These reflections concern only the development of a human community generally, rather than politics specifically --which, as we will see in chapter four, requires institutions. Also, while the problem of the opposition between freedom and unfreedom, or particular and general will that Rose found in Levinas will be addressed in greater detail below, we find in the social account of norms the beginning of an answer to her criticisms. This social production of norms allows for each particular ethical will to contribute to the general ethical will, as norms are produced by a general agreement of particular wills over time through discourse. My Sellarsian reading of Levinas as providing an 'ethical space of reasons' allows for a particular will to offer disagreement with --and thus potentially correct-- their received general will. Thus, one can begin to see a sketch of how the particular and the general can be brought together.

If one takes Levinas to be offering a meta-ethical account of duty, wherein one's duty is simply to respect the Other's judgment as the source of normativity, there is no reason to believe

⁵⁴ 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 (January 1999): 76–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.1999.11008545>. p. 83

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 214

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that Levinas would hold that a slave must submit to their slave master, or a colonized person to their colonizer. In the following section, I will show how the reading of Levinas I have presented here allows Levinas to evade Badiou's critique.

The Phenomenon of The Face

The problem of the Other's anonymity as raised by Badiou and Milbank is of less consequence if one views Levinas' project as meta-ethical. This is because the Other is only anonymous --that is, lacking in any determinate character-- on the level of second-order ethics. What one is submitting to is not the physical, bodily presence of the Other, but only their capacity to evaluate and judge action. For ethics to be possible we must accept external judgment as regulative, or at least contributing to the regulation of action through its role in the social production of norms. The opinion of the Other needs to have at least some say concerning the permissibility of our actions. Otherwise, everyone would operate like Nietzschean *übermenschen*, self-creators of norms and values without reference to any kind of community membership.⁵⁶ Of course, this is not how most people operate, and we tend to view people who behave in this way --i.e., without regard for social norms-- negatively: at best as anti-social and at worst as criminal. The identity of the Other only comes to matter after their initial status as an anonymous evaluator. One's need to submit themselves to the Other's judgment does not require them to literally submit to their slaver at the political level. Given Levinas' reliance on phenomenology in *Totality and Infinity* it would be bizarre for him to ignore the more 'everyday' elements of the experience of another such as their position of power, in favour of this quasi-spiritual notion of the Face alone.

⁵⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third edition (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). pp. 112-114 and *passim*. While one could call it the thesis of the whole book, this section of the chapter *Nietzsche or Aristotle* is the clearest presentation of the idea that the Nietzschean 'revaluation of all values' is the only alternative to at least some kind of embeddedness in a community of evaluators.

To provide some first-order structure on top of this foundation that can address Badiou's concerns, I will turn to what Christine Sypnowich calls the "*phenomenology of begging*."⁵⁷ A beggar on the street seems to make certain demands of us by their abjection alone; what prompts us to give to the beggar is our recognition of the intolerable humiliation of their performance, which we are made to participate in.⁵⁸ In other words, we are responsible to not just a person in the abstract but the concrete individual before us, and our responsibility is to the particular needs presented by this unique case. In Levinas' work we recognize the Other not only in the abstract sense of their Face, but also as the stranger, the widow, or the orphan.⁵⁹ Thus, we see that developing from the abstract responsibility we have discussed to this point, we can point to more concrete, particularistic duties. Concerning how he saw his own responsibility to Others who were anti-Semitic towards him, for instance, Levinas said the following:

My self, I repeat, is never absolved from responsibility towards the Other. But I think we should also say that all those who attack us with such venom have no right to do so, and that consequently, along with this feeling of unbounded responsibility, there is certainly a place for a defence, for it is not always a question of 'me', but of those close to me, who are also my neighbours.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Christine Sypnowich, "Begging," in *The Egalitarian Conscience: Essays in Honour of G. A. Cohen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) <http://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0199281688.001.0001/acprof-9780199281688-chapter-10>. p. 184 emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 190

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 251

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1989). pp. 291-292 Levinas goes on to say later "My people and my kin are still my neighbours. When you defend the Jewish people, you defend your neighbour; and every Jew in particular defends his neighbour when he defends [himself]." This further reinforces the idea that *defence*, which is the kind of politics that Levinas gives an ethical justification to, is about group membership.

Levinas says that such a defense is a politics, but one that is necessarily ethical. That is, the concern here is not of one person's submission to a singular other, but a defense of those who are close to them, those who are neighbours. To respond to Baidou, we can say that it is not the responsibility of the slave to submit to their master, on Levinas' account, and that their right to resist their condition comes from their neighbours: slavery is resisted by the slave not only for their own good, but also for the good of the community of oppressed, enslaved people to which they belong by dint of their oppression. This is how first order concerns enter into Levinas' work, where we move from the Other as purely Other to the Other as neighbour or an enemy, as a concrete part of the world. One can imagine a phenomenology of the slave, or of the colonized, that attends the specific character of the Other in these conditions, analogous to the phenomenology of the beggar. Such work exists, though not from a Levinasian perspective, in the works of Franz Fanon, or the tradition of critical phenomenology. The phenomenology of begging, of colonization, of slavery, illustrates how the specific elements of the Other's condition --beyond the transcendence of their Face-- determine the concrete duties that we have to them under specific circumstances. Levinas does not address many concrete ethical judgments in his most well-known works, but one can find his outlook in a fragmentary form in his lesser-known works, such as in the quote concerning anti-Semitism from an interview he gave. One thing that Levinas makes clear is that "alongside ethics, there is a place for politics"⁶¹ and that while opposed, they can coexist. However, as we have seen, Levinas seems to focus on the individual alone, and so I will need to answer how Levinas unites the particular and general wills.

⁶¹ *ibid.* p. 292

Chapter 5: Levinas and the Prophet

Objection

Gillian Rose argues that Levinas widens the gap between ethics and politics to such a degree that there is no possibility of mediation between the two,⁶² citing the following section of an interview given by Levinas: “Ethics is, therefore, against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first. Ethics redefines subjectivity as this heteronomous responsibility in contrast to autonomous freedom.”⁶³ Levinas locates the ethical in a duty to the Other, and as such personal freedom can only be seen in resistance to this duty which Levinas suggests we must submit our will. Thus, ethics is opposed to both nature and freedom, which are held to be one and the same: the natural freedom of the ‘stomach without ears,’ which exists prior to and without the Other. As Rose writes, “instead of recognizing and comprehending the opposition between 'nature' and 'freedom' as the tension of freedom 'and' unfreedom”,⁶⁴ Levinas collapses the opposition so that he can present ethical duty as ‘other’ to politics, the latter of which ultimately falls victim to the self-interested caprices of human freedom.

