The “Breach” that Leads to God
On the Interrelation Between Love and Justice as Revelatory Enactment in the Work of Emmanuel Levinas

Innes, Stephen

Awarding institution:
King's College London

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

END USER LICENCE AGREEMENT

Unless another licence is stated on the immediately following page this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Non Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works - You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Any of these conditions can be waived if you receive permission from the author. Your fair dealings and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
**Title:** The “Breach” that Leads to God  
*On the Interrelation Between Love and Justice as Revelatory Enactment in the Work of Emmanuel Levinas*

**Author:** Stephen Innes

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

---

**END USER LICENSE AGREEMENT**

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/

You are free to:
- **Share:** to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:
- **Attribution:** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- **Non Commercial:** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- **No Derivative Works:** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Any of these conditions can be waived if you receive permission from the author. Your fair dealings and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

---

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
The “Breach” that Leads to God: On the Interrelation Between Love and Justice as Revelatory Enactment in the Work of Emmanuel Levinas

By Stephen James Innes

Student ID Number 0830839

Date of Award: 1 June 2013

Theology and Religious Studies, King’s College London
# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements

## Abstract

### Chapter 1: Introduction: On the Possibility of Love and Justice as a Locus for Revelation

1. Preliminary Considerations
2. The Relation of Love and Justice in Levinas’s Thought
3. Obedience before Understanding: The Prioritisation of Desire over Cognitive Apprehension in Augustine and Levinas
4. Extending the Range of Phenomenology: Situating Levinas in a Philosophico-Theological Context
   4.1 A New Humanism, An Unfaithful Phenomenology, or a Phenomenology of Religion?
   4.2 A New Humanism?
   4.3 An Unfaithful Phenomenology?
   4.4 Towards a First Theology?
5. Outline of the Thesis

### Chapter 2: Love, Justice and the “Knowledge” of God in Augustine’s Search for God

1. The Search Within: The Origin of Love and the Desire for Happiness
   1.1 Love and the Quest for Happiness
   1.2 The Relation of Love and Desire
   1.3 The Origin of Love in the “Beyond” of Memory
2. Love of God Through Love of Neighbour
3. Justice as the Ordering of Love in Society
   3.1 Justice as the Ordering of Love within Oneself
   3.2 Justice as the Ordering of Love with Others
4. Reconciling Augustine’s Eudaemonism with Christian Theology
   4.1 Hannah Arendt: The Incongruity of Desire and the Knowledge of God
4.2 Karl Holl: The Privileging of Self-Love and Instrumentalisation of the Neighbour 60

5. Conclusion 62

**Chapter 3: Levinas’s Ethics of Responsibility: The Asymmetry and Diachrony of the Intersubjective Relation and the Opening Onto the Dimension of the Divine** 65

1. The Advent of the I-Other Relation as an Ethical Relation 68
   1.1 The “I” of Subjectivity: Levinas and his Interlocutors 70
   1.2 Levinas and Descartes: The Sensible Self and its Movement towards Ethics in *Totality and Infinity* 72
   1.3 The Totalising Self, The Idea of Infinity and the Advent of the Ethical Relation 74
   1.4 Height and Destitution: The Encounter with the Face 77

2. Diachrony and the Structure of the Asymmetrical Relation 83
   2.1 The Trace and Illeity: The Opening to the Religious Through the Ethical 87
   2.2 The Trace and the Image of God 90

3. Conclusion 92

**Chapter 4: The Work of Justice and the Dimension of the Divine in Levinas** 95

1. The Critique of Justice Founded Upon Freedom and “Responsible” Self-Interest 97
   1.1 “Responsibility in the First Person” 98
   1.2 Society and Responsible Self-Interest 102
   1.3 Egocentrism and Bad Conscience 105

2. Peace and the Work of Justice 106

3. The Justice of Society: Language, the Third Party, and Scepticism 109
   3.1 Subjectivity as Proximity 110
   3.2 Proximity, Substitution, the Third Party and the Question of Justice 113
   3.3 Scepticism and Justice: Justifying Oneself before the Other 117

Chapter 5: A “Love Without Eros”: The Evolution of the Interrelation of Love and Justice as the Modalities of the Ethical Relation which Compose the Movement “Unto-God”

1. The Evolution of Love in Levinas’s Thought
   1.1 Love as Isolated from the Work of Justice in Levinas’s Post-War Works
   1.2 Eros and Fecundity in Totality and Infinity
   1.3 Eros, Fecundity and the Feminine: Key Difficulties and the Beginning of their Transformation

2. Otherwise than Being: Maternity as the Paradigm of Love as Responsibility for the Other
   2.1 Maternity and the Visceral Human Being
   2.2 Maternity as Mercy: The Possibility of a “Love without Eros”

3. Love and Justice as the Movement “Unto-God”
   3.1 Love as Desire for the Good
   3.2 Love of God in the Love of Neighbour
   3.3 The Role of God in the Ethical Character of Love and Justice

4. Conclusion

Chapter 6: “As Simple as ‘Hello’”: Love and Justice as Witness of the “Breach” that Leads to God

1. The Subjectivity of the Subject: Love as Witness of the Glory of the Infinite
   1.1 Saying and Said, Glory and Witness
   1.2 Ricoeur on Levinasian Witness: Two Ways in which Immanence is Disrupted by Transcendence
   1.3 Love as Witness of the Infinite: The Circumstances in which “God” Comes to Mind

2. The Said of Justice: (Betrayed) Witness of the Dimension of the Divine
   2.1 The Passage from Saying to Said:
   2.2 “As Simple as ‘Hello’”: The Positive Witness of Justice

3.1 Is Levinas’s Ethical Metaphysics Theologically Underpinned? 180

3.2 Witness of God or Anonymous Identity? 183

3.3 Can the God who “Comes to Mind” in Levinas’s Phenomenological Investigations be Linked with the God of the Bible? 187

4. On the Relation of Love and Justice as a “Model of Intelligibility” for Divine Revelation 190

5. Conclusion 194

Bibliography 197
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Paul D. Janz for his careful and instructive supervision of this project. I am profoundly grateful for his stringent critical attention to every step of this process and for his encouragement of my growth as a writer and aspiring academician. I would also like to thank Professor Ben Quash for his thoughtful comments and suggestions through the various stages of the development of this thesis. It is also important to thank a few people whose influence led me to pursue this project: Dr. Don Hudson, for introducing me to Levinas’s work; Professor Jolyon Mitchell, whose supervision of my Master’s dissertation encouraged me to think through the relation between ethics and divine encounter in the films of Krzysztof Kieslowski; the people and leadership of Barclay Church, Edinburgh, who gave me a tremendous amount of creative freedom to explore many of the ideas that culminated in this project; and finally to the many people at the North American Levinas Society who have given me invaluable support and feedback for some of the central tenets of the thesis. Thanks also to Fr. Jonathan Kester for housing us in London for extended periods during the first years of research and writing, and also to Anita Tully and Charlie Weinberg, who both provided such skillful and superb comments and suggestions. Finally, I would like to express my love and gratitude to my sister Margaret, who patiently and faithfully read several drafts of the thesis and always gave me thoughtful feedback and encouragement; and to my partner Peter, for whom there is not enough space here to adequately express my gratitude and love for all that you have meant to me throughout this process. Without you none of this would have been possible. Thank you for allowing me to pursue my dream.
Abstract

This thesis undertakes a critically constructive examination of the relation of love and justice in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, concentrating principally upon what for Levinas is the “revelatory” status of this relation, which, when enacted, gives witness of the Infinite. Although the term “revelation” in Levinas’s work is often employed with specific reference to the ethical relation between human beings, without any apparent religious connotation, he also maintains that the revelatory character of the ethical relation constitutes the “breach that leads to God”. Importantly, this is not to be understood as an impassable chasm between immanence and transcendence but rather as a “breach” within immanence itself, at the enactment of which the unthinkable and unthematisable God first “comes to mind”. Through the analysis of love and justice, as the mutually constitutive and interdependent enactments which give witness of this breach, familiar themes in Levinas’s work will also be shown to be associated with it: for example, asymmetry, diachronic time, the “saying” and the “said”, nothingness and being, and the “passing” of the infinite in the finite. In light of this analysis, the thesis will then seek to address a specific and often-debated problem in Levinas’s work about whether, and if so how, the God who “comes to mind” in the ethical relation (where the term “God” retains the character of an irrepressible ambiguity) can be identified with the biblical God; and further, to evaluate the implications this question may have with regard to understanding the role and significance of the unavoidably thematising discourse of theology, which Levinas calls “the intellection of the biblical God”. In this regard, it is of particular interest that the “revelatory” character of the relation of love and justice features in Christian theology with similar prominence in the work of Saint Augustine. In order to provide a basic framework, therefore, through which both the opportunities and difficulties in approaching revelation through the relation of love and justice can be examined, the thesis begins with a succinct analysis of Augustine’s account which, despite the opportunity it presents and its continuing relevance, nonetheless can be shown to rely upon a Neo-Platonic mode of metaphysics, and thus on certain philosophical and cosmological commitments that are difficult to reconcile with the contemporary mindset. We will suggest that Levinas’s account provides an opportunity to return to the relation of love and justice for approaching revelation but in a new way, insofar as his account of the “breach” that leads to God formulates a model of “intelligibility” for revelation, a model in which the “welcome” given to the other person gives witness of a heteronomous command that is obeyed before it is understood. We will also suggest that such an approach creates an indispensable ethical ground for theology to engage with the biblical God.
Chapter 1 – Introduction: On the Possibility of Love and Justice as a Locus for Revelation

This thesis seeks, as its primary focus, to carry out a critically constructive examination of the relation of love and justice in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, concentrating principally upon what for Levinas is the “revelatory” status of this relation which, when enacted, gives witness of the Infinite. Although the term “revelation” in Levinas’s work is often employed with specific reference to the ethical relation between human beings, without any apparent religious connotation, he also maintains that the revelatory character of the ethical relation constitutes the “breach that leads to God.”1 Importantly, this is not to be understood as an impassable chasm between immanence and transcendence but rather as a “breach” within immanence itself, at the enactment of which the unthinkable and unthematisable God first “comes to mind”.

Moreover, the term “revelation” is routinely employed in Levinas’s work to describe the awakening of the human subject to a heteronomous summons to responsibility for the other person, a summons whose origin is not temporal or finite, but infinite, yet is nonetheless witnessed by and through the ethical relation with another person. Indeed, the effects of this summons are no less real or transformative in embodied human existence in daily life. Levinas calls this awakening to responsibility for the other person the “love of one’s neighbour”, a love in which its ethical aspect precedes its passionate aspect, which he also calls a love “without eros.”2 Yet because there are more than two people in the world—other “others”—this love must be weighed and measured, a weighing and measuring which, in Levinas’s work after Totality and Infinity broadly constitutes the work of justice.3 Thus Levinas’s later work emphasises that love and justice are not successive stages in ethical life but are rather inseparable and interrelated. Moreover, according to Levinas, the enactment of love and justice “produces” this breach of immanence, and as such is

---


3 Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love”, in Entre Nous, 90. Levinas makes the simple observation that justice is necessary because we live in a society of citizens, not just in the realm of interpersonal relations. But a society and its institutions have their grounding in the ethical relation with the other person.
the indispensable precondition for divine revelation, or the indispensable act through which the unthinkable and unthematisable God first “comes to mind”. As we will see, although there has, of course, been a great deal of attention given in secondary discussions to the prominent themes of love and justice in Levinas’s work, this thesis is unique both in its attempt to analyse the development of these themes in an extensive way across the Levinasian corpus, but especially also in its particular focus on the revelatory character of this relation. In so doing, the thesis will also contribute constructively by showing in new ways the evolving character of Levinas’s treatment of both love and justice as his work progresses. And the recognition of this evolution will lead, in turn, not only to a new understanding of each term individually but also, significantly, to a richly cohesive description of their relation to each other.

Yet in an important way the thesis is also motivated by a second and related underlying concern, which is to discern whether and to what extent the Levinasian understanding of the revelatory status of the ethical relation—an understanding which at a fundamental level (even in his philosophical writings) is informed by the specificity of Judaism—can inform or illuminate a broadly Christian understanding of revelation while acknowledging the particularity of revelation that is so central to the orthodox beliefs and practices of each. With this concern in mind, it is of particular interest that the “revelatory” character of the relation of love and justice features in Christian theology with similar prominence in the work of Saint Augustine. In order to provide a basic framework and backdrop, therefore, through which both the opportunities and difficulties in approaching revelation through the relation of love and justice can be examined, the thesis begins with a brief and strategically focused analysis of Augustine’s account which, despite the opportunities it presents and its continuing relevance, nonetheless will be found to rely in vital ways upon a Neo-Platonic metaphysic, and thus on certain philosophical and cosmological commitments that are difficult to reconcile with the contemporary mindset.

Against this backdrop, this thesis will seek to show that Levinas’s account provides an opportunity to retrieve, in a new way for the contemporary milieu, Augustine’s important orientation which prioritises the relation of love (which he associates with desire) and justice (as the enactment of love) over cognitive apprehension as that through which God is encountered or, in Augustine’s words, is
made “present”.\(^4\)

This thesis makes two main contributions. First, it represents the first extended in-depth study of the important relation between love and justice in Levinas’s work, especially with an interest as to the revelatory status of their intersection (acknowledging that “revelation” in Levinas is primarily, although not exclusively, an “ethical” rather than a “religious” term); second, it retrieves in a new way for the contemporary milieu Augustine’s important orientations to the “knowledge” of, and “encounter” with, God which are also focused foundationally through the intersection of love and justice.

However, it is important to emphasise that this thesis is not an attempt to co-opt Levinas as a theologian; to the contrary, we will agree with those who argue that Levinas is and remains essentially a phenomenological thinker. But his ethics, as a phenomenology of responsibility, can nevertheless bring back into view, and in new ways, the primacy of the interrelation of love and justice in the orientation to revelation. Because revelation in Levinas’s work is more often a fundamentally ethical term rather than a religious one, what will be required as such, will be a consideration of whether the God who “comes to mind” of Levinas’s phenomenological endeavours can provide a grounding for engaging with the biblical God. As we will see, this is by no means a straightforward alignment and will require careful consideration.

Before we outline the path that the subsequent chapters of the thesis will take in its analyses, let us first explain what this thesis seeks to accomplish in a little more detail.

1. Preliminary Considerations

In his 1961 work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas famously claims that ethics is “first philosophy”.\(^5\) It is of course well known that for Levinas, the term “ethics” does not mean a principled set of prescriptive norms for moral behaviour, such as rational self-legislation (deontology), the calculation of the greatest happiness for the greatest number (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics). It is rather the way

---

\(^4\) Augustine, Sermon 378, in *Sermons on Various Subjects*, 341–400, from *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, translated by Daniel Edward Doyle, Thomas F. Martin, and Boniface Ramsey (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990). “God takes pleasure in [that] which is an expression of active piety and of fervent charity. That is, after all, the effect of the presence of the Holy Spirit, as the apostle teaches us when he says, *The charity of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us* (Rom 5:5).”

\(^5\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 304.
in which the subject’s spontaneity is called into question by the presence of the other person. Although Levinas will call the relation with the other person “metaphysical”, this “first philosophy” is neither traditional logic nor traditional metaphysics. What Levinas means by “metaphysics” relates to events that repeat in everyday life, yet which cannot be reduced (in the phenomenological sense) to objects of intentional consciousness. As we will see, this resistance to representation is due, at least in part, to the structure of time in which the relation with another person is inaugurated, which he calls “diachrony”. That is, it comes to pass from an “an-archic” time in an instant that “breaches” intentional consciousness. Thus, Levinas’s notion of metaphysics is approached in light of the phenomenology of consciousness and its temporality.

Levinas’s conception of metaphysics offers a helpful way forward in the wake of the critiques of metaphysics from the Enlightenment and beyond, insofar as the ethical relation is, for Levinas, the indispensable ground of philosophy. Moreover, his philosophy, which Edith Wyschogrod calls an “ethical metaphysics”, offers a unique orientation for thinking and speaking about God within the contemporary horizon of thought. As we will see, it is through a certain kind of “phenomenological reduction” that Levinas redevelops Husserl’s subjective reduction to a consideration of the subject as ethical; and more crucially, he also shows that this reduction can be extended to embrace a religious dimension of human existence. According to Levinas, the relationship with another person—or the ethical relation—is the way in which the “word” of God—or the “life” of God—reverberates in the world. As such, the ethical modes of love and justice will be found to be not the content of God’s “self-revelation” but rather the “effects” of, or modes of enacted testimony given of, what Levinas will call the “passing” of God in a diachronic time which cannot be recalled by any memory.

Yet ethics, as Levinas conceives it, is not only “first philosophy”; he also claims it is “first theology”. By engaging with Levinas’s work, this thesis seeks to

---

6 Totality and Infinity, 43.
8 Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love”, 94.
align itself, albeit in a different way, with a familiar initiative\(^\text{10}\): Theology must be grounded in ethics, which necessarily leads to a reassessment of theological self-understanding and method, especially in its attentiveness to the ethical relation as the indispensable movement for the “revelation” of a transcendent God.

2. The Relation of Love and Justice in Levinas’s Thought

In making the claim that this thesis represents the first in-depth study of the relation of love and justice with specific regard to the revelatory status of this interrelation, it is important to acknowledge that there has, of course, been considerable scholarly attention given to both love and justice in Levinas’s thought. A significant amount of the work has examined these notions separately, concentrating primarily on the passages which examine the phenomenology of love as \textit{eros} in his work up to and including \textit{Totality and Infinity}, or examining the changes in the character of justice as Levinas moves from ethical to “political” concerns. We see, for example, that some examinations of Levinas’s notion of love by figures such as Irigaray and Wyschogrod tend to focus their analysis on the work prior to \textit{Otherwise than Being}.\(^\text{11}\) Similarly, we see that works devoted to the concept of justice in Levinas’s work, such as those by Howard Caygill and Elizabeth Thomas, examine justice either in isolation from love (in the case of the former) or only in relation to love as \textit{eros} (in the case of the latter).\(^\text{12}\) The reasons for choosing to examine these terms separately are in no small part due to Levinas’s own comments in his work prior

---

\(^\text{10}\) Kevin Hart writes in the introduction to \textit{The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians} that ethics as first philosophy or first theology “is to be found not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the Gospel”. He refers specifically to Exodus 24:7 and Matthew 25.

\(^\text{11}\) See e.g., Luce Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress” (1984), in \textit{An Ethics of Sexual Difference}, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Continuum Books, 2004); Edith Wyschogrod, \textit{Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics}, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). The basis for Irigaray’s critiques of Levinas’s conceptions of sexuality and femininity is her reading of part IV of \textit{Totality and Infinity}, entitled the “Phenomenology of Eros”. Wyschogrod devotes her examination of love to an analysis of \textit{eros} and fecundity in Levinas’s work up to and including \textit{Totality and Infinity}.

\(^\text{12}\) See e.g., Howard Caygill, \textit{Levinas and the Political} (London: Routledge, 2002); Elizabeth Louise Thomas, \textit{Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics, Justice, and the Human Beyond Being} (New York: Routledge, 2004). Caygill argues that Levinas’s attempt to rethink fraternity as that from which freedom and equality are derived, rather than the reverse, leads to an increased importance of the concept of justice. Despite Caygill’s excellent analysis of the relation of justice to the political in Levinas’s thought (particularly the way in which an ontological conception of justice is transformed by an ethical notion of justice rooted in proximity to the other person), there is no reference to the relation of love to justice, understood as \textit{eros} or otherwise. Thomas, on the other hand, does see a relation between love as \textit{eros} and justice, insofar as the former plays an important role in Levinas’s rethinking of the role of ethics and justice. She also briefly mentions that Levinas’s notion of \textit{eros} in \textit{Totality and Infinity} as “beyond the face” opens onto the possibility of a love that recognises the “exigencies of social justice” (102), which she associates with the “love without concupiscence” of which Levinas speaks in his work after \textit{Totality and Infinity}. However, she raises this point without developing it further, concentrating instead on the way in which Levinas’s account of \textit{eros} stands as a critique of the Platonic conception of love which provides a “unifying ground and principle of the social totality” (87).
to *Totality and Infinity*, in which he clearly states that love (*qua* eros), while certainly an important phenomenon worthy of examination, by its very nature excludes consideration of the third party, or other “others” (justice). Moreover, Levinas identifies the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* as a fundamental aspect of the “work of justice”, not of love.

Other work, however, has recognised a transformation of these two terms in Levinas’s work—even acknowledging the ways in which this transformation introduces a richer, more nuanced rendering of these terms—including the recognition that the relation between the two becomes much closer, if not inseparable, as Levinas’s work progresses. We see this reflected, for example, in works by Stella Sandford, Simon Critchley, and Diane Perpich, (to name but a few), each of whom recognises the transformation of both love and justice in Levinas’s works following *Totality and Infinity* and the new relation it forges. Each examines, in his or her own way, the implications of Levinas’s claim in *Otherwise than Being* that philosophy, as an expression of justice, not only has a close relation to love, but has its grounding in love: justice is the “wisdom of love in the service of love.” Hence Levinas claims there is a correlative relation between love and justice on the one hand, and the “saying” of responsibility and the “said” of thematisation on the other hand, insofar as the “said” (no matter to what degree it represents it unfaithfully) always already refers to the primordial “saying” of responsibility.

Yet despite their otherwise illuminating

---


14 *Totality and Infinity*, 72. “The work of justice—the uprightness of the face to face—is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced. . . .”

15 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (1974), translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 162. See e.g. Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000); Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992); Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Sanford argues that it is Levinas’s association of responsibility with the trope of maternity which leads to a shift away from a limited conception of love as eros to love “without concupiscence”, a love which is not only more closely associated with the subject’s responsibility for the other person, but also closer to the biblical conception of hesed (83-84). Critchley notes that Levinas’s association of love with responsibility for the Other, coupled with the demand that this responsibility does not become “injustice” with regard to the third party, means that the ethical relation is “always already political”, that is, the relation with the face of the other person is already a relation with humanity as a whole (226). Perpich, following Critchley’s argument, suggests that the close relationship between love (responsibility) and justice (consideration of the third party) means that to love is not restrict its expression to some private realm (as it would if it were only understood in terms of *Eros*), but rather entails a “justification” of oneself before the other; it is to justify one’s life before the other’s material suffering (6). Moreover, Perpich argues that the relation between ethics and politics is correlative to the relation between the “saying” of responsibility and the “said” of thematisation: Just as the entry into the political is made possible only due to its ethical ground, and just as the ethical needs the political for its expression in the world, so the “said” requires the “saying” for the possibility of its utterance, and the an-archical “saying” can only be traced in the giving of the “said”. These terms will come to full discussion in Chapter Four below.

analysis of the transformation of love and justice in Levinas’s work, none of these contributions really captures what becomes the interrelated and interdependent character of love and justice that Levinas himself describes at the end of “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” (1982): “Justice comes from love. . . . [Yet equally] charity is impossible without justice, and justice is warped without charity.” Our analyses will seek to provide new and added depth to the interrelation and interdependence of love and justice in Levinas’s thought.

Moreover, none of these aforementioned studies analyses the relation of love and justice with regard to the revelatory character of their interrelation. Again, it is acknowledged that there have been many scholars who have examined the way in which the ethical relation per se opens onto the relation to God in Levinas’s work, but not through the specific lens of the relation of love and justice. Levinas himself claims that it is not only in the form of an “ethical order, an order to love” that the “descent” of God takes place in the world, but equally in the enactment of this love in justice. In other words, it is not simply the utterly gratuitous turning towards the other person, contrary to one’s own perseverance in being, which constitutes the “first miracle” or the way in which the “life” of God reverberates in the world, indispensable as this is to Levinas’s conception of revelation; it is also the moment in which one says bonjour to the other person. The “word” of God is given in the turning and the speaking; and an important aspect of what this thesis attempts to show, therefore, is

17 “Philosophy, Justice and Love”, 104.
18 See e.g., Richard Cohen, Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Robert Gibbs, “The Disincarnation of the Word” (2005), in The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas between Christians and Jews (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Michael Purcell, Levinas and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jeffrey Kosky, Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Cohen devotes an entire chapter to God in Levinas’s thought, but mentions the role of justice (understood as the ethical relation and the sense in which it moves beyond ethics, into the realm of the political) in the opening onto what Levinas calls the “dimension of the divine” (187-188). Gibbs also emphasises the role of justice (again, understood in the way Levinas describes it in Totality and Infinity) when he argues that although a “cognitive relation with an object” will not lead to God, access to the “spiritual” for Levinas is through the “work of justice”; “ ‘To see God’ is to work justice in a world that dwells separated from God—and only in working justice can we have access to the spiritual realm” (33-35). Likewise, Purcell argues that for Levinas, God is “accessible” as the counterpart of the “justice I render to my neighbour”, although he clarifies that this justice refers back to the subject’s an-archic or anterior assignation as responsible-for-the-other, an assignation which is “beyond the measure of finitude” or presence as manifestation (133). Kosky acknowledges that Levinas has adopted the term love in his later work because he has come to see it as a utterly gratuitous devotion of the self to the other, and this devotion prior to any act is a witness to God “without this witnessing becoming a new figure of theism”, but strangely the role of justice is left out of the analysis (188).

20 Emmanuel Levinas, in an interview with François Poirié (1986), in Is it Righteous to Be? edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 59. “I have this responsibility as soon as I approach the other man. It is
how Levinas establishes this claim phenomenologically without recourse to any pre-existing theological conceptuality. As we will see, one of the vital components of his argument will be the phenomenological description of the prioritisation of desire over cognitive apprehension, a prioritisation which is at work, for example, in Levinas’s discussions of the obedience to a command before it is understood.

In this regard, we find an example in Christian theology where the revelatory status of love and justice—and the priority of desire and of “doing” the truth over cognitive apprehension—features prominently. As we will see, Saint Augustine’s account of love and justice provides an important orientation with regard to revelation, and our brief outline of his account here—as a precursor to the strategically focused discussion of Augustine in the next chapter—will outline the basic framework for how the thesis will regard Levinas’s work as a retrieval of crucial aspects of Augustine’s account in a new way for the contemporary milieu.