Rose’s suggestion is that the opposition between freedom and unfreedom is the reason why politics is necessary. As she writes earlier in *The Broken Middle*: “This difficulty is the political difficulty par excellence: the opposition between particular and general will ... and the difficulty of representing this relation in terms of political institutions.”⁶⁵ The political, for Rose, emerges

⁶² Bettina Bergo, “Gillian Rose’s Critique of Prophetism and Politics in Levinas,” in *Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty That Adorns the Earth*, Phaenomenologica (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1999), 258–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-2077-9_12, p. 273

⁶³ Richard Kearney, *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). p. 60 Cited by Rose in *The Broken Middle* p. 248

⁶⁴ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992). p. 249

⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 164

in the opposition between what one person wants, the particular will; and what is willed by the general will of the community, which the subject experiences as *unfreedom*. Thus, because Levinas' ethics --which emerge from the 'event' or experience of the Other-- cannot be universalized or made into positive law, it cannot mediate between these these two wills and relies on a religious *agape* love: an unconditional love between community members. For Rose, it is this inability for Levinas' ethics of the Other to account for the general will --for politics-- that prevents it from accounting for the specificity of the Other, for example. When Levinas makes claims like "Goodness does not radiate over the anonymity of a collectivity presenting itself panoramically, to be absorbed into it. ... It has a principle, an origin, issues from an I, is subjective"⁶⁶ and "Ethics will never, in any lasting way, be the good conscience of corrupt politics"⁶⁷ it is easy to understand how Rose arrives at the conclusion that Levinas' philosophy simply lacks the ability to address the conflict between the individual and the community.

If a community can only be maintained by relationships sustained by *agape* love between its members as individuals, rather than through the mediations of the state and law, then this love cannot account for specificities that would upset this relation. Pure *agape* cannot account for the slave master's relation to the slave, as we discussed above concerning Badiou. But on a more general level, Levinas' philosophy appears to propose, at best, a beautiful dream: a community of saints governed without any need for political mediation or suspension of the ethical. At worst he advocates a kind of 'prophetism'⁶⁸ where the ethical emerges to 'shame' the world in brief instances that do little to affect any overall trend of violence and injustice in a political society. It

⁶⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Revised. Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969. p, 305

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1989). pp. 289-290

⁶⁸ I will defend a kind of 'prophetism' later in this paper against Rose, but for now I must acknowledge the insufficiency of the kind of 'prophetism' she finds in Levinas' work.

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sounds almost foolish, like hippy sloganeering dressed up in the false profundity afforded to it by the idiom of continental philosophy. The notion of a community based on pure *agape* love is obviously impossible, or at least massively impractical. As such, Levinas' philosophy would seem to collapse under the weight of reality, unless one can discern a way for political mediation to enter it.

Reply

If Levinas is offering us the sort of meta-ethical foundation that I have suggested, then the move from ethics to politics becomes possible, as it can be constructed on the foundation of Levinas' ethics rather than being excluded or superseded, as Rose suggests.⁶⁹ The two fields may remain in tension, but they can nonetheless coexist within this tension. To show the manner in which this tension is mediated, I will present an answer to two of Rose's critiques of Levinas, one of which I have saved until now. That is, in order to show how Levinas can account of the will of individuals and the will of society we must turn to a concept called *prophetism*.

Prophetism is a concept that, while based in Levinas' works --specifically *Otherwise Than Being*-- is applied to him negatively by his critics as a result of the belief that his ethics can only serve to 'shame' the particular political norms of a given community. In what follows, I will suggest an alternative reading of Levinas prophetism, with a focus on the role of the 'apology' or defence made by a subject to justify their going beyond what the community accepts as ethical behaviour. That is, I will present prophetism --and the figure of the prophet-- not as exalted individuals, but instead a function we must all perform: we possess the potential to be prophets. This discussion of prophetism will not be exhaustive, as the problem of the particular and general will has a mass of literature that would take this project widely outside of its scope, and prevent

⁶⁹ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992). p. 258

me from presenting a clear vision of Levinas' particular response to this problem. Specifically, I will be presenting a defense of prophetism against the specific way in which it is framed by Rose. To get to this defense of prophetism, however, I will first have to proceed through a general account of Levinas' politics, and its relationship with ethics.

Through a careful reading of a discussion that takes only a few pages in *Totality and Infinity*, one can find the basis of a Levinasian politics. In the final section of division C in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas subtly introduces a dialectic between the collective judgement conducted by rational institutions and the individual's 'apology' before such judgement. 'Apology' is meant here in the Socratic sense, that is, one's apology is their defense of their actions before the judgement of institutions, just as Socrates defended himself in the titular dialogue. Levinas affirms that the collective judgment of rational institutions is objective, and that such institutions safeguard a certain degree of human freedom from the limitations brought on by "the insecurity of the morrow, hunger and thirst."⁷⁰ Further, Levinas notes that institutions consist in precisely the kind of submission to the Other's judgement that he has made the cornerstone of his philosophy. Thus, it seems that the transition to the political is easy: the submission to the Other that Levinas deems central to the ethical is made objective by its depersonalization in institutions. The potential subjective bias of the face-to-face encounter and the pre/non-ethical human capacity to ignore the Other altogether is controlled by the impersonal character of politically and institutionally enforced law. One can, in theory, resist the Face of the Other with little consequence beyond one's conscience, but the power of law makes tangible the punishment for violating fraternity. This is the move that Paul Ricoeur makes in *Oneself as Another* when he defines the goal of ethics as "aiming towards the good life, with and for others,

⁷⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). pp. 241-242

with just institutions.”⁷¹ Ricoeur breaks this phrase into three parts, divided by the commas, utilizing Levinas to illustrate how we can live ‘with and for others,’ before introducing institutions to take care of issues of justice that go beyond the face-to-face relation in the third section.⁷² While this formulation of Ricoeur is similar to my reading of Levinas, I think that the way in which Levinas describes the relationship between subjects and institutions needs to be examined further, to avoid the misinterpretation that the political is a simple formalization of the ethical.

While Levinas admits of the justice and necessity of institutions, he does not hold that insuring their most just and effective functioning is the key to ensuring a just society: they are necessary, but insufficient. Levinas always holds to a continuing tension between ethics and politics. Specifically, Levinas states in an interview that, “there’s a direct contradiction between ethics and politics if both these demands are taken to the extreme. It’s a contradiction which is usually an abstract problem.”⁷³ It is vital to recognize that the contradiction between ethics and politics exists only at the level of abstraction, that is, as pure opposites without mediation. Levinas makes clear that while the existence of institutions is both good and necessary, there is a certain domination of the individual that occurs by moving from face-to-face ethics to the impersonal justice of jurisprudence. He writes,

the will now knows another tyranny: that of works alienated, already foreign to man ...

There exists a tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal, an order that is inhuman

though distinct from the brutish. Against it man affirms himself as an irreducible singularity,

⁷¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, First Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). pp. 169-202

⁷² *ibid.* p. 194

⁷³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Politics,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1989). p. 292

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exterior to the totality into which he enters, and aspiring to the religious order where the recognition of the individual concerns him in his singularity... The virile judgment of history, the virile judgment of "pure reason," is cruel.⁷⁴

For Levinas, the existence of institutions --particularly as they are united into a state and/or legal bodies-- exercise a kind of domination over the individual subject, insofar as their individuality is made subject to the general will. Levinas wants to avoid solving the problem of the general and particular will through the sublation of the particular to the general through state institutions without providing some way for the particular to assert itself over and against those institutions.