3. Obedience before Understanding: The Prioritisation of Desire over Cognitive Apprehension in Augustine and Levinas

Although Levinas only refers to Augustine on a couple of occasions in his work, he does draw upon Augustine’s notion of the “truth that accuses” in the *Confessions* as a way to illustrate his own distinction between the “ethical” truth that puts the subjectivity of the subject in question and the “ontological” truth that simply illuminates the world. Or more exactly, the notion of the “truth that accuses” is interpreted by Levinas as an affective structure that is essential for his development of what constitutes the ethical dimension of the “I-Other” relation. While Augustine’s notion of the “truth that accuses” will not be examined in much detail in this thesis, we are nevertheless interested to explore the ways in which both Augustine and Levinas posit the prioritisation of an affective structure over cognitive apprehension.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine’s quest for understanding how one encounters God begins with questions about the nature of his own existence. We read for example in *Confessions* Book X that Augustine has become a “question to himself” (*quaestio mihi factus sum*), and those familiar with Augustine’s writings will be aware that

---

posing this question is an expression of his lifelong task of contemplating the human being’s fundamental relationships to God and to other human beings. Indeed, we will see that one of the more well known questions Augustine puts to himself is a very helpful one for our purposes: “What do I love when I love my God?” This question is important for two reasons. First, it implicitly recognises the absolute transcendence of God. His question asserts that his love of God is known, but what he loves is not. He thus proceeds in Book X of the Confessions to speak of God more apophatically, to speak only of what may be said about what God is not. We also see Augustine talk about God in “negative” terms elsewhere, such as one of his later sermons (117), where he famously says that “if you understand something, it is not God” [si comprehendis, non est Deus]. The second reason this question is important, which follows from the first, is the extent to which love, and not cognitive apprehension, is the measure for answering the question. For Augustine, to comprehend God in knowledge is impossible, and yet he will argue that God is encountered through love and the works of love, or justice. We shall see that for Augustine’s account of how creatures are related to God, everything depends on how he answers this question of what is loved when one loves God.

According to Augustine, the affinity between the human self and God is to be understood in terms of love. Throughout his writings, love plays a decisive role in the constitution of the self. Although he has a nuanced and sometimes confusing understanding of love (and various terms for love, including dilectio, amor, caritas and cupiditas), Augustine nevertheless defines human life in terms of what it loves. Perhaps the most straightforward definition of love he gives is that it is “indeed nothing else than to crave something for its own sake,” and shortly afterwards adds that love “is a kind of craving.” Every craving (appetitus) or desire is tied to a definite object, and this object is required to spark the desire itself, thus providing an

22 Augustine, Confessions, translated by J.G. Pilkington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1943), X.33.
23 Augustine, Confessions, X.6.
aim for it. Love is therefore understood as revealing a lack in the human subject, a lack which is only filled when one gains possession of the desired object.

In contrast to the self-generated love as craving, however, we will see that Augustine also speaks of a causative kind of love, whose origin lies outside the human subject: it is a gift “poured into our hearts” by God:

It is we who believe and will, but he who gives to those believing and willing the ability to perform good works through the Holy Spirit, through which the love of God is poured forth in our hearts, thus making us compassionate.

Augustine calls this love of God “charity” (caritas). He suggests here that charity is not marked by a desire for possession but rather by a gratuity, a free and unmerited giving. It orders the subject to love the neighbour with the love “poured into” the heart by God. Augustine argues that this love is enacted or expressed by acts of kindness and concern, by bearing one another’s burdens. Such expression gives the other person his or her due, which is how Augustine defines justice. Thus, justice bears witness to the gift of divine love (caritas) that makes it possible for the self to love others and, derivatively, to love God in return. When enacted, the transforming and generative love of God gives witness to a prevenient grace, a gift whose origin is outside of ourselves.

Insofar as caritas, expressed in justice, gives witness to the love of God “poured into our hearts”, we can understand Augustine’s claim that when love is enacted in the world, God is made “present”. Moreover, because God is “present” in love, and when that love is ordered correctly or justly in a society, Augustine suggests that the enactment of love and justice enables one to participate (albeit indirectly) in fellowship with God. That is, as Edmund Hill observes, Augustine says in substance that “one can have direct knowledge . . . of certain values [of which love and justice are primary], and hence an indirect knowledge of God as the guarantor of these values, or the source from which they derive.” Hill adds that these values lead to indirect

---


27 Augustine, Propositions from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, translated by Paula Fredriksen Landes (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1982), 40.

28 Augustine, Propositions from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, 40.


30 Edmund Hill, “Introductory Essay to Book VIII in Augustine, On the Trinity”, 239. Original emphasis. Hill is referring to Book VIII, chapter 3, where Augustine identifies God with the “truth” and the “good”, of which love and justice are the two primary expressions of both truth and the good.
“knowledge” of God through faith, insofar as God is love, that God is just, and not that love is God or justice is God.31 For Augustine, the knowledge of these values provides sufficient indirect knowledge of God to provide a meaning for the word “God”, and so for him to make affirmations (in faith) about God.32 Yet crucially, such knowledge for Augustine is not gained cognitively but is rather gained through love, which Hill suggests is itself a kind of knowing.33 As John Caputo argues, religious truth for Augustine “belongs to a different order”, an order which finds its expression in the Confessions as facere veritatem—the “making” of or “doing” the truth.34 One enters into relation with God by loving, by doing justice. As we will see in Chapter Two, our brief analysis of the relation of love and justice will hope to demonstrate a prioritisation of desire (love) over cognitive intellection in Augustine’s work.

The perennial power and relevance of Augustine’s thought across a whole spectrum of theological themes and questions, is for our purposes especially helpful here insofar as, like Levinas, he emphasises the role of desire over cognitive apprehension as that through which God is encountered or “made present” (a term Levinas would not use) at the intersection of love and justice. However, as we will see, Augustine’s account gives rise to specific epistemological and ethical difficulties which can be traced back to a reliance (to a certain extent) upon a Neo-Platonic mode of metaphysics. That is to say, the answer to the question of “what” one loves when one loves God depends on a cosmology in which love and justice are assumed to be independently existing substances. As elements or standards in the world perceived by the mind, and not ideas imposed by the mind on its experience of the world, Augustine must therefore speak of them, in Neo-Platonic terms, as real forms. Because the conception of the Forms and Ideas provide the normativity for Augustine’s conception of love and justice, they can be said to provide a kind of “bridge” or “link” for the theological task of thinking about God. With regard to ethics, several prominent scholars, as we shall see, will argue that the eudaemonist framework leads inevitably to the subordination of the neighbour to the pursuit of the sumnum bonum, which

32 Introductory Essay to Book VIII, 239.
33 Ibid., 239. See also e.g., Augustine, On the Trinity, from The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, translated by Edmund Hill and John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), VIII.12. In this passage Augustine writes, “But he sees his brother with human sight, with which God cannot be seen. But if he loved with spiritual love him whom he sees with human sight, he would see God, who is love itself, with the inner sight by which He can be seen.” Hill suggests that one of the implications of this exhortation is that loving is a kind of knowing.
ultimately raises significant questions about the precise relation between love and justice as well as the specific role of love of neighbour as the primary locus for the encounter with God. Addressing these specific difficulties in the next chapter will serve as the point of departure for our engagement with Levinas’s work.

Like Augustine, Levinas argues that it is through action—through the work of justice—and not through the fixing of an idea of God in one’s mind, that the transcendent—or what Levinas calls the “dimension of the divine”—enters the human or is made “accessible”:

A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics. . . . The work of justice—the uprightness of the face to face—is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced—and “vision” here coincides with this work of justice. Hence metaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted—in our relations with men.35

As we will see, this “breach” of which Levinas speaks is not a chasm between immanence and transcendence, but is rather a rupture of immanent reality itself. In this sense, as Annette Aronowicz observes, the relation between human beings “reveals itself as pointing beyond itself.”36 For Levinas, the opening onto the relation with God is glimpsed in everyday life, in the relation with another person. And, like Augustine, it is an enacted truth—facere veritatem—that conveys meaning.

As is well known, Levinas claims that this relation to God is given witness in one’s responsibility for the other person, which in his later work he calls a “love without eros”.37 This love is expressed in justice, understood in the works after Totality and Infinity as weighing one’s responsibilities to other “others”. We will see that for Levinas, justice as such is the birth of the “theoretical” or the birth of reflection, and in this sense the relation of love and justice provides a kind of orientation whereby theology would arise as a kind of “wisdom” from the depths of this initial responsibility or love for the other person. According to Levinas, love and justice are the modes of the ethical relation in which the word “God” is first “heard”.

35 Totality and Infinity, 78.
37 Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy” (1975), in Of God Who Comes to Mind, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 68. “We have shown elsewhere the substitution for the other at the heart of this responsibility, which is thus...also the transcendence of goodness, the nobility of pure enduring, and ipseity of pure election. Love without Eros”.
Or more exactly, they are the way in which “the word of God reverberates.”38 This interplay of love and justice with respect to revelation can be seen, for example, in a passage from one of Levinas’s Talmudic essays:

As little as I have ever understood the exact meaning of the expression “the opening up of the soul in its love of God,” I ask myself, nonetheless, whether there isn’t a certain connection between the establishment of working hours and the love of God, with or without the opening up of the soul. I am even inclined to believe that there are not many other ways to love God than to establish these working hours correctly, no way that is more urgent.39

The love of God is conveyed, with or without one’s knowledge. In the initial concern for the other person, such love is “thematised” in justice, in the practicality of establishing working hours which are just. It is important to stress that Levinas is not arguing that one’s love of God results in moral or ethical behaviour. Rather, something else is at work. “The ethical is not the corollary of the religious but is, in itself, the element in which religious transcendence receives its original sense.”40 In other words, as Aronowicz observes, it is in and through the relation with the other person, quite apart from any love of God which may or may not be professed, that the love for God is conveyed.

But can such love be given before one is aware of giving it? For Levinas, the answer is yes, and one of the tasks of the subsequent chapters of this thesis is to examine how Levinas affirms this apparent inversion of logic through a rigorous phenomenological analysis. Interestingly, Levinas notes that this question has already been addressed in the Talmudic discussion of a similar kind of inverted logic through which the Israelites came to accept the Torah. One of the most striking features of this acceptance is that they accepted the commandments before they had even heard what they were: “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and we will hear” (Exodus 24:7). According to Levinas, the Israelites’ acceptance of the Torah inverts the “normal order” in which understanding precedes action.41 Levinas stresses that the question is not “to transform action into a mode of understanding,” but to “praise a mode of


knowing which reveals the deep structure of subjectivity” that, as we will see, entails the human being awakened to a summons to responsibility (or love) of which the self is not the author.42

Thus, like Augustine, Levinas’s conception of a subject who obeys a command prior to any understanding emphasises the priority of a kind of causality and enactment over cognitive apprehension. And yet, as the comments from Levinas above suggest, the “we will do” does not exclude the “we will hear”. As we shall see, this prior obedience is not a simple naïveté—everything in it can (and must) become speech, that is, thematisation, which is a central facet of what Levinas’s later works call justice. Thus, love and justice are not only indispensable in relation to each other, but also for the way in which this relation produces the “breach” that leads to God. As we will see, while Levinas will argue that the obedience to an order to which the self is subjected before understanding it constitutes the “glory” of the Infinite, the response itself is crucial for the witness of this glory to be given. That is, justice brings the subject “out of the shadow” in which glory could have remained hidden. However, as our subsequent analysis will show, the response, or justice, does not “reveal” God in the way that a sign reveals its signified; rather, it gives witness of an order to responsibility for which the self cannot account, and as such opens up a “breach” within immanent reality. And for Levinas, it is precisely this “breach” which first brings God to mind.

4. Extending the Range of Phenomenology: Situating Levinas in a Philosophico-Theological Context

Despite his frequent references to God and the acknowledgement of the necessity for the recovery of theological discourse, situating Levinas’s thought in terms of genre is far from simple. Is Levinas a phenomenologist, a Jewish philosopher, or a philosopher of religion?

This question, as is well known, is the subject of ongoing debate, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, as we will see, this thesis will indirectly to contribute to this debate, insofar as in it Levinas will emerge as essentially a phenomenological thinker whose analyses can provide an orientation for revelation, for how God first “comes to mind”, in the relation of love and justice. Following

42 Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation”, 49.
Michael Purcell’s helpful summary of three accounts which represent dominant characterisations of Levinas’s work within this debate, we will argue that despite claims to the contrary, Levinas can be seen to remain true to a rigorous phenomenological method, albeit in a way which expands the range of Husserlian phenomenology. To explain further, it will be helpful briefly to explore Purcell’s analyses of some of the ways in which Levinas’s work has been characterised in order to point preliminarily to the rationale for what will be our own conclusions on the matter.