Levinas writes that "the judgment of history consists in translating every apology into visible arguments, and in drying up the inexhaustible source of the singularity from which they proceed,"⁷⁵ describing the process by which the normative evaluations of individuals become a received tradition through collective assent. The ethical decisions made from a particular subjective perspective are universalized in the ethical space of reasons, as the 'singularity' of their individual contexts are removed so that they can function as laws. For Levinas, the traditions that are formalized in institutions are *provisionally universal*. By this I mean, for the perspective of the members of that tradition, Law and custom often seems to be all encompassing. However, new apologies are always being given --new defences are always being presented-- and as a result, the supposed universality of institutions is always being revised. It is this revision that I take to be a truly Levinasian account of prophetism. That is, the prophet is anyone engaged in making some aspect of their experience that is not included by the current

⁷⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). pp. 242-243

⁷⁵ *ibid.* p. 243

institutions heard in an attempt to revise those institutions such that they have provisions for this aspect of their experience.

Invoking theological language to describe the prophetic relation between subject and institution, Levinas writes,

To place oneself under the judgment of God [judgment according to received moral law] is to exalt the subjectivity, called to moral overstepping beyond laws, which is henceforth in truth because it surpasses the limits of its being ... Concretely to be an I presenting itself at a trial --which requires all the resources of subjectivity-- means for it to be able to see, beyond the universal judgements of history, that offense of the offended which is inevitably produced in the very judgment issued from universal principles.⁷⁶

Prophetism is the process through which the ethical is not limited to existing as a 'sublime Other' or 'outside,' only casting its judgement on the necessarily amoral political. Instead, prophetism allows ethics and politics to serve as two opposed poles of a dialectic that drives the development of social normativity. The provisional universality represented by institutions is not static, but rather, develops historically alongside the tradition through the prophetic relation. The singular ethical enters the universal political through an apology or defence: when a legal case results in new protections for a minority group, for instance, this is the prophetic relation at work. The existing institutions did not account for some aspect of the experience of that group, and the new protection aims to correct for that. This is how the development of society takes place, at least considered from the point of view of ideas. Traditional moral judgements that can no longer be supported on the basis of current reasoning are replaced when modern judgements provide new,

⁷⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Revised Edition. Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969. pp. 246-247

superior reasons for their application. These reasons may inspire social movements to bring about the material changes that are required to base institutions and other social forms on the new reasoning. Regardless, these changes are only founded on the collapse of the rationality of the older aspects of the tradition, and its replacement by new reasons and justifications.⁷⁷

We find in this rehabilitated prophetism an answer not only to Gillian Rose's question concerning the relation of the particular will to the general will, but we also find an answer to how the political fits into Levinas' philosophy. There is both a mediation between ethics and politics as well as a tension between them. In fact, this mediation exists *in* the tension between these two terms. The apology offered by a subject against the impersonal justice of the state and the collectivity in general is explicitly permitted to go *beyond* that justice, and thus to reform the boundaries of what justice *is*. It is not the case that politics and justice simply replace ethics, or that ethics stands apart from politics: the two are always interwoven, with politics accounting for justice to the third party and ethics exposing where politics fails in its universal ambitions. In other words: the ethical alone is impotent, as it only concerns itself with singularity. Politics alone has the inverse problem; its universality cannot account for the singular not already included within it. Prophetism allows one to preserve the pluralism of ethics --which is necessary if we are to truly respect the Other's judgements-- and the universality and community of law by allowing the former to modify the latter. To give a brief outline of this process: by listening to the testimony of an Other who is not properly included in the considerations of the general will as represented by our institutions --a gay man who wished to get married before the legalization

⁷⁷ While the issue is more complicated than can be discussed here, I want to at least gesture at the similarity between what I am suggesting here, and the notion of class consciousness found in the work of Marx, especially as it has been read by György Lukács. That is to say, the reasons provided by Capital and its ideologists come to fail the judgments of them made by the working class in light of their experience, and so they work to generate new reasons to replace them --and indeed, to produce political action to enact social change to bring about such changes.

of gay marriage, for instance⁷⁸-- we may come to discover that the law --be this the literal law, or the vast body of unspoken cultural norms-- is not yet sufficiently universal in its coverage, and thus work to expand it. However, it remains the case that throughout this process, the law in general remains in force.

This more involved reading of Levinas' prophetism is not considered by Rose. Bettina Bergo writes that for Rose, "what is characteristic of post-modernism is its inability to conceive a ground of meaning beneath the individual and the state, the ethical life and political institutions,"⁷⁹ and Levinas is a paradigmatic of this position. In other words, Levinas' position, as Rose sees it, does not allow political mediation through the state or other institutions, instead relying on the figure of prophet to shame the current ethical habits of the day. She identifies a radical and absolute division between prophetic mediation and political mediation, which as is implied by what I have written above, does not seem to apply to Levinas' account of the issue: Levinas *does* speak explicitly about political mediations in *Totality and Infinity*, as we have just discussed. Bergo writes that one of Rose's citations of Levinas conceals the complications that he introduces into the seemingly naive dualism between politics and ethics:

'When you compare world history, where there are so many mystical thoughts and movements, ... doctrines of peace and love, with the true political course of this history made up of wars, violence, conquests and the oppression of men by their fellows, then you have less cause to worry about Israel's soul and political history. Ethics will never, in any lasting way, be the good conscience of corrupt politics...' Rose ends her citation here. The

⁷⁸ The point here is not to suggest that this is the limit of inclusion for gay men, but rather to provide a slightly more concrete example than has been given to this point.

⁷⁹ Bettina Bergo, "Gillian Rose's Critique of Prophetism and Politics in Levinas," in *Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty That Adorns the Earth*, *Phaenomenologica* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1999), 258–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-2077-9_12, p. 258.

stopping point is infelicitous for Levinas ... First, he resumes his assertion by stating, ‘the immediate reactions we've witnessed over the last few days prove [that ethics can not be the 'good conscience of corrupt politics'], and transgression of ethics made 'in the name of ethics' is immediately perceived as a hypocrisy and as a personal offence.’⁸⁰

In this quote, Bergo is showing how one of Rose’s citations of Levinas --the section in single quotes-- is cut off before Levinas is able to provide nuance. What Levinas is referring to when he says, “the immediate reactions we've witnessed over the last few days,” is the reactions to a massacre of Palestinians at the hands of Christian Falangists in Israel. This is important, as it highlights that he is not drawing up an absolutist logic between politics and ethics but is instead indicating the tendency for politics to violate the bounds of ethics while claiming to be doing so in the name of the ethical. The Falangists, a group organized along explicitly political lines, slew the Muslims in the name of what they saw as Christian ethics. In other words, while Rose finds in this passage a radical diremption between ethics and politics, what Levinas is doing is highlighting the historical evidence of the limitations of ethics in mediating politics. This, combined with the role of prophetism described above, does not speak to the incommensurability of ethics and politics, but instead suggests that the ‘apologetic’ relation between ethics and politics is a never-ending process, because there will always be some aspect of the general will that needs to be made more universal --whether it be as extreme as this example, or something smaller and more everyday.

It is also important to state explicitly that, for Levinas, the role of prophet is not one reserved for the likes of Moses and Samuel. Instead, in their capacity to introduce a new perspective to the tradition they receive, *everyone* is a prophet --or at least, everyone has the

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p. 261. Formatting edited for clarity.

prophetic potential, which is actualized by going beyond the limits of the ‘judgement of God.’ The Biblical reference more appropriate than the classic example of prophets is Job, pleading his case before the Lord after experiencing intense suffering. In this example we have a person presenting their case subjectively to what they see as an Absolute tribunal, attempting to make their own subjective experience --Job’s suffering, the experience of the marginalized, etc.-- known to, and included by, the universal --God for Job, institutions and the state for most moderns. Of course, the analogy does not track exactly, as Job conflicts with a literal universal in the form of God, rather than the provisional universality afforded to Law in Levinas’ philosophy, but it provides a much more adequate image of the role of the prophet: not a rare, pious individual, shaming us for how we have lost our way, but the ordinary individual, making the universality of law aware of the specificity of the individual’s plight. In this way, we are all responsible for being prophets, so that we may work toward making the Law’s provisional universality truly universal. While it might seem outlandish that *everyone* is a prophet in Levinas’ ethics, it falls in line with his more theological account of the Biblical prophet elsewhere. As Anna Yampolskaya notes, in an essay surveying the role of the prophet in the later Levinas’, “as a prophet, I neither substitute myself for God, nor do I serve as a spokesperson for Him; but I have to become a spokesperson for myself.”⁸¹ The prophet for Levinas is someone who is a spokesperson for themselves and their own experience, and in doing so defends those who share this experience with them.

There is some irony, then, to the fact that the apology performs the same function that Rose attributed to the trio of women who she sees as paradigmatic of her own views on political mediation --Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt. In *Mourning Becomes the*

⁸¹ Anna Yampolskaya, “Prophetic Subjectivity in Later Levinas: Sobering up from One’s Own Identity,” *Religions* 10, no. 1 (January 2019): 50, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010050>, p.g. 10

Law, Rose writes that each of these women addressed the “inequality and insufficiency of the universal political community of her day, but without retreating to any phantasy of the local or exclusive community.”⁸² This description fits the role of the prophet perfectly, as it is precisely by identifying within their subjective experience some element that is not adequately covered by the Law, the prophet locates --and, crucially, attempts to rectify-- some inequality or insufficiency within their political community. The communities imagined by Levinas in which the prophetic relation occurs are not utopian retreats from the political, as the prophetic relation is at work in any society in which its members work to produce a more universal community. Thus, once we properly understand Levinasian prophetism as I have outlined here, not only does it provide a way for Levinas to allow for mediation between the particular will and the general will but provides this mediation in such a way that it fulfils the requirements that Rose attributes as the hallmarks of her own theory. To give a concrete, historical example of my own, I will utilize a historic piece of Canadian law as a concrete example of what prophetism entails. The case I am interested in is that of Jane Hurshman --a young woman from Nova Scotia-- who was on trial for killing her violently abusive husband in 1982. Hurshman was forced to suffer a profoundly damaging array of violences and indignities, which are recorded in the book *Life and Death With Billy*.⁸³ The recounting of these details in her court case and their subsequent publication resulted in this supposed open and shut case instead resulting in an acquittal for Hurshman. In fact, as a *Maclean's* article recounting the story recalls, the decision was applauded by the court's audience.⁸⁴ The trial was appealed numerous times, and while Hurshman did eventually face some jail time for manslaughter, the case attracted national

⁸² Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). p. 39.

⁸³ Brian Vallee, *Life and Death with Billy* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1998).

⁸⁴ Diane Turbide, “Pushed to The Limit,” *Maclean's* | The Complete Archive, November 8, 1993, <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1993/11/8/pushed-to-the-limit>.

attention and Hurshman became an outspoken advocate for abused women. Of particular importance is that she introduced into the public consciousness the more insidious effects of abuse that can often prevent women from leaving these relationships --called ‘coercive control’ by the sociologist Evan Stark--⁸⁵ and her case becoming part of the legal precedent for further cases like *R v. Ryan* where Nicole Ryan was acquitted of hiring a hitman against her own abusive husband.⁸⁶ These two legacies have combined in recent years into a debate over whether or not Canadian law should include explicit provisions for coercive control.⁸⁷ Given the lack of concern for her plight exercised by the RMCP --to which Hurshman has spoken in numerous places, and is illustrated to great effect in *Life and Death with Billy*-- one can see that Hurshmann was forced to contend not only with her abuse but also with a patriarchal view of marriage that lead the RCMP to regard domestic violence as a private issue to be handled within the household.

These details are relevant to the discussion of prophetism, as in her capacity as an advocate for the rights of abused women, Jane Hurshman functioned as a prophet. That is to say, there was inadequate provision in the Law or the culture to address her subjective experience, and through both her time in court and through her advocacy --not to mention what she has represented to the public, and to other women in similar situations to her-- Hurshman gave her apology before the judgement of a law that had no place for her. She went beyond the law, in both the very literal sense of her killing, and in the general sense of showing a place where her subjective experience was not covered by the law, and thus it failed in its universal ambitions. By putting forward her

⁸⁵ Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸⁶ *R. v. Ryan*, 1 SCR 14 (Supreme Court of Canada 2013). Hurshman’s name is invoked in the court documents. Furthermore, though I have not read it yet, I know from personal correspondence and my own contributions that Nadia Verrelli and Lori Chambers’ new commentary on the case (*No Legal Way Out: R v Ryan, Domestic Abuse, and the Defence of Duress*) make the connection to Hurshman’s explicit as part of the genealogy of the case.

⁸⁷ Tara Carman and Madeline McNair, “Proposed Legislation Would Allow Police to Intervene in Domestic Violence Cases Sooner,” CBC, April 27, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/legislation-police-intervene-domestic-violence-1.6000706>.

defence, and making known the horrific treatment she received at the hands of Billy, she provided an a challenge both to the legal and political institutions that did not have the proper understanding or provisions to address women in her situation, but also the cultural attitudes toward domestic violence and marriage that held the instution of marriage to be an institution that involved the submission of women to their husbands. The inadiquacies of both to provide justice and care to the third party were thrown into stark relief. There is not room in this thesis to unpack all of specific ways in which popular understandings of gender and marriage were challenged by Hurshmann’s defense, but it is sufficient to say that she introduced a perspective that contributed to a shift in how victims of domestic violence are seen.