4.1 A New Humanism, An Unfaithful Phenomenology, or a Phenomenology of Religion?

In the Foreword to the first edition of *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Levinas states an intention to investigate the possibility of understanding of the word “God” as a significant word, and how this signification “cuts across” the phenomenological:

What is sought here is the *phenomenological concreteness* in which this signification could or does signify, even if it cuts across all phenomenality, for this *cutting across* could not be restated in a purely negative fashion and as an apophatic negation.⁴³

Because Levinas insists that this “cutting across” cannot be stated as a pure negation, he seeks to describe the phenomenological “circumstances” or “concrete staging” surrounding the advent of what we will be focusing on as a disruption or “breach” of the immanent order, which is also the circumstance in which God first “comes to mind”.⁴⁴ Purcell observes that what is implicated here, in the movement Levinas traces from “phenomenological concreteness” to “first theology”, is the tenuous relation between phenomenology and theology.⁴⁵ As we will see later, the question of whether this relation can be maintained is crucial for Levinas’s entire argument about the revelatory status of love and justice within the ethical relation, and hence also for the analyses of this thesis.

Purcell remarks that a brief survey of much of the secondary literature evidences a variety of attempts “either to claim or disclaim Levinas, not only as philosopher or phenomenologist, but also as a religious thinker, Jewish thinker, ethical

---


thinker, biblical humanist, and even theologian.” Of the many claims and counterclaims with regard to situating Levinas’s thought, Purcell lists three prominent arguments given by Tamra Wright, Dominique Janicaud and Jeffrey Kosky. Wright and Janicaud argue that phenomenology and theology must remain separate, but for different reasons. Kosky, by contrast, argues that Levinas’s work offers a path by which the two may be negotiated without being conflated. Let us look at these arguments more closely.

4.2 A New Humanism?

According to Purcell, Tamra Wright maintains in her work *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy* that what Levinas attempts cannot and should not be considered theology, but rather as providing the ground for a new “humanism.” He notes that Wright finds support for her argument in *Totality and Infinity* when Levinas says that his description of the transcendence of ethics “would be false to qualify it as theological.” Moreover, Purcell agrees with Wright’s contention that any rapprochement between the “Greek” and “Jewish” dimensions of Levinas’s thinking (or the coming together of the “philosophical” and the “religious” in Levinas’s work) is possible only insofar as “each can be understood as a response to the ‘pre-philosophical’ experience of the self’s inescapable responsibility for the other(s).”

For Levinas, this “pre-philosophical” experience is the ethical relation which, according to Purcell, requires “both phenomenological and theological articulation.” He adds that, according to Levinas, “concrete” human life or “life with others” is the “pre-philosophical” starting point for any kind of reflection.

Yet for Wright, this new “humanism” should be understood as essentially ethical rather than theological, primarily because of the way in which Levinas himself describes the ethical. Such a humanism is characterised by an orientation towards the

---

46 Purcell, “Levinas and Theology”, 471.
47 Ibid., 472. See also e.g., the discussion in Tamra Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 35–65. This chapter is devoted to the discussion of Humanism and Ethics in Levinas’s work. In her conclusion, she argues that Levinas’s philosophy “amounts to a restatement of humanist values with a radically different theoretical foundation from that of traditional humanism” (65).
48 *Totality and Infinity*, 42.
49 “Levinas and Theology”, 472. See also e.g., Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy*, xiv.
50 Ibid., 472.
51 Ibid., 472.
other person which Levinas calls a “liturgical” orientation of the self, which he defines as “a movement of the [self] to the Other which never returns to the Same.” However, as Purcell observes, this humanism does not exclude the divine, for Levinas still speaks of the God who “comes to mind” in the ethical relation with the other person. Even in Levinas’s positive interpretation of atheism, he never argues that “there is no God” but that the “dimension of the divine” has no other locus than the human, from which it should never be divorced. Purcell himself suggests that Wright mistakenly assumes an undifferentiated understanding of theology; that is, that there is no distinction to be made, for example, between fundamental theology and dogmatic (or doctrinal) theology. Purcell perhaps derives this assessment of Wright from passages such as the following:

Neither Totality and Infinity nor Otherwise than Being should be interpreted as theological texts. On the contrary, these texts are explicitly critical of the theology of “positive religions”, and frequently emphasise that the Infinite is refractory to the thematising discourse of theology. The apparently theological claims in Totality and Infinity can be understood phenomenologically as belonging to the description of the relationship between the self and a transcendent other.

However, we wish to argue with Wright’s contention that in the first instance, ethical metaphysics should be understood phenomenologically rather than theologically. Her argument in support of this highlights the inherent problems associated with reading Levinas’s work (particularly in Totality and Infinity) as a theological text, and in agreement with this we will be paying careful attention that our examination of love and justice per se remains essentially a phenomenological analysis and not a theological one. And yet, as Purcell also notes, we must be able to reconcile Wright’s argument with Levinas’s claim that ethics is “first theology”. We will return to this in a moment.

52 See e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other” (1963), in Deconstruction in Context, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 349-350. In this essay, Levinas employs the Greek term “liturgy” which, in his view, in its primary meaning “indicates the exercise of an office that is not only completely gratuitous, but that requires, on the part of him that exercises it, a putting out of funds at a loss.” Apart from its religious signification, Levinas argues that “liturgy” is an “absolutely patient action”, which for him is the ethical relation itself.


54 By a “positive” interpretation of atheism, we have in mind his discussion of atheism in Totality and Infinity, 58: “One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated. . . . By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine. . . .”

55 “Levinas and Theology”, 472.

56 Ibid., 472.

57 The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy, 93.
4.3 An Unfaithful Phenomenology?

Dominique Janicaud is well known for his critical stance towards the so-called “theological turn” in French phenomenology, and he often cites Levinas’s work to illustrate this critique. Purcell observes that for Janicaud, Levinas owes more to the “undisciplined” nature of theological enquiry than the more rigorous discipline of Husserlian phenomenology. Though Janicaud commends Levinas for his “singular originality”, he maintains that Levinas too often lapses into theology, which in his view is prohibited if one is to employ Husserlian phenomenology in a faithful manner.

Purcell argues that there is a certain legitimacy to Janicaud’s criticism, both with regard to the “undisciplined” nature of theology as well as Levinas’s deviation from Husserlian phenomenology. Theology, Purcell notes, can seek to legitimise itself in “uncritical” notions of revelation, in mysticism, or in various forms of “fideism”. Although Janicaud makes the paradoxical claim that Levinas is “more faithful to the spirit of phenomenology than Husserl himself,” he also argues that Levinas nonetheless “takes liberties” with Husserl with his emphasis on “overflowing the intentional horizon.” Moreover, he argues that the “aplomb of alterity” which we find in Levinas “supposes a nonphenomenological, metaphysical desire,” a “metaphysico-theological montage, prior to philosophical writing.”

For these reasons, Janicaud argues that Levinas should be considered more theologian than phenomenologist. His reading of Levinas suggests that his ethics is not at all “first philosophy” but rather is grounded in the Jewish theological tradition: “All is acquired and imposed from the outset, and this all is no little thing: nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition.”

Despite what Purcell views as a certain “legitimacy” of Janicaud’s critique of Levinas, he asks whether, in fact, what Levinas is actually doing is Husserlian

---

58 “Levinas and Theology”, 472.
60 “Levinas and Theology”, 473.
62 Ibid., 27.
63 Ibid., 26.
64 Ibid., 27.
phenomenology. If Husserl articulates consciousness in terms of intentionality, is intentionality limited to consciousness as representation? According to Levinas, the answer is no. As he clearly states in *Totality and Infinity*:

> Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives.66

Levinas sees Husserlian phenomenology as providing an opening to transcendence, but essentially restricts its analyses of these “unsuspected horizons” as thoughts aiming at objects. As we will see in Chapter Three, in introducing the idea of overflowing “objectifying” thought, and by attempting to overcome what Janicaud calls the “purely intentional sense of the notion of horizon”, Levinas expands phenomenology beyond representation.67 Purcell concludes that whereas Wright denies a theological interpretation of Levinas’s ethical metaphysics in favour of the phenomenological, Janicaud sees the theological in Levinas’s work as compromising the phenomenological discipline. Purcell argues that Janicuad, like Wright, also maintains an “undifferentiated” understanding of theology.68 He adds that this oversimplification represents a larger failure to recognise that “theology is no more an undifferentiated discipline than phenomenology is an undifferentiated discipline.”69 What Levinas attempts, which Purcell observes, is to push both phenomenology and theology towards the prior situation of the ethical relation such that ethics is both “first philosophy” and “first theology”.70 Yet even if this is correct, we still have not answered the question of how one forges a relation between them. However, Purcell suggests, following Jeffrey Kosky, that there is a path that can be negotiated between phenomenology and religion and as such, argues that Levinas’s work should be read as a kind of philosophy of religion.

---

65 “Levinas and Theology”, 473.
66 *Totality and Infinity*, 28.
67 “Levinas and Theology”, 473; see also e.g., “The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology”, 25.
68 “Levinas and Theology”, 473-474.
69 Ibid., 473.
70 Ibid., 473-474.
4.4 Towards a First Theology?

In his book *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, Kosky argues that Levinas’s analysis of the ethical relation can be read phenomenologically and also as a philosophy of religion: “The analysis of responsibility opens onto a philosophical articulation of religious notions and thus makes possible something like a philosophy of religion.” He adds that Levinas’s analyses “offers a way to think and speak about religion within the contemporary horizon of thought”, insofar as he offers a new way of thinking about religion and God in the sense in which “the discovery of the subject’s religiosity happens through a phenomenology of the subject . . . a subject that we all are.”

According to Purcell, what Levinas seeks to achieve in his employment of Husserlian phenomenology is to show how the “subjective reduction” in Husserl (understood as the constitutive transcendental ego) can be extended to the level of the “intersubjective reduction” and a description of the subject as ethical. That is, according to Kosky, Levinas’s analyses show that a “broader range of phenomena” appear with this subject than its “previous figure” (intentional consciousness), and these phenomena include “religious meanings” that have been consigned to the “unintelligibility” of faith or else reduced to the intentions of the subject.

Kosky’s reading, in our view, offers a helpful way forward towards situating Levinas’s thought within a broader philosophico-theological context. As Purcell observes, what Kosky’s analysis points to is the way in which the demarcated relationship between phenomenology and religious discourse is called into question. It is worth quoting Kosky again to underscore this observation:

I argue that Levinas’s ethical philosophy can be applied to a philosophy of religion which relieves theological thought of sacrificing the significance of religious notions at the threshold of intelligibility and understanding. This philosophy of religion gives significance to religious meanings by reducing them to the responsible subject where they appear. Achieved through a reduction to subjectivity, the significance of religion is accessible to those not committed to a particular religious tradition.

---

73 “Levinas and Theology”, 474. See also Kosky, 56, where Kosky notes that unlike Husserl, Levinas claims that the point to which the phenomenological reduction leads is not “subjectivity in the form of [intentional] consciousness” but subjectivity as responsibility.
74 Ibid., xix.
75 “Levinas and Theology”, 475.
76 *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, xix.
What Kosky, in effect, points to here (in addition to his own language of a “philosophy of religion”) is a way of retaining the phenomenological orientation that Wright rightly insists on and preserving its rigour in Levinas. Yet as we will see later, Kosky will conclude that Levinas’s “philosophy of religion” only allows the word “God” to designate the anonymous which undoes and “renders improper” every name that is given to it, including “God”. Levinas, however, can be seen to go beyond what Kosky claims, insofar as he does not contest the necessity to choose the opportunity for the recuperation of an ethically-oriented theological discourse, and it is this sense that Levinas makes the claim that ethics is “first theology”. This characterization of Levinasian thought as a methodologically strict phenomenology (despite its expansion of range) can be shown to inform, or open onto, the concerns of theology, of which the present thesis will be an expansion of in new ways through its inquiry into the revelatory status of the interrelation of love and justice.

5. Outline of the Thesis

Before we turn our attention in Chapter Three to a more detailed examination of the themes in Levinas’s work presented in this introductory chapter, we first turn in the next chapter to a succinct and strategically focused analysis of Augustine’s thought on love, justice, and divine/human relation. The aim of Chapter Two, therefore, is not to provide a thorough analysis of these themes in Augustine’s work but rather to sketch, in broad terms, the basic framework of love and justice in order to set out how Levinas’s account can retrieve this important and productive framework in a new way for the contemporary milieu. To this end, the chapter follows the progression of Augustine’s search for God in his work, particularly in the *Confessions* when he asks, “What do I love when I love my God?” The primary task of this chapter is to show that Augustine’s search for God through love sketches a powerful way to understand revelation, not least by for the way in which he conceives the relation with God in terms of desire above that of cognitive knowledge. We will trace Augustine’s journey to find the love of God and his own desire, a journey which begins introspectively but ultimately leads to the discovery that God becomes “present” in the enactment of love for one’s neighbour and in the wider society through the enactment of justice. That is, the search for love in the depths of his interiority will actually lead him back to

---

77 *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 193.
exteriority, where God is “found” where this relation between love and justice is enacted in the relation with one’s neighbour.

Our analysis will show how Augustine maintains that love and justice have their origin in God, and when one participates in this interrelation of love and justice, God is made “present”. We will conclude with the suggestion that, despite the important orientation to revelation presented in Augustine’s account, the Neo-Platonic metaphysical framework on which it can be shown to depend creates certain epistemological and, it could be argued, ethical obstacles which are difficult to overcome from such a framework. In order to retrieve these important and fruitful orientations for looking at revelation through the ethical modes of love and justice, especially within the contemporary horizon of thought, we will turn to the work of Levinas.