Of course, Hurshman’s story is complicated, and there are a range of opinions that one could have about any of her actions, but it remains the case that she introduced new content to the law of her tradition, both formally through the courts --and potentially through future legislation-- and informally, through the change in attitude that she brought about in how abused women were perceived in the popular consciousness. Insofar as her efforts have shaped both political-legal institutions and the public consciousness, her apology has been translated “into visible arguments.”⁸⁸ Her efforts are preserved in the tradition not as observations specific to the experience of Jane Hurshman, but as part of how her community now views abused women in general. Of course, prophets can fail in their attempts to be heard, and some perspectives may be heard and included that ought not to be as they are injurious to the project of tolerance overall. Hurshman did not effect a total revaluation of the legal or cultural attidutes concerning domestic violence. However, as we see in the Hurshman case, people’s everyday experiences will supply them with content that is not present in the tradition and cannot be adequately interpreted within

⁸⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 243

that tradition in its current form. One should think of members of all the groups in the world for whom this is true: we have spoken elsewhere of the colonized and the enslaved. Hurshman did not embark on her career of advocacy for the sake of herself, but for abused women in general. Abused women's resistance to the violence and injustice of their own situations constitutes prophetism as well, as they are working to make the traditions and communities in which they live more universal. They do this not only for their own good, but also for the good of all the people who are oppressed as they are. The examples of Jane Hurshman, the colonized, and of the enslaved struggling against their exclusion shows that while prophetism is ethical, it is also a *political* struggle. This brings us to a point discussed earlier in this essay, which is worth recalling here: "there is certainly a place for a defence, for it is not always a question of 'me', but of those close to me, who are also my neighbours."⁸⁹ Prophetism is the way in which this defence is conducted, which is to say as a politics that is also ethical.⁹⁰ There are many questions that could be posed about prophetism and the conflict between the particular and general will which would go beyond the scope of this thesis, but I what I have presented here should serve as an adequate summary of how Levinas solves this particular problem in his own work.

Having responded to what I see as the most central objections to Levinas' ethical and political theory, I will proceed to the final chapter. In this chapter I will provide a Levinasian account of how political communities are formed, and the relationship between communities, as well as between members of communities and strangers. Through this definition, I will show the necessary peace-in-tension that defines the particularly Levinasian view of communities that I endorse.

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1989). pp. 291-292

⁹⁰ *ibid.* p. 292

Chapter 6: Narrative Communities

Now that I have established Levinas' metaethical philosophy, I want to provide an account of narrative communities, in order to provide a greater degree of depth to the concepts that have been discussed above. In particular, I will show how the Other's Face functions as a symbol, and results in the production of communities that are described by Hauerwas as 'Story-Formed,' which is to say that they are united by a shared narrative about who they are as a group that forms the community by providing some account of human existence or purpose.⁹¹ This chapter will use this discussion of narrative communities to say more about how one can relate to Others who are radically unlike themselves and provide a Levinasian account of community formation in more detail than could be done in the discussion of the third party.

The Threefold Mimesis

In the term 'narrative community,' 'community' deliberately retains its colloquial vagueness, as I mean it to only refer to an organized group of people. Any specificity therefore comes from the appellation 'narrative.' I will use this section to explain what I mean by narrative, which for our purposes is a story which structures human life, and thus leads to community formation. To do this, I will employ the threefold *mimesis* described by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*. Each stage of this *mimesis* represents a level at which the subject's experience is organized into narrative form in the mind as a way of coherently organizing it.

⁹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvpj77hg>. p. 10

*Mimesis*₁

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur writes that the ‘emplotment’ or organization into narrative form of experience begins in the *symbolization* of this experience. At this stage, our raw experience is transformed from a brute manifold of sensations into a coherent web of actions and social symbols by which we understand beings and acts as *meaningful* rather than simply extant.⁹² This is not just the valuation that turns paint on a canvas or a sequence of notes into art. Meaning here is meant in the widest possible sense, as one might talk about the meaning of an action or custom. This is the most basic kind of experience that is properly called human; it is where a fist swinging through the air becomes Jones’ punch aimed at Harry’s head to avenge an insult --intuiting intention, assigning meaning to phenomena. It is the creation of a coherent social world, with subjects and intentional actions.⁹³

The Face is a perfect example of this kind of symbolization. The face of the Other --with a lower-case ‘f’⁹⁴-- is experienced, in one sense, as a thing that simply exists. However, it is this stage of symbolization which allows for the transition from the face to the Face. The human face becomes a symbol of the Other’s alterity, it comes to signify in Heidegger’s words that which “does not strictly speaking belong to it.”⁹⁵ The alterity of the Other does not belong to the face in any physical sense, but rather it is the presence of the Other’s face, the Other’s gaze, that leads us to realize the existence of external sources of evaluation and thus comes to symbolize that externality in the form of the Face. In other words, one needs to make the Other’s physical

⁹² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1990). pp. 54-60.

⁹³ *ibid.* pp. 54-55

⁹⁴ I am using the lower-case ‘f’ here to indicate that I am referring to the concrete face that the Other possesses, and not the Levinasian concept.

⁹⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Ferrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976). p. 331

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existence into a symbol of their consciousness, which lies outside of any perceptual experience thereof --in fact, this consciousness lies outside of any perceptual experience *tout court*.

Therefore, Levinas speaks of the Face as the ‘holy’ or ‘numinous’ quality that exceeds our perception of the Other or the Other’s speech, because we cannot experience the Other’s consciousness. We instead intuit this consciousness through the Other’s speech and gaze, which Levinas equates to the way theology discusses the qualified revelations of Himself that God gives.

We can see, then, that this first level of narrativization is required to make the concept of the Face meaningful, because it is required to make experience in general meaningful. We ascribe symbolic meaning to the world, otherwise we could not think about the world beyond its bare existence. We thus view acts as ‘possessing’ the intent behind them in this symbolic sense, and Levinas views the Face as ‘possessing’ the alterity of the Other in this same sense.

*Mimesis*₂

The second stage or level of *Mimesis* is what is most important to the present analysis. At this stage, Ricoeur presents the organization of experience into narrative form. Emplotment “brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, [and] unexpected results.”⁹⁶ The *mimesis* at this stage, then, is the organization of the various symbolized experiences into the narrative form that one would use to describe one’s life. These narratives are inherently social, as people and communities often assert their constancy by telling and retelling stories about themselves and the groups to which they belong. Whenever you tell a friend “remember when we...” you are engaging in the process which I am describing, if only in

⁹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1990). p. 63

a small way. It is for this reason that Ricoeur says that keeping a promise is not only important for moral reasons, but also because fulfilling one's promise --even if you no longer want to-- is an exercise in self constancy. One remains connected to the person they were by making good on their promise because they have told a story that joins the current intentions to their future actions. This is also implied in J.L. Austin's description of promising as a speech-act. What is the act of making a promise if not telling a story about your own future? 'There will be a person x who is identical to me, who will get you a glass of water at time t ' is a very laborious translation of me telling my fiancée 'I will get you a glass of water later,' but it draws out the fact that by making a promise you are assuming your own self-constancy into the future. Otherwise, who is getting the water, and why are they bound by that promise? As Austin says, "I promise to ... obliges me --puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle."⁹⁷