Prior to the specific consideration of Levinas’s account of love, justice and revelation in subsequent chapters, Chapter Three examines the structure of the asymmetrical relation between the human subject and the other person in Levinas’s thought. As we will see, such a relation rests upon his conception of the self whose uniqueness or separateness can only be encountered phenomenologically by way of sensibility. Sensibility, too, is a developing term in Levinas’s work, as we shall see, but in later works he argues that through sensibility, the self is “indebted” to the exterior world in a way for which the cognitive self cannot account. It is “summoned” to respond to and for another person prior to the symmetry of all reciprocal awareness and communication.

The chapter will then proceed to examine another central feature of the structure of the asymmetrical relation; namely, that the summons to responsibility has its priority or origin in what Levinas calls an “immemorial time”, a past which cannot be re-presented in any representational memory as a past that was once present, and yet a “past” nonetheless. This immemorial time is part of what forms Levinas’s conception of temporality for ethics, which he calls “diachrony”. According to Levinas, diachronic time is the very opening to transcendence, or what he calls the “transcendence of the unto-God (à-Dieu)”. We will see that although the asymmetrical relation provides the structure by which the “breach” that leads to God is produced, for Levinas, God remains unknowable and unthematisable. God is often described in his work as “absent”, save for the “trace” of his having already passed in a diachronic
time. Because the “source” of the trace is not encountered, yet is somehow personal, Levinas gives this “Absent” from which the trace comes a name: *illeity* (a neologism meaning “that-ness” or more exactly, “he-ness”). We will show how *illeity* describes the paradox of the trace as absolutely unavailable and withdrawn into an irreversible past while orienting the subject to the “personal” order of responsibility for the other person. The “origin” of the “trace” is thus neither an “I” nor a “Thou”; the “beyond” is in the third person: “He”. In other words, to use the example of reading the text of an author, access to gaining knowledge of the writer at the time of writing remains closed; there is an unbreachable “gap” between the sign of the trace (the text) and its signified (the author). We will conclude with a consideration of how one, then, becomes conscious of this “trace” of God who has always already “passed” in the subject’s awakening to responsibility for the human other.

This question of consciousness opens onto the larger question of justice in Levinas’s work, and as such forms the basis for the explorations of Chapter Four. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas claims that the moment in which the transcendent God becomes “accessible” is in the work of justice—the ethical relation—and this notion of justice evolves in *Otherwise than Being* to encompass the movement where the upsurge of the ethical relation into being has its advent in the realm of thematised significations, or what he calls the “said.” It is this movement from ethics back to “being” that for Levinas will constitute the circumstances in which God first “comes to mind”. That is, while Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity* that the work of justice “is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced”, or again, that “God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men”, he argues in *Otherwise than Being* that although the ethical relation is the only locus for the relation with God, justice is integral to the recognition, diachronically, of this relation—a relation with a God who has always already “passed”. We are particularly concerned with the nature of this breach and how it opens the dimension of the divine in a way that distinguishes it from a “bridge” or a “link”. As we will see, the work of justice introduces a gap or breach within immanent reality; that is, justice

---

78 Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other” (1963), in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 356. “Through a trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a ‘He’.” Here Levinas makes a distinction between the third person *il* or “He” of *illeity* and that of the third party of justice in the “political” domain.

79 *Totality and Infinity*, 78. “A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice.”

80 Ibid., 78.
opens a breach because it interrupts—or rather disrupts—the machinations of the “I” and its totalising efforts.

The chapter’s primary task, then, is to show how the work of justice is required in order for the “breach” that leads to God be produced. Before we pursue this task in more detail, we begin with Levinas’s critique of a commonly accepted conception of justice founded upon the freedom and “responsible” self-interest of the subject. We will then examine his own conception of justice, which is instead founded upon the relation to the other person and, as this comes to fuller development in Otherwise than Being, other “others” (which he calls the “third party”) or society as a whole. The primary focus of our analysis of justice in Levinas’s work will be upon two of his major texts, Totality and Infinity and Otherwise than Being, with particular attention paid to the ways in which the notion of justice expands and deepens from the former work to the latter. We will see that in Totality and Infinity, the work of justice functions as the way in which the ego is disengaged from self-interested being through an interruption or breach which the “encounter” with the face of the other person inaugurates. Otherwise than Being emphasises the movement from ethical subjectivity to the necessity of a return to what he calls the “question” of justice; that is, the return to the question of how one’s infinite responsibility is “shown” in being, out of consideration for weighing responsibilities towards other others, or what he calls the “third party”.

The task of Chapter Five is to provide a more thorough analysis of charity or love with regard to justice. Its central task is to discover how Levinas develops his claim that justice and love are the modalities which compose the movement “unto-God” [à-Dieu]. This task is neither simple nor straightforward, for at least two reasons. First, the notion of love is an evolving term in Levinas’s thought, and thus must be used carefully. Second, Levinas often laments that love is a word with which he is not entirely comfortable. Nevertheless, the word appears quite often in the works after Totality and Infinity as a way to juxtapose the face-to-face relation with justice and as one of the modalities which comprise the movement towards God. Additionally, Levinas devotes greater attention in these later works to the interrelation between the ethical relation (love) and that of the third party or political realm.

---

81 “Philosophy, Justice and Love”, 88. Although Levinas equates responsibility for the other person with the notion of love of one’s neighbour, he adds that “I don’t very much like the word love, which is worn-out and debased. Let us speak instead of the taking upon oneself of the fate of another.”
(justice). They are interrelated because one cannot find its full expression without the other.

The chapter then seeks to discern how the word “God” arises out of the encounter with the face of the human other, in the relation which is increasingly called the love of one’s neighbour. We hope to show that while there are similarities between Augustine’s notion of love and that of Levinas, ultimately for the latter it is not the love of God *per se* that empowers the subject to be responsible (and subsequently to discover the source of that empowerment)—one is not the beneficiary of loving grace in a strictly Augustinian sense—love is rather “generated” by the summons to responsibility.

Having examined the way in which love and justice open up the dimension of the divine, we are nevertheless still presented with a problem which forms the basis for Chapter Six: How does Levinas’s notion of love and justice describe the possibility of God being “revealed” in a way that can be attested by those who enact them in the way Levinas articulates? What significance do love and justice find for the specific employment of the word “God”? This chapter argues that Levinas’s analysis of “testimony” or “witness” provides intelligibility to the claim that the relation between love and justice is a locus for “revelation”, although not in a way in which the witness testifies to an encounter with God. Rather, witness is given of the trace of God who has always already passed; to go towards others in love and justice is to bear witness of the “He” of *illeity* who has withdrawn from every relation but has nevertheless “ordered” [ordonné] the subject to responsibility. For Levinas, witness is not descriptive, but rather expresses one’s availability to respond. Thus love and justice, as they are given expression in witness, are the modalities which open up the “breach” of the immanent order, and it is precisely this breach which first brings God to mind.

What therefore separates Levinas’s notion of witness from its use in ordinary language is that the testimony does not belong to the witness; it proceeds from an absolute, immemorial “initiative” as to its origin and content. But here a serious problem arises. For while Levinas claims that the self is a witness, it is difficult to determine whether the self gives witness of what religious practitioners would refer to as the God of the Bible, or merely the anonymous *il y a* of the phenomenological enterprise.
To answer this question, the chapter will take a closer look at Levinas’s claim in *Otherwise than Being* that the word “God” borders on being and skirts nothingness. In other words, the word must somehow be lodged in an “excluded middle” between the two. The source of the obligation to responsibility comes from what Levinas himself calls the “who knows where.”82 The subject, in the position of witness, cannot know its origin. However, the word “God” also borders on being, and although this presents a greater risk for Levinas than nothingness, it is nevertheless a necessary one (and one which will open up onto the legitimacy of theology despite the risks involved), just as the “said” of justice will be shown to be a necessary risk for the “saying” of love. In other words, it is possible for one to take God for a being and ground the subject’s responsibility for the other person by starting with the supreme efficacy of God. Levinas acknowledges that the “glory” of the Infinite “shuts itself up” in the word “God” and becomes a being.83 However, as soon as this word is uttered, the Infinite already “unsays” itself without being reduced to nothingness. We will thus discover that the “excluded middle”, which Levinas seeks to articulate with the interrelation of love and justice, will be found to be associated with other juxtaposed themes in his thought, such as nothingness and being, “saying” and “said”, infinite and finite, diachrony and synchrony. There is a retreat of God in manifestation itself, an “effacement of the Name” in its attestation.84 As we will see, the “saying” of infinite responsibility (love) and the “said” of justice give witness to the “otherwise than being”, but such witness to transcendence by definition requires the transcendent to remain ambiguous, a “breach” of the immanent order that “perhaps” is the trace of God or “perhaps” only the anonymous movement of the *il y a*.

Hence, we will see that this “excluded middle” now contains in it the shadow of a problem, the fuller expression of which will allow, on the basis of all the preceding chapters, for the articulation in the conclusion of Chapter Six of a new and more precise formulation of the basic twofold problem with which we began: First, the problem of whether the interrelation of love and justice in Levinas can retrieve for the contemporary mindset the orientation to Divine revelation (with genuinely religious import, not only revelation in the ethical sense of the epiphany in the face of the other);

---

82 *Otherwise than Being*, 13.
83 Ibid., 151.
second, what will turn out to be the fundamentally related problem of how Levinas, as a thoroughly phenomenological thinker, can inform, speak to, and guide the theology of the positive religions. For these reasons, it will be necessary to address the broader question of how, and in what way, God understood in the phenomenological sense as anonymous *il y a* can have a bearing on, or an affinity with, God used in the second sense, which is, of course, the God of the Bible (and thus unavoidably the God of the positive religions). Levinas himself wants to claim that the former does bear on the latter, but gives little concentrated attention to how they are related. Our own exploration of revelation through the interrelation of love and justice will serve to reconfigure the relation of love and justice itself, and thereby inform in new ways the relation to which it is concerned—the relation to God. We will suggest that the interrelation of love and justice in Levinas’s thought allows for the tension of their juxtaposition to stand without ontologising them. In other words, love and justice in Levinas’s thought do not present a dichotomy in which one must be chosen over the other; they rather present a “gap” that is opened between them, an “excluded middle” in which their interdependence can be maintained.

All of these juxtapositions (described above) show that what is transcendent or outside of knowledge can still be assembled into being, but not as an ontology (*qua* “science” of being); they retain their “otherness”. And it is precisely in so doing that we will also be able to come to a new understanding of the matter of how Levinas’s strictly (while expanded) phenomenological enterprise can inform theological enterprises.

To the extent that Levinas offers a rethinking or reorientation of love, justice, and revelation (and even with what is expressed by the word “God”), it is all done through the recovery of an examination of life as it is lived—in the extraordinary event of the face-to-face relation with another person. If the questions about Levinas’s relation to theology can all too often be answered in a negative way, the best approach to providing an alternative account (while acknowledging some of the very real difficulties in doing so) may be to examine these questions—as well as the problems in theology that he wishes to critique—in as precise a manner as possible. In the contemporary horizon of thought, the question of revelation—of how it is that one can speak about God—remains an essential one for the theologian continually to undertake. This is the conviction that informs this thesis and the task that guides its analyses.
Chapter 2 – Love, Justice and the “Knowledge” of God in Augustine’s Search for God

In the introductory chapter we observed that Augustine’s quest for understanding how one encounters God begins with questions about the nature of his own existence. In Book X of the *Confessions*, for example, Augustine states that he has become a “question to himself” (*quaestio mihi factus sum*), and asking this question marks the inauguration of his lifelong pursuit to understand how the nature of human existence can illuminate a broader understanding of the precise nature of one’s relation to God as well as with other human beings.¹ Interestingly, Augustine asks a second question in the same book of the *Confessions* which illuminates a complex problem with regard to this pursuit: “What do I love when I love my God?”² For our purposes, his question is important for two reasons. First, Augustine acknowledges that although his love of God is “positive” and “certain”, what he loves is not.³ Indeed, Augustine’s attempt to answer this question in Book X proceeds apophatically, insofar as apophatic is understood as a theology that focuses on the breakdown of all language about God. Augustine’s uncertainty about “what” he loves when he loves God raises the larger question of how one begins the search for God, and the path he chooses starts with a query about himself and about what is loved when he claims to love God. Earlier in the *Confessions* Augustine famously states that “our hearts find no peace until they rest in [God]”.⁴ Yet in Book X, Augustine is asking questions such as: Who is God? Where is God? And who am I? As we will see, these are fundamental questions for Augustine as he builds his theology.