The dialogue that produces this kind of social narrative is inherently ethical, in the Levinasian sense. In chapter two, we saw how dialogue is our primary access to the exteriority of the Other, and *Mimesis*₂ shows how these dialogical relations allow us to form not just ethical duties, but also the social bonds of narrative. The creation of these social bonds always possesses an ethical element because they assume that the Other is capable of judgement, as all dialogue does. We would not worry about our promises if we did not believe that the Other could judge us to be in violation of those promises in a meaningful way. To this point then, I would argue, while they are addressing two different problems, Levinas and Ricoeur share the same dialogical view as it concerns metaethics and social ontology. The same dialogue that produces the Face as a symbol of the Other's capacity to judge connects us to that Other because it gives us a responsibility to them. It is from this responsibility to the Other that communities of judging

⁹⁷ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). p. 10

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subjects can form, bound together through the responsibilities produced in these ethical relations. The social bonds described here are relatively limited, however, because they only concern the relations between individuals, or very small groups. While it is precisely these everyday bonds that make up the substance of narrative communities, the power of narrative to organize individuals is expanded to a much wider scope in the third level of *mimesis*.

*Mimesis*₃

The third *mimesis* makes explicit the social collaboration that is implicit in the first two *mimeses*. In *mimesis*₁, Ricoeur focuses on the symbolization of human action, as we come to take the actions of the Other to be meaningful symbols of their intent in addition to their simple brute reality. *Mimesis*₂ concerns the kinds of narratives that are created not only by people but also by communities at large to define themselves. It is this final *mimesis* that gets us beyond the examples of friends and lovers given in the previously, as well as returning us to Levinas. *Mimesis*₃ marks the connection of a particular set of objects, events, and actions organized into the form of a plot to the wider context in which those replotted symbols exist within. Ricoeur describes the way in which this larger narrative is constructed as a “fusion of horizons,”⁹⁸ taking the term from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. Ricoeur talks about the fusion of horizons in terms of the interaction between the world of a reader and the world of a text during the act of interpretation. This occurs whenever a reader interprets a text --be it a novel, an essay, a movie, etc. -- as their assumptions and social situation collide with the information provided by the text. In the case of a social narrative this would occur in much the same way, where the narrative that informs and shapes the community must be grounded in the historically situated experience of that community at the time in which they exist.

⁹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1990). p. 63

Every member of a community is presented with a received tradition during their upbringing which they must interpret and react to, thus contributing some new content to that tradition through their subjective reaction. I do not mean to say that one is presented with a tradition all at once, or at any point as a coherent totality that one can interpret holistically. Rather, this interpretation is done in a more-or-less piecemeal fashion, in relation to particular thoughts or practices that constitute a part of the social life of a group. One can interpret this tradition in an direct way --as a philosopher or politician-- or in an indirect way, simply in the ways that one thinks and acts in relation to a particular prohibited or incentivized act, for example. This is how progress occurs in a society, as new generations work through and reshape the received narrative concerning who they are, and their place in the world, through interpretation. This interpretation may be enough to change minds on its own, or it may lead to social or political activity to affect the aims of a given set of interpreters, but it begins in the reaction of a subject --or group of subjects-- to their tradition.

Returning to Levinas' ethics, one should recall here the concept of prophetism elucidated in the previous chapter. Progress occurs through the individual's reaction to their received traditions in Levinas' prophetism as much as in Ricoeur's fusion of horizons. Levinas presents this prophetism as occurring through a fusion of horizons between the particular and the universal; the pairs 'prophet and law' and 'reader and narrative tradition' are one and the same. When Levinas writes that "Goodness does not radiate over the anonymity of a collectivity ... it has a principle, an origin, issues from an 'I,' is subjective."⁹⁹ I do not take this to mean --as Rose does-- that Goodness is only a property of individuals. Instead, ethics --in issuing from an 'I'-- takes on a particular character and comes to govern a community through the positing of a

⁹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Revised Edition (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 305

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broadly shared interpretation of the world and of social life by the community's members. By recognizing the Other's capacity to evaluate, one refrains from holding up one's own particular Good as universal, and the fusion of horizons allows for traditions to be re-evaluated/re-interpreted in light of the particular experiences of diverse subjects, who can contribute these perspectives through prophetism in order to produce a more universal --or at least more broadly applicable-- ethics.

Thus, while this character will be shaped in part by the narrative which we inherit, because it is formed through experience and dialogue which is bound up with the Other, it also contains the subjective particularity that allows for that tradition to be challenged through prophetism, as in the previous chapter. Communities formed through these traditional narratives are not determined as more-or-less cohesive, closed wholes. Instead, these narratives are a part of the world that the subjects within these cultures belong to, but they are not totalizing. For there to be any kind of interpretation done on the basis of a temporally situated subject, that subject needs to stand apart from their tradition in some way. One's tradition imposes certain limits on ways of thinking, but it does not preclude thinking in ways that challenge its laws and practices -- especially if one is a member of a group that is harmed by these laws and practices. The way in which the narrative that determines a subject's community conditions that subject's experience will be explored below, but it is important to keep in mind that the conditioning exercised by this narrative is not totalizing, as one's subjective experience of the world will introduce new information that will force the tradition to evolve.

Narrative Ethics

As a result of this narrative situatedness, theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has taken the position that all ethics ought to come with a qualifier denoting the community to which

it is connected.¹⁰⁰ For Hauerwas as for Levinas, this is because we do not have an ethical ‘I’ until we have an ethical ‘thou,’ and as such we are situated within communal norms from the moment we come to understand what morality *is*. As Hauerwas puts it, “we are first of all ‘we’s’ who discover our ‘I’s’ by learning to recognize the others as similar and different from ourselves,”¹⁰¹ mirroring Levinas’ claims about the genesis of the ‘I’ that occurs in the experience of the Other’s Face.

Considering everything that has been said to this point, it would be true for Levinas as well as for Hauerwas that any universal ethics would be impossible to complete. This does not mean that we cannot arrive at rules that have a provisional universality on account of a general agreement between groups. Rather, it is only that we should temper our expectations if we believe that we can ever *conclude* such a project by finding a perfectly universal collection of ethical rules. Levinas reminds us that every ethical system is bound up necessarily with the community that produced it, and so it will always be lacking some new subjective perspective: all ethical judgments must contend not just with reason, but also the concrete reality in which the acts they evaluate are carried out. There would have to be a universal community in order to produce a universal ethics, and while such a community can be imagined in principle, it is unlikely that we will ever exhaust the supply of perspectives that ethics must take into account.

Hauerwas gives as an example that Christian ethics is necessarily parochial; it is an ethics by and for those who are members of “communities and institutions capable of carrying the story of God.”¹⁰² While there is certainly overlap with other ethical frameworks, it is nonetheless its own ‘language’ wherein words like ‘forgiveness’ obtain a particular meaning that is unique to

¹⁰⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, First Edition (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). p. 1

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* pp. 96-97

¹⁰² *ibid.* p. 96

that language. Furthermore, this language has developed --and will continue to develop-- over time, as new perspectives on the story of God are introduced and subsequently bring out new elements of that story. To summarize, the various ethics produced by communities are developing stories they tell themselves about what kind of people they are. These narratives need not be religious, as the examples are here, as even secular communities possess unifying narratives, such as national myths or family stories. In the next section, I will show how these narratives become habits, thus moving from a shared way of understanding one's place in the world to that understanding's practical consequences.

Habit, Habitus, and Community

One can see these narratives as ways of modeling the historical development of what we call 'moral habits.' Specifically, I am referring to the definition of habit that has come up through Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas. In Aristotle, the acquisition of moral virtue is achieved through practice or habituation.¹⁰³ That is, through the repetition of a certain act or acts, one gains a habit or disposition to act a certain way. In the work of Aquinas, the relationship between such a habit and the acts included in it is described as the "relation of a principle to an act."¹⁰⁴ That is to say, no matter what word one uses to describe it --moral sense, habit, etc.-- it is obvious that there exists an instinct that governs our responses to ethical questions that we lack the ability, willingness, or awareness to give reasoned consideration. This instinct weighs heavily even on the decisions to which we lend greater consideration. Through the passing down of habits to children, these habits can persist through time and become communal: as traditions, received views, practices, the background assumptions of a culture and so on. That is, the acceptance by a

¹⁰³ Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima: A Critical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511551017>, p. 233

¹⁰⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (New York: Thomas More Press, 1981). p. 1067

community of judging subjects of a particular act, or their rejection of a different act does not need to be constantly reaffirmed, but rather becomes ‘passed down,’ and forms part of what appears simply obvious to the members of that community.

This conception of communal habits finds some empirical support in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu uses the Latin root of habit, *habitus*, to describe the social habit-building that is embedded in the practices of societies. Bourdieu calls the *habitus* the “immanent law”¹⁰⁵ that is inculcated in each member of a society from an early age, allowing for the co-ordination of social activity. The *habitus* that one is inducted into during their upbringing provides the interpretive lens through which a subject views the world, determined by their role within the social structure. Bourdieu gives as an example the Kabyle people, whose culture interprets binary oppositions like fire/water, clean/dirty, dark/light and so on as cleaving the world into ‘male’ and ‘female’ spheres. These spheres enclose the social roles of the sexes in Kabyle society: for example, in the opposition outside/inside --understood in terms of the home-- the male ‘sphere’ is outside the home, and the female ‘sphere’ is inside it, determining the latter as the homemaker and the former as the hunter.

The way in which a given subject assigns meaning to their world through *mimesis* is conditioned by the social world or *habitus* that they inhabit. In their exercise of *mimesis*, the Kabyle people apply symbolic meanings of masculinity and femininity to objects in their social world not simply through the spontaneous use of reason but conditioned by their upbringing and tradition. In our own social world, we may apply our symbols differently, but we nevertheless apply our own symbolic meanings. To give an analogous example to the Kabyle people, we apply masculine and feminine symbology to articles of clothing, career paths, and so on, as

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 81

conditioned by the sexism in our own tradition. The *habitus* is the environment in which the Levinasian ethical space of reasons takes place. That is, ethical judgement is not simply a rational communication within a community concerning what is permissible, as every judgement is already laden with the particular set of symbolic meanings inherited from the *habitus*. The development of the variety of *habitus* has resulted in the variety of conclusions about ethics drawn from the same stock of facts concerning the world. As was noted in previous chapters, many of Levinas' critics accuse him of advocating simply retreating into the tribalism of these *habitus* through his commitment to the 'exalted ethics' of the face-to-face relation. At this stage, it may appear that I am going in the same direction. Thus, to bring both this chapter, and the essay as a whole, to a close, I will provide a Levinasian theory of politics; a way for these communities to live together in a mediated way.

Fraternity and Human Nature

The way for the plurality of narrative communities to live together can be found in Levinas' use of the concept of fraternity.¹⁰⁶ Levinas writes that fraternity is opposed to "an idea of humanity united by resemblance;"¹⁰⁷ a fraternity based on shared membership in the human genus. So, while there is no universality by virtue of simply being human, there can also not be any fraternity produced by defining the human genus as to exclude certain people or groups, as has been done historically --the ancient Greeks excluded women from humanity, European race science excluded non-white peoples and so on. Fraternity is instead based on each person's absolute individuality --represented by their Face-- while simultaneously sharing a point of

¹⁰⁶ Levinas use of the term 'fraternity' to describe the human community at large --not just the men-- is a product of the casual linguistic sexism of the time in which *Totality and Infinity* was written. I employ the term here because it is the language Levinas uses, but any further developments on Levinas' work that attempt to go beyond reconstruction or reinterpretation should find a new and more universal vocabulary.

¹⁰⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969), p. 214

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origin. Levinas is saying there is a universal ethical community --even if it is not often acknowledged in life-- given by the fact that the Other can be, if one reflects, any human being. This does not invalidate the idea of semi-parochial narrative communities, like the ones that I have outlined above, but it does require a way of preventing these communities from violating this broader fraternity.

The first thing I want to note is that the concept of narrative communities I have outlined does not imply that there can be no notion of a shared human community. As David Bentley Hart writes, expressing that rationality is always culturally conditioned and situated does not mean giving up rationality as a universal concept:

To say that one can never escape from language and history, or that one necessarily starts from interests, prejudices, and premises that one cannot simply conjure away, is still not to say that one should abandon a belief in shared human rationality ... It is to say only that our shared human rationality is always situated in a constellation of concrete particularities, and that its operations are various and complex in nature¹⁰⁸

This is not only true for rationality, but for human society more generally. To say that there are some norms, laws, and practices which are appropriate to one group and not to another does not mean abandoning the idea that there are also certain norms, laws, and practices that are good for everyone. In Levinasian language, there can be human fraternity alongside communal fraternity.

In order to have these two kinds of fraternity together, we must first draw a distinction between universal duties and particular duties, the latter of which I will call taboos. These taboos

¹⁰⁸ David Bentley Hart, "Response to James K. A. Smith, Lois Malcolm and Gerard Loughlin," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1017 (2007): 610–23.

apply only to members of specific groups and derive their moral justification from the language and metaphysics of that group. We can determine where universal duties arise by observing where there is overlap between different sets of taboos. If there has been agreement between multiple communities of judging subjects on a particular issue, then this provides warrant for a claim of universality. Of course, a claim being warranted does not mean that it is true and there can be disagreement between two duties that both claim universality. However, this still provides us with a provisional method for the potential universality of taboos. This is not a historical claim concerning why certain cultures or groups of cultures consider a rule to be universal --it might be tied up with metaphysical beliefs, for example, like the laws in Leviticus. Instead, I am making this distinction to provide my Levinasian account with a formula for determining right action. I present this formula as a heuristic that determines warrant rather than truth because of the aforementioned necessary incompleteness of any attempt at universal ethics. I would argue that a great deal of social life is living with the fact that moral disagreement exists and allowing the provisional universality of prophetism to be found in the social practices of people.