The second reason Augustine’s question about God is important, which follows from the first, is the way in which the question is framed as though he is assuming a priority of love over knowledge. For Augustine, “love” and “God” go together. To comprehend God in cognition is impossible, and yet he will argue that one can encounter the “presence” of God through love and the works of love, or justice.⁵ Thus,

³ Ibid., X.6.
⁴ Ibid., I.1.
we shall see that for Augustine, to “encounter” God in the world does not mean the experience of an event which then allows the self to comprehend God as a referent of knowledge; instead, he will attempt to describe the encounter with God in terms of “doing” the truth \[facere veritatem\], for it is in doing the truth that one comes into the light of God.\(^6\)

At the heart of Augustine’s notion of the interrelation between love and justice as a site for participation in God lies a paradox that centers around his reading of a text he frequently cites in his work from Romans 5, which speaks of “the love of God . . . poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (5:5). As Oliver O’Donovan observes, Augustine can be seen here to be treating the words “of God” as both an objective and subjective genitive.\(^7\) In other words, the suggestion here will be not only that the love of God has been imparted to humans, but has also, in the same act, generated humanity’s love for God. To use Augustine’s words, God loves with a “love by which he makes us lovers.”\(^8\) The double rendering of the phrase “of God” thus reflects Augustine’s view more broadly that God is love but at the same time love is a desire that animates the human search for happiness or fulfillment, which can only be found in God. Moreover, Augustine’s reading of the text from Romans reflects his argument more broadly that the goal of human desire or love is love itself, which he acknowledges explicitly elsewhere.\(^9\)

Augustine’s search for God, therefore, is simultaneously a search for the origin of both the love of God and of his own desire. The primary task of this chapter is to show that Augustine’s search for God through love sketches a powerful way to think about divine revelation, not least for the way in which it presents an opportunity to conceive the relation with God in terms of desire prior to that of cognitive knowledge. We will begin by tracing Augustine’s journey to find the love of God and the true source and fulfillment of his own desire, a journey which begins introspectively but make God “present”: “God takes pleasure in [that] which is an expression of active piety and of fervent charity. That is, after all, the effect of the presence of the Holy Spirit, as the apostle teaches us when he says, The charity of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Rom 5:5).”\(^6\)

\(^6\) Confessions, X.1. Augustine’s stated desire to “act in truth” is in response to his reading of John 3:21: “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”


ultimately leads to the discovery that God becomes “present” in the enactment of love for one’s neighbour and in wider society through the enactment of justice. That is, the search for love in the depths of his interiority will actually lead him back to exteriority, where God is “found” when this relation between love and justice is enacted in the relation with one’s neighbour.

However, before we can proceed with an analysis of the “revelatory” aspect of this relation between love and justice, we must first examine what Augustine means by “love” and “justice”, with the goal of understanding how and why the two virtues are interrelated. From there we can begin to see how Augustine maintains that love and justice have their origin in God, and thus to participate in this interrelation of love and justice is to participate, albeit indirectly, in modes in which God “dwells” or is “present”.

The chapter will then show that, despite the importance and perennial resonance presented in Augustine’s account, his reliance upon a Neo-Platonic mode of metaphysics creates certain epistemological difficulties which are challenging to overcome within such a framework. Moreover, we will see that according to some Augustinian interlocutors, Augustine’s eudaemonist approach to ethics creates additional difficulties not only for his conception of love, but also for the coherence of the relation between love and justice. With regard to the former, we will argue that although the Neo-Platonic framework allows Augustine to see love and justice as means of “knowing” God, their “status” as independently existing entities in the transcendent eternal realm implies that their apprehension functions as a kind of mediation between humans and an unknowable God.

With regard to the latter, we will argue that according to several prominent scholars, Augustine’s acceptance of the classical teleological model of the quest for happiness—eudaemonism—leads to the subordination of the neighbour. Drawing from the work of three diverse Augustinian interlocutors, including Oliver O’Donovan, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Holl, we will see that despite his attempts to harmonise eudaemonism with the biblical command to love one’s neighbour, everything finds its ultimate justification by its place in the “acquisitive” pursuit of the self-referential framework of happiness. This, of course, carries significant consequences for his otherwise compelling account regarding the relation of love and justice to revelation or participation in God. We will suggest that because Augustine’s account is based on a
mode of metaphysics which, for the most part, is difficult to reconcile in the contemporary mindset, the work of Levinas offers a helpful way to further pursue the retrieval of this important orientation for looking at revelation through the ethical modes of love and justice within a contemporary milieu.

1. The Search Within: The Origin of Love and the Desire for Happiness

As we saw above with the excerpts from the *Confessions*, Augustine also argues in *On the Trinity* that while there are no categories of knowledge into which one can fit God, it is through an examination of the mystery of what it means to be a human being that one can delve more deeply into the divine mystery. Yet if God cannot be known as an “object” of cognition, how can Augustine affirm that his search for God in the *Confessions* results ultimately in the “sight” of God? Rather than assert that one can have, for instance, a certain indirect knowledge of God as of a cause in its effect, Augustine takes a more subjective line. He claims that one can have indirect knowledge of God in certain immutable values, and hence an indirect knowledge of God as the guarantor of these values, or the source from which they derive. The values Augustine speaks of most often are “truth” and the “good”, and, these values represent specific modes of orienting one’s search for God, or more exactly, they provide meaning for the word “God” insofar as one believes by faith that God is truth or is good.

However, Augustine recognises that values such as “truth” or the “good” are abstract. Thus, he seeks to concretise or find a site where one can experience (or enact) the “truth” and the “good”. He argues that such a site is bound up in a relation between the virtues of love and justice, virtues which, if they are to be meaningful in any way, require a relation with another human being. As he writes in a homily on the First Epistle of John (with reference to 4:12, which says that “no one has seen God at any time”), because the writer asserts that God is love yet is invisible, one must not seek

---


11 *Confessions*, VII.17.


God with the “eyes” but with the “heart”.\(^\text{14}\) He goes on to say that to seek God with one’s “heart” is to enact love for one’s neighbour, a love which is expressed through specific acts which, as we will see later, he associates with justice:

> What sort of face has love? What form has it? What stature? What feet? What hands has it? No man can say. And yet it has feet, for these carry men to church: it has hands; for these reach forth to the poor: it has eyes; for thereby we consider the needy: “Blessed is the man,” it is said, “who considers the needy and the poor”. . . . These are not members distinct by place, but with the understanding he that has charity sees the whole at once. Inhabit, and you shall be inhabited; dwell, and you shall be dwelt in.\(^\text{15}\)

Here we see Augustine maintaining that when one “inhabits” love and expresses this love in such acts of care for the needy and the poor, one is “inhabited” by God. Moreover, we see in *On the Trinity* that he calls such acts the “perfection of justice”, and it is precisely in the enactment of love and justice, so understood, that God is made known. Commenting on a text from the First Epistle to John in *On the Trinity* in which the biblical writer says that whoever loves his brother “abides in light”, Augustine writes,

> It is clear that [the apostle] sets the perfection of justice in the love of one’s brother; for a man in whom there is no scandal is clearly perfect. And yet he seems to pass over the love of God over in silence. He would never do this unless he wished God to be understood in brotherly love. . . . This passage shows clearly and sufficiently how this brotherly love . . . is proclaimed on the highest authority not only to be from God but also simply to be God.\(^\text{16}\)

Augustine’s conception of the knowledge of God which comes after the enactment or instantiation of these virtues which have their origin in God thus provides an instance of what Rowan Williams suggests with regard to revelation: “If we live like this, has revelation occurred?”\(^\text{17}\) In other words, what is first is the lived enactment of love and justice, and only afterwards can it be interpreted as a revelatory event.

However, as we have already seen, before Augustine turns to the relation with the neighbour as a locus for the manner in which love and justice lead to the knowledge of God, he first seeks the origin of how he became aware of the love of God through introspection. As we will now see, this introspection takes particular


\(^{15}\) Ibid., VII.10. Original emphasis.

\(^{16}\) On the Trinity, V.12.

shape through an examination of the origin of his own desire and the quest for happiness.

1.1 Love and the Quest for Happiness

In Book X of the Confessions, Augustine claims that in his search for the answer to “what” he loves when he loves God, he is specifically looking for that which will bring fulfillment to his desire; he seeks the source of true “happiness”.\(^{18}\) As Denys Turner observes, Augustine’s own description of his conversion to Christianity in the Confessions includes the proclamation that his discovery of the love by which the Christian God loved him was the true path to happiness. The love of God is what he had been searching for his whole life.\(^{19}\) Having made this discovery, Augustine seeks to retrace the steps in his search so as to understand what led him to this discovery.

He begins with the philosophical problem of the nature of “searching” itself. Readers who are familiar with the Confessions know well how this problem is presented in Book X. Echoing Plato, Augustine asks how can one be said to be searching for something if it is not known what one is searching for; and further, if it is not known what one is searching for, can it be said that one is searching for it at all?\(^{20}\) As Denys Turner suggests, insofar as Augustine’s life can be represented as a search for God and, simultaneously, a search for himself, his search progresses from various kinds of not-knowing to the “corresponding forms” of knowing.\(^{21}\) And yet, Turner adds, the search cannot have been a progress from “unqualified ignorance” to “wholly new knowledge”, for that still raises the question of how a person can be said to be searching for something if that for which one is searching is not known.\(^{22}\) For Augustine, in order to be able to say that the object of one’s search has been found, there must be some sense in which one possesses some form of “knowledge” of that which was sought. In some of his earlier post-conversion writings, we see that Augustine explores the Neo-Platonic idea of anamnesis: the theory according to which all knowledge is a form a remembering that which, prior to birth, one fully knew but in

---

\(^{18}\) Confessions, X.20.


\(^{20}\) Confessions, X.20. See also e.g., Plato, Meno, translated by R.W. Sharplies (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1985), 80d.

\(^{21}\) Turner, The Darkness of God, 58.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 58.
the upheaval of birth, had been caused to forget. Although as Turner observes, by the
time Augustine wrote the *Confessions*, he had largely abandoned this theory, Turner
nevertheless maintains that there is still a way in which Augustine holds onto the
notion of knowledge as *anamnesis*: he maintains the centrality of memory in the
process of knowledge-acquisition and, following Plato, that all knowing is a form of
recognition. As we will see, he argues that there are two indispensable concepts for
understanding the nature of searching in general: happiness and love. Both are used in
a specific way by Augustine to support his claim that the discovery of God is a
“rediscovery” of God, the “return” to a “knowledge” already somehow present within
the searching itself. However, unlike Plato, as John Caputo observes, Augustine’s
quest to discover what he loves when he loves God is not to be read as a quest to recall
a somehow forgotten prior cognitive knowledge of God; rather, it is a question which
is framed in terms of love, in which he tries to understand what he already loved.

1.2 The Relation of Love and Desire

Augustine writes that “to love is indeed nothing else than to crave something
for its own sake”, that is, to pursue something as an end in itself. Further on, he adds
that love “is a kind of desire.” Every desire (*appetitus*) is tied to a definite object, and
it takes this object to animate the desire itself, thus providing an aim for it.
Furthermore, Augustine argues that love is “a kind of motion, and all motion is toward
something.” Because of this, Augustine claims that we should look for what should
be loved, or to look for the thing towards which the motion is directed. Hannah Arendt
observes that the object that is desired or loved is called a “good” (*bonum*), insofar as
the object’s “goodness” consists in something one desires but does not yet possess.
Once the object is possessed one’s desire ends, unless there is the threat of loss.
According to Arendt, all of this is set in motion by the self’s quest to live happily, and
as we will see later, one’s notion of happiness greatly determines not only the

---

24 *The Darkness of God*, 58.
25 Ibid., 58-59.
28 Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, translated by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark
29 *Miscellany of Eighty-three Questions*, XXXV, 1.
respective “goods” that become objects of desire, but also the proper orientation of desire itself. Moreover, according to Augustine, since one desires a particular good rather than random objects, desire is a combination of “aiming at” and “referring back to.”

For our present purposes, the “referring back to” of love as desire is most significant. As Hannah Arendt observes, desire (in this specific context understood as a “kind of craving”) “refers back to the individual who knows the world’s good and evil and seeks to live happily.” As such, desire simultaneously refers back to this innate knowledge in all it desires. When the soul has finally found the fulfillment of such desire, the supreme good or *summum bonum,* one is said to have found happiness (*beatitudo*). Augustine argues that it is because we somehow have always “known” happiness that we want to be happy; and, as we suggested above, one’s notion of happiness more or less determines the goods that become objects of love or desire. Thus, as Arendt suggests, to love is a human being’s possibility of gaining possession of the particular good that will achieve happiness, or said differently, love is the possibility of gaining possession of what is most his or her own. However, for Augustine, temporal objects, when possessed, fail to satisfy the deepest desire of the soul. The happiness of the soul requires a search that extends beyond the realm of everyday objects. We will return to this point in a moment. But first we will say more about the philosophical commitments which ground Augustine’s notions of love and happiness.

It is of central importance to acknowledge the ways in which Augustine’s conception of love are interwoven with his broader philosophical commitments, which are rooted in classical Greek philosophy and in particular the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions. His concern for how a human being might find happiness owes a great deal to the wider influence of these two philosophical traditions. Augustine recognises Socrates as “the first to turn the whole of philosophy towards the improvement and regulation of morality”, and as a result of this turn towards

---

31 *Love and Saint Augustine,* 9, 17.
32 Ibid., 9.
33 Ibid., 9.
morality came “the question of the necessary conditions for happiness.” An ethic which views happiness as the ultimate justification for morality is also known as eudaemonism. It understands happiness as a state of being, the perfection of which is the desired end of every human life. In short, the homogeneity of the moral enterprise is determined from the pursuit of one’s supreme or highest good (sumnum bonum). While the Peripatetic school supposes that the sumnum bonum was a function of the human subject—an activity or state of being—Augustine follows the Neo-Platonic tradition by objectifying the sumnum bonum into a transcendent object of worship and delight (God). Rather than posit morality as seeking his own true “well-being”, Augustine locates the justification of morality in the Christian command to love God as the sumnum bonum. Happiness is held by Augustine to be a natural desire of every human being. He expresses this idea throughout his writings, but nowhere more plainly than in this statement from the Confessions: “Surely happiness is what everyone wants, so much so that there can be none that do not want it.”

Moreover, Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry exercised great influence over Augustine’s formulation of happiness as the telos of all human love. They argue that happiness is not to be found in anything in the created order, which is one of perpetual change; rather, it is to be found in the divine realm of eternal, unchanging truth. Such happiness is consummated upon the soul’s return to this divine realm, where it can enjoy the contemplation of the divine in eternity. For a Platonist, the eternal realm is more real than anything in the created order. Augustine follows Neo-Platonic thought insofar as he approaches the question of the self’s relation with the eternal or metaphysically real realm of “truth” by appealing to the Platonic Forms or Ideas, of which love and justice are among the highest and most noble Forms. One “participates” in the eternal realm to the extent that one participates, for example, in the enactment of love and justice.

According to O’Donovan, Augustine remained committed to the eudaemonist position (with only small modifications) throughout his life. He adds that the

37 Augustine, The City of God, VIII.3.
40 Confessions, X.20.
42 The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine, 57.
eudaemonist principle “we all wish to be happy” forms the basis of an “apologetic argument” for Augustine which leads to God as the source of the happy life, and therefore one’s love must be directed exclusively to him.\textsuperscript{43} It is through love that we come to the possession of the \textit{summum bonum}, which for Augustine is God.\textsuperscript{44}

However, if the pursuit of happiness, animated by love or desire, is the path by which one discovers God, we are still left with the problem that Augustine explores in \textit{Confessions} Book X, to which we now return: How can a person recognise that his or her search for happiness can be found in God unless happiness is somehow already known, and furthermore, how can one know that happiness can be found in a source (God), unless that source can also somehow be “known”? As we have seen, Augustine insists that God cannot be apprehended within the categories of knowledge, so how does he attempt to resolve this epistemological dilemma? He begins by exploring the structure of knowledge-acquisition in greater depth, an exploration which places its central focus upon memory. What we shall see, however, is that Augustine’s search for the origin of love and thus, God, extends beyond knowledge, beyond all memory.

1.3 The Origin of Love in the “Beyond” of Memory

As we saw above, although Augustine had largely abandoned the Neo-Platonic theory of \textit{anamnesis} by the time he wrote the \textit{Confessions}, he nevertheless holds to the affirmation of the centrality of memory in the process of acquiring knowledge; and more specifically, he maintains that all knowing is a form of recognition.\textsuperscript{45} This is particularly evident in Book X of the \textit{Confessions}, where the discovery of God is discussed in terms of the “rediscovery” of God, the return to a truth somehow already known, already present within the searching itself.

Yet this modified version of \textit{anamnesis} still does not sufficiently solve the philosophical problem of the nature of “searching”. As we suggested earlier, his solution initially takes form in his reading of Romans 5:5, where he proposes a “causative” genitive for interpreting the “love of God”: such love is “the love by which he makes us lovers.”\textsuperscript{46} For Augustine, what animates his search for God does not have

\textsuperscript{43} The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine, 57.


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 58. It should be noted that in Augustine’s \textit{Retractions} (1.4.4) he corrects his previous adherence to the pre-existence/birth model, not the theory of knowledge as recognition.

its origin in himself but God. As Turner agrees, it is only because the love of God (understood objectively and subjectively) has been “poured into his heart” that Augustine desires God:

If, for Augustine, the seeking is always for God, his seeking is before that from God. This is the foundational truth which . . . underlies all Augustine’s paradoxes about seeking and finding: God is not to be sought outside the self, for God is already there “within”. . . .

If this is the case, then Augustine’s search for God originates both in and from a love which is always already active within him. The search that leads to God is animated by a cause that is somehow beyond all memory: it is an act of prevenient grace. This idea requires further explanation, not least because we shall find a similar idea present in Levinas’s work with his notion of “diachronic” time.

Augustine claims that it is “wondrous” that the mind can see in itself what it has not seen anywhere else. For example, he claims the mind already knows, prior to any experience, “what it means to be just.” In the same way, one seeks the “happy life” as if there is some “knowledge” of it despite the fact one cannot know what it is like through experience. For Augustine, the “knowledge” of the possibility of the “happy life” is given in consciousness prior to all experience, and as such provides the means for one’s recognition whenever it is encountered in the future.

As Arendt observes, it is only because this recollection of happiness must actually lie beyond any memory of having experienced it can it become the “guarantee” of recognising it in the future. That is, when happiness is projected into the future, it is guaranteed by a “past” which cannot possibly be explained by any experiences in this world. Augustine argues this is consistent with how memory works in general:

Perhaps it is in the memory in the same way as we remember joy. Even when I am sad I can remember joy, just as I can visualise happiness when I am unhappy. Yet I have never been aware of joy through any of the bodily senses. I have not seen or heard it, smelled, tasted or touched it. It is something that I have

47 The Darkness of God, 59. Original emphasis.
48 See e.g., City of God X.29; On the Trinity V.1, 5, 16.
49 On the Trinity, VIII.6.
50 Ibid., VIII.6.
51 Love and Saint Augustine, 46.
52 On the Trinity, VIII.6.
53 Love and Saint Augustine, 47.
experienced in my mind on occasions of joy, and the knowledge of it has remained firmly in my memory.\textsuperscript{54}

Thus, according to Augustine, whenever one searches for the origin of what constitutes the happy life—the love of God—one must begin in the “space of memory” and not anywhere outside it.\textsuperscript{55} It wholly depends on a preexisting reference that can only be sought out through memory, although the search eventually leads beyond all memory to an absolute “past”. This recollection is not guided simply by the search for God or a desire for the \textit{summun bonum}, but by the “love of Thy love.” That is to say, the “recollection” of the love of God is guided by the love “poured into our hearts” by God. As Arendt agrees, this \textit{amor amoris Dei} neither is nor could be the object of desire; it already presupposes a relation with God that the search for God seeks to establish.\textsuperscript{56} By recalling a past that is prior to all experience, the self discovers that s/he is a creature; it is the answer to the question of whence comes one’s desire for the happy life. It is the dependence of the one who is created upon his or her Creator.\textsuperscript{57}

Because human desire or love for the “happy life” depends upon a notion of love that cannot be experienced in the world, it can only signify that human desire depends on something outside human existence as it is known and experienced. Furthermore, as Arendt argues, since the concept of happiness is present in us through a consciousness that is equated with memory (that is, not an “innate” but remembered idea), this “outside human existence” actually means before human existence.\textsuperscript{58} Therefore, God is both “outside” and “before” the self. God is only known as “in” the self by virtue of memory, where the self is “inspired” by an act of grace to desire happiness.\textsuperscript{59} Only in referring back from immanent life to the transcendent source of this life does the creature find the origin of his or her search for God. It is the grace bestowed upon the creature from its Creator.

Based upon our analysis thus far, it would appear that the site or locus in which Augustine takes in his quest to gain an understanding of what he already loved is limited to his own interiority. We would like to suggest, however, another possibility,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} \textit{Confessions}, X.21
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid., X.24.
\item \textsuperscript{56} \textit{Love and Saint Augustine}, 48-49.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 49.
\item \textsuperscript{58} \textit{Love and Saint Augustine}, 49.
\item \textsuperscript{59} \textit{Confessions}, I.2.
\end{itemize}
one that Denys Turner raises but does not develop in the context of his own work on Augustine: is not Augustine’s discourse of interiority dependent on a language that is borrowed from experience and thus, from exteriority? Turner argues that Augustine’s discourse of interiority is “riddled with imagery”, and as such is an inherently “metaphorical language” which both describes and is borrowed from “exteriority”. It could be argued, therefore, that the primordial “origin” of his desire—the passion of his love—is first discovered not in the interior search through memory but in the enactment of love itself. There are many instances in Augustine’s work where he appears to affirm this notion, where he describes the discovery of the love of God through the specific site of the relation with (or love of) the neighbour, and as we will see below, to support this argument he often turns to the testimony of the New Testament.

2. Love of God Through love of Neighbour

As Augustine seeks to articulate ways in which the Neo-Platonic notion of happiness can be understood within the context of Christianity, there is an increasing acknowledgement that God has not only commanded us to love him, but equally to love our neighbour as ourselves. Such an acknowledgement can be found explicitly in early works such as On the Morals of the Catholic Church, where after devoting much of the first two sections to an explanation of the exclusive claim of God for our love, Augustine shifts to a discussion of the second command to love one’s neighbour. However, in making this shift, he must reconcile the difficulty created by the Neo-Platonic precept of desire exclusively for the *summum bonum* and the twofold biblical command to love both God and neighbour. We will return to this important concern later in the chapter. For our present purposes, it is necessary to state briefly how Augustine’s shift to a greater consideration of how the exterior relation of love of neighbour begins to give meaning or content to the interior discoveries made in the search for the love of God. As we will see, Augustine’s reading of the pertinent New Testament texts will provide support for his philosophical consideration that the love of God has an origin beyond any human memory, but nevertheless is manifested (and thus discovered) in the love of one’s neighbour.

---

60 *The Darkness of God*, 101.

61 Ibid., 101.

62 *Confessions*, X.37.
In our examination of Augustine’s search for God in the *Confessions*, we saw that the quest for understanding “what” one loves when one loves God originates both in and from a love “poured into our hearts”, which suggests a gratuitous act that is not of human origin. It is a love that is always already active within humans, prior to any explicit knowledge of its presence. Several years later, writing in *On the Trinity*, Augustine makes an attempt to add depth and nuance to his account of the road to the “knowledge” of God. At the mid-point of Book VIII, Augustine asks: “From what likeness or comparison of known things can one believe, in order that one may love God, whom we do not yet know?” His initial (albeit provisional) and well-known answer to this question is to sketch an image of the Trinity through a threefold psychological description of *caritas*: the lover, the beloved, and love itself. He argues that if God is love, as the biblical texts suggest, the Trinity enters knowledge when *caritas* is viewed in the same threefold manner. That is, the Father is the lover, Jesus the beloved, and the Holy Spirit love itself.

Despite this initial attempt to find a correlation between the psychological aspects of love and the Trinity, Augustine concludes Book VIII by acknowledging that this sketch of the Trinity has not yet resulted in settling his question. Indeed, in a retrospective note in Book XV, Augustine admits that the so-called “failure” of the efforts of Book VIII was due to his neglect of the possibility that one might be able to search for God through the “creaturely nature” of human beings:

We may recall that it was in the eighth Book that the manifestation of the Trinity to our understanding began. . . . But so far we had no glimpse of the Trinity, because we could not look in that dazzling brightness [of the light of Truth] direct our mind’s eye steadily to look for it. . . . Only when we came to consider charity, which in Holy Scripture is called God, the light began to break upon a Trinity, consisting in lover, the beloved, and love. But from that ineffable light our gaze flinched away: we had to confess that our mind in its weakness was not yet strong enough to be conformed to it. And therefore . . . we occupied ourselves with our own creaturely nature in order that we might be able to apprehend and perceive the invisible things of God through the things that are made.

The problem of which Augustine becomes aware with his intellectual pursuit of God is that whenever he tries to give imaginative content to his ideas, his mind becomes confused. Without some kind of “sight” or experience to give content to his ideas,

63 *On the Trinity*, VIII.5.
64 Ibid., VIII.10.
there can be no basis for belief. Thus, Augustine turns to examine further the idea of the “good imprinted in us”, which one recognises and experiences in love, particularly in the love of one’s neighbour. This turn to a consideration of the encounter with God through the love of one’s neighbour is particularly evident in several of Augustine’s Sermons and in many sections of his Homilies on the First Epistle of John.

For example, in the first homily on 1 John, Augustine cites the text that says, “this is how we know him, if we keep his commandments” (2:3). Augustine himself narrows this reference to keeping his “commandments” specifically to the new commandment Jesus gives in the Gospel of John: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (13:34). Later, in another homily, Augustine comments on 1 John 4:7, which describes how one discerns the difference between true knowledge of God and an erroneous one: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” Augustine’s response here seems to mark a significant departure from his earlier approaches to the search for God, one which presents an argument for the “revelatory” status of love:

Much has he commended love, in that he has said, “[Love] is of God”: but he is going to say more; let us eagerly hear. At present he has said, “Love is of God; and every one that loves is born of God, and knows God. He that loves not knows not God.” Why? “For God is love.” What more could be said, brethren? If nothing were said in praise of love throughout the pages of this epistle, if nothing whatever throughout the other pages of the Scriptures, and this one only thing were all we were told by the voice of the Spirit of God, “For Love is God”; nothing more ought we to require.

Here the clear suggestion is that the value of loving one’s neighbour lies in the enactment of love itself, for love is “of God” and everyone who loves “knows” God. While this is an idea that features with similar prominence in Levinas’s work, Augustine’s reference to this particular text perhaps illuminates why love is so central to his thought. For he points out that the biblical writer has commended love so much as to claim that God is love, and when we love, we catch a glimpse of love’s eternal (or divine) essence.