My proposal is that we must learn to live in what Ricoeur calls the ‘conflict of interpretations.’ For Ricoeur, we must allow for a multiplicity of meanings, interpretations, and symbolizations to be drawn from a shared experience.¹⁰⁹ The symbol of the Face, as is the prime Levinasian example, will not always be interpreted the same way by all people or groups. There is room for debate, for conflict between these interpretations but ultimately the fraternity of humanity must prevail over these conflicts: we must live in the conflict. There are times when conflicts can be resolved --when we find that a set of interpretations are all saying the same thing, or when there is a particular interpretation that is repressive of the capacity of certain

¹⁰⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 3–26. p. 13-15

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Others to judge-- but human social life will always be defined by conflict of this kind. It is through learning to live with this conflict, together, that is necessary to balance both levels of duty. Furthermore, this tension --properly held in check and limited-- is highly productive of progress, or at least change in ethics.

Iris Marion Young describes a method for living in this tension that relies on the “social differentiation without exclusion”¹¹⁰ that city life can provide. The shared living space of the city effectively forces interaction between communities due to the incentives and pressures enforced by its structure. That is to say, the city unifies so many diverse communities in one spatially bounded area, such that they will interact in their daily lives as they venture outside of their communities to engage in employment or commerce. Even if one expends a great deal of effort to remain insular, it is almost inevitable that they will encounter curious outsiders. The city facilitates exploration of Otherness that does not require one to sacrifice their rootedness in their home community because of what Young calls the ‘eroticism’ of the city. She writes about how city life, with its all of its necessary encounters with those other than us --the denizens of some other ethnic enclave, or simply those from the ‘other side of the tracks’-- facilitates the development of a pluralist outlook and a toleration of difference.¹¹¹ City life, as Young presents it, engenders the encounter of the Other as Stranger¹¹² that allows for the co-mingling of narrative communities that in turn engenders a willingness to live in the conflict of interpretations.

However, I see no reason to limit this so-called eroticism --which I will call ‘social receptivity,’ as a matter of personal taste-- to city life. There seems to be something essentially

¹¹⁰ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). p. 238

¹¹¹ *ibid.* p. 239

¹¹² The Stranger is a particular kind of Other that is not only external in the way that all Others are, but also comes from outside of one’s community --or in extreme cases, an Other with which one has no familiarity.

human about this openness to the Other or Stranger. One finds it as a human ideal in the Christian tradition, such as the parable of the good Samaritan or the story of the Uncondemning Monk found in the *Prologue from Ohrid*.¹¹³ One also finds it in the Buddhist idea of *Maitrī* or loving-kindness, which preaches a universal love and tolerance for all things.¹¹⁴ Even largely ‘isolated’ groups in western societies are still connected to the wider social world. Groups like the Amish or Hutterites --both religious communities that rely on face-to-face interaction with few political mediations-- still sell their wares to the ‘English,’ and accept tourists and visitors in all but in rare cases. Furthermore, the Amish send their young adults on what is called ‘*Rumspringa*,’ wherein they leave the community for an extended period to see what life is like for others before deciding if they want to continue living an Amish life. While the theological vagaries are too much to attend to here, it should be noted that at least in part, the Amish and Hutterites live in enclosed communities not only out of a desire to separate themselves from the world, but also --as Hauerwas’ *Resident Aliens* describes--¹¹⁵ a belief that the strictures of their lifestyles are only rightfully imposed on those who would accept them willingly. So, somewhat paradoxically, the retreat from the world conducted by these groups is done --at least in part-- out of respect for the autonomy of the ‘English.’ The exclusive community that the Amish belong to is formed --at least in part-- out of a belief that they are called to a particular life-plan that cannot

¹¹³ This story tells of a Serbian Orthodox monk, whose sins are forgiven because he has not judged anyone in his life, which models the kind of openness and tolerance that is required to live in tension with the Other.

¹¹⁴ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). p. 279. The description of loving-kindness, taken from the *Metta Sutta*:

Let none deceive another nor despise any person whatever in any place;

in anger or ill-will let them not wish any suffering to each other.

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life,

even so, let him cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.

Let her thoughts of boundless lovingkindness pervade the whole world:

above, below and across, without obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.

¹¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014). *passim*.

be achieved outside of such a community, save for an unjustified use of force to impose it on society at large.

One need not only look to religious examples, however. Anthropological studies, stretching at least as far back as Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* have stressed the importance of sociability and the collaborative spirit of humanity as essential for our survival and development as a species.¹¹⁶ This is not a mere appeal to sentiment, the inclination for collaboration -- impossible without a willingness to sometimes live in the tension of disagreement-- is an essential part of human nature. This is what ties together the diverse authors referenced herein: the shared commitment to this openness to the Other, the Levinasian "non-allergic reaction to alterity."¹¹⁷ This commitment is foundational to ethics, as Levinas shows us, but it must be the foundations of our politics as well. Just as the experience of the Other is motivated by the intellectual desire for universal experience, the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*,¹¹⁸ our politics must too be driven by the judgements made not only by those of our community, but also by Strangers. Levinas writes that "Transcendence or goodness is produced as pluralism,"¹¹⁹ which is not formed simply by binding heterogeneous Others together under a homogeneous law which binds this plurality together. He says,

Peace therefore cannot be identified with the end of combats that cease for want of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of the others, that is, with cemeteries or future universal empires. Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and

¹¹⁶ Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, trans. John Hewetson (Freedom Press, 1987). Stephen Jay Gould held up Kropotkin's argument as remaining correct, even if his biology and anthropology is out of date.

¹¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969). p. 47

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 196

¹¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 305

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goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism.¹²⁰

This serves as an ideal which our politics strives toward through prophetism, but never reaches.

This fusion of horizons, between individual and community, and between communities, represents the fundamental relation of politics for Levinas: the tension between the particular and the universal, the productive tension that moves towards the peaceful plurality of pure ethics, but never reaches it. Prophetism is the struggle towards a universal ethics in a world of particularity: it is the lost cause for which we must never stop fighting.

¹²⁰ *ibid.* p. 306

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have presented a reading of Levinas that looks to rehabilitate his ethics as capable of including political mediation, and not simply relying on a quasi-spiritual quietism. While Levinas privileges an openness to the Other, his critics overextend this openness in their readings, making him appear to be committed to a far stronger thesis than he actually is. Rather, Levinasian openness to the Other is an openness to judgement, a willingness to be evaluated. This distinction is important, because this allows us to escape a reading of Levinas that renders him a political dead-end.

The goal from the start has been to help Levinas shed his idealistic reputation, and show instead that one can build a coherent ethical and political philosophy on the basis of his works. There are obviously many questions that have had to be left out of this discussion --and these questions would have to be answered if one wanted to address the question of Levinas' politics exhaustively-- but the justification for asking these questions is what I hope to have provided herein. If one can understand Levinas as capable of including politics in his understanding of ethics and the Other, then the stage is set for such further inquiry. It is my earnest belief that there is much fruitful discussion to be had concerning the continued application of Levinas to ethical and political philosophy.

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