As if to reinforce this idea, in one of his sermons Augustine highlights a text from Matthew 25 to address the question of how, and why, members of the body of

---

68 Ibid., VII.4.
Christ should love each other when the fulfillment of happiness is found not in the other but God. He maintains that when the text quotes Jesus as saying that when one looks after these “least of mine”, one does it “for me”, what relates us to God is the *caritas* shown to the neighbour.69 How does he make this connection? Augustine is not content to let the New Testament justify itself; he believes there is a philosophical explanation for these claims. To see how he makes this connection and justifies it philosophically, we must return briefly to Book VIII of *On the Trinity*.

According to Augustine’s retrospective note from Book XV, Book VIII proceeds in two stages, the first having the aim of demonstrating that there is no “measurable mass” in God’s being, the second offering a momentary “glimpse” of the Trinity through a consideration of the threefold structure of love.70 For our purposes, the second stage is more significant for how it builds upon a broader philosophical point to construct a theological conception of love of neighbour and the “knowledge” of God.

The second stage of Book VIII starts by stating in even stronger terms why love is fundamental in the search for God: “But it is by love that we must stand firm to this and cleave to this, in order that we may enjoy the presence of that by which we are, and in the absence of which we could not be at all.”71 According to Augustine, love not only guarantees the presence of God “by that which we are”, but also without the gift of love we would have no life at all. Because the “knowledge” of God is only acquired “indirectly” through love, Augustine’s claim recalls the biblical text that the Christian “walk[s] by faith, not by sight”; one does not as yet see God “face to face.”72 This reference raises once again the philosophical question of how one can love something that is not known. What Augustine seeks to do in this second stage is employ Christian eschatology to develop a theory of how one can love God “by faith”. According to Oliver O’Donovan, he does this by showing there is a continuity between what one can know now and what can only be known in the eternal realm.73

---


70 On the Trinity, XV.6.

71 Ibid., VIII.4.

72 On the Trinity, VIII.4.

73 The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine, 79.
As we suggested earlier, there must be some kind of “sight” now, without which there can be no claims about God. Augustine thus proceeds with the claim that the “idea of the good” is imprinted in us, which he demonstrated in the first stage of Book VIII to be implied in all natural love. However, he is careful to insist that this “idea of the good” is not a knowledge that is identical with the direct “vision” of God. At this point Augustine substitutes the “idea of the good” with “love itself”, with which we love our neighbour.\textsuperscript{74} Augustine does not, in this immediate context, justify his equation of the two, but we can infer from elsewhere that this equation is at least in part due to his reading of texts such as 1 John 4: 6-7, which we quoted earlier. The question of knowing God, as O’Donovan argues, could then be reduced to the question, “what is love?”\textsuperscript{75} Yet it is not just any love; as distinct from the other words he uses for love, such as \textit{dilectio}, \textit{amor}, and especially \textit{cupiditas}, Augustine is careful to point out that the biblical text specifies that the one who loves his or her neighbour with \textit{caritas} “sees” God in faith, since God is \textit{caritas} itself.\textsuperscript{76}

One of Augustine’s aims of Book VIII in \textit{On the Trinity} is that by interpreting biblical texts about the relation between love and God through the lens of Neo-Platonic philosophy, he can demonstrate how the \textit{summum bonum}, the Good \textit{par excellence}, is available for all human beings. That is to say, Augustine draws upon Neo-Platonic philosophy to enable theology to bring the transcendent reality of God (namely, love) to bear on the historical reality of the world (through love given to the neighbour). But how does one know that the neighbour is loved with \textit{caritas} and not some other love, such as \textit{cupiditas}? In other words, what are the outward signs that demonstrate that the neighbour is being loved with \textit{caritas}? For Augustine, another component is required. One can know that one loves with \textit{caritas} if love manifests itself in terms of righteousness or justice. That is, \textit{caritas} loves, among other things, by assigning to each person “that which is due in life and behaviour . . . [so that] likewise they themselves may live righteously and be righteous in character.”\textsuperscript{77} Love of neighbour is a central concern for Augustine when developing his thought on justice. When the ordering of love is correct—that is, when the neighbour is loved with \textit{caritas} and for

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{On the Trinity}, VIII.6.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine}, 80.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{On the Trinity}, VIII.8.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., VIII.6.
the sake of the Good—and then embodied in the active life, justice ensues, and this justice acts as a testimony to the reality of the love of God in the world.

3. **Justice as the Ordering of Love in Society**

For Augustine, justice is an expression of *caritas* insofar as it is identified as the “right relationship” or “right ordering” of love. It is the rule of life in which the various loves are in harmony with the “natural” order; or more precisely, justice involves the ordering of a human’s proper relationship of love for God, for others, and for oneself. More exactly, a human is properly related to himself and to the external world of people and objects when s/he is rightly related to God. In this sense, as O’Donovan observes, “order” is a teleological notion in Augustine. In other words, the self discovers, along with the value of a loved object, a teleological order that is implicit in it, and that in loving it the self willingly conforms to such order. As such, Augustine’s notion of justice conforms to an ontological “natural” order; justice as a value takes on meaning when it conforms to the already established order of proper relation to self, others, and God. Justice is not a goal humans posit for themselves, but its advent comes in the recognition of and obedience to the correct ordering of love that leads to happiness.

As we will now see, not only does justice produce harmony within oneself and by extension, peace with others, but like love its value lies in preparing us for the *summum bonum* or true happiness: the “possession” of God in the eternal realm, when “faith” becomes “sight”. This is because Augustine views justice as the manifestation of the sincerity of love for one’s neighbour, and as such produces righteousness in a society. We will proceed with a brief examination of two components of justice in relation to the ordering of love, beginning with the relationship to oneself, then to the relation with others. In order for these relationships to be to be considered just, Augustine argues that they each must be grounded within the larger framework of a commitment to pursue God as the *summum bonum*, the true source of happiness. As we will see below, this examination of justice culminates in an intricate description of the revelatory character of love and justice in Book XIX of *City of God*.

---

3.1 Justice as the Ordering of Love within Oneself

Augustine maintains a rather distinctive view that justice begins in the ordering of love for oneself. Although he defines justice in the *City of God* in terms that can be found in most moral discourse (“The function of justice is to assign to each his due”), Augustine quickly adds that this is only possible because there is established in human beings a certain “just order of nature.” This just order consists of the body’s subordination to the soul, the soul’s subordination to God, and thus both body and soul are subordinated to God. To love oneself therefore, is to pursue as one’s sole aim the *summum bonum*, for it is only here that one can find happiness. This pursuit also serves as the model for the proper ordering between soul and body, or between reason and the senses. Only when this order prevails in oneself can one act justly.

Moreover, self-love is required in order to truly love others. He insists that “you cannot love your ‘neighbour as yourself’ unless you try to draw him to that good which you are yourself pursuing.” Furthermore, it is from this commandment to love one’s neighbour that the duties of human society arise. That is, one must also consider what is just as it relates to those others who are made in the likeness of the Creator.

3.2 Justice as the Ordering of Love with Others

By rooting justice in the love of God and love for one’s neighbour, Augustine unites all humans into a society. In the Augustinian outlook, humans are social creatures due to their moral exigency, out of the command to love God and neighbour. Such a society formed with God as the common object of love is considered just because people rightly related to God will enjoy personal harmony and social peace. The love for one’s neighbour entails for each one the responsibility of providing the material, social, cultural and moral conditions necessary to bring the neighbour closer to their *telos*, to the fulfillment of their quest for happiness. A commitment to the common good of others flows most immediately from this.
command, which is what Augustine appears to suggest when he says, “from this precept [of brotherly love] proceed the duties of every human society.”

How does one proceed along this path of social justice? Perhaps not surprisingly, Augustine begins with the interior: “the first thing to aim at is, that we should be benevolent, cherishing no malice nor evil design against another.” Yet justice, which he argues in *City of God* Book XIX, is the manifestation of the correct ordering of love, does not simply remain as an attitude within the one who loves. It is grounded in the social order of external, material goods. One might be tempted to think, for example, that doing physical harm to another person is an injustice, whereas the failure to extend a helping hand is merely a “failure to love” to which one may or may not have been obligated. Augustine, however, unites these two acts and regards them as both failures in justice and failures in love: “a man may sin against another in two ways, either by injuring [the other] or by not helping him when it is [within one’s] power.” Indeed, the refusal to love the neighbour in the latter way is called “criminal” by Augustine; he adds it is as if (echoing Matthew 25) the transgression against the neighbour is a transgression against God himself. Love for neighbour is the indispensable basis for social justice.

For this claim regarding justice, as Mary T. Clark observes, Augustine aligns himself not with the “idealism” of his philosophical contemporaries (who assert that justice can be achieved without love for another), nor upon the institution of justice through violence as employed by the Roman Empire, but upon the Pauline doctrine of love as a social duty. Writing to the Romans (13:8-10), St. Paul clearly describes the path to justice, which is also the way to personal and social order, and thus peace:

Owe no man anything except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the Law. . . . If there be any other commandment it is summed up in this saying – “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Love does no evil to a neighbour. Love is therefore the fulfillment of the Law.

---

86 *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, I.49.
88 *City of God*, XIX.23. In this passage Augustine argues that justice is found where the ordering of love is correct, that is, where God is loved and the neighbour is loved on account of God. He adds that when this ordering of love is incorrect or absent, justice “does not exist”.
90 Ibid., I.73.
91 “Augustine on Justice”, 93.
It could be argued that Augustine’s close identification of love with social justice begins to make the distinction less clear. Is he in fact confusing love with justice? Clark observes that the self’s recognition of the needs of the neighbour, which is one of the “fruits” of love, enables the self to truly recognise what is really due this neighbour.92 Only thus can our nature, which seeks after its own fulfillment, be corrected. Love is not justice but, following St. Paul, is rather the fulfillment of justice.

Based upon the above analysis, one could argue that Augustine sketches a unique relation between love and justice in that justice “obliges” in charity. In his conception, love is a free act, but this does not mean that it is untouched by obligation. We see this in late works such as the *Enchiridion*, where he argues that just as an act of justice, such as almsgiving, is meaningless without love (in reference to 1 Corinthians 13:3a) so too is love lacking in complete expression without obedience to the duties required by every society.93 In the *City of God*, Augustine insists that the heavenly city is not marked by a community whose love is restricted to a “personal” or “private” realm, but rather “rejoices” in participating in the common good that is “shared by all.”94 Love is a command, and as such it carries with it obligations towards those whom we love. Conversely, by firmly grounding justice upon love for one’s neighbour, Augustine reminds the reader that all the commandments of God concerning justice require of us that which is most our own: our love.95 It is for this reason that love is the “fulfillment” of justice.

Augustine’s claim that love and justice can be seen in his admonition that those who desire to belong to the City of God are to “pursue after charity, and by thinking holy thoughts about it bring forth the fruits of justice.”96 Here, as he does elsewhere, Augustine argues for a conception of love and justice whereby they are smoothly juxtaposed in relation to one another. The advent of true justice in a society testifies to the correct ordering of love in that society, and only thus can it testify to the “presence” of the love of God in that society. It is in this sense that Augustine claims in one of his sermons that when love is in the world, expressed in acts of righteousness

---

92 “Augustine on Justice”, 93.
93 *Enchiridion of Faith, Hope and Love*, 316:72, 76.
94 *City of God*, XV.3.
95 “Augustine on Justice”, 94.
or justice, God is made “present”. Moreover, because God is “present” in love and that love is ordered correctly in a society (which for him forms the core of his thought on justice), we can see that in the enactment of love and justice, one participates in fellowship with God. That is, through this enactment one can have indirect “knowledge” of God in the immutable values of love and justice, and hence an indirect “knowledge” of God as the guarantor of these values, or the source from which they derive.

The perennial power and resonance of Augustine’s account of the interrelation of love and justice is especially helpful insofar as the search for God is framed in terms of the prioritisation of love (or desire) prior to cognitive apprehension. As Edmund Hill observes, Augustine says in effect that “one can have direct knowledge . . . of certain values [of which love and justice are primary], and hence an indirect knowledge of God as the guarantor of these values, or the source from which they derive.” He adds that these values lead to indirect “knowledge” of God through faith, insofar as God is love, that God is just, and not that love is God or justice is God. For Augustine, the knowledge of these values provides sufficient indirect “knowledge” of God to provide a meaning for the word “God”, and so for him to make affirmations (in faith) about God. Yet crucially, such “knowledge” for Augustine is not gained cognitively but rather, through love, which Hill suggests is itself a kind of knowing. Or as John Caputo suggests, religious truth for Augustine “belongs to a different order”, an order which finds its expression in the Confessions as facere veritatem, the “making” of or “doing” the truth. One enters into relation with God by loving, by doing justice.

---

97 Sermon 378.
98 Edmund Hill and John E. Rotelle, “Introductory Essay to Book VIII in Augustine, On the Trinity”, 239. Hill and Rotelle are referring to Book VIII, chapter 3, where Augustine identifies God with the “truth” and the “good”, of which love and justice are the two primary expressions of both truth and the good.
99 Hill and Rotelle, “Introductory Essay to Book VIII in Augustine, On the Trinity”, 239. Hill is referring to Book VIII, chapter 3, where Augustine identifies God with the “truth” and the “good”, of which love and justice are the two primary expressions of both truth and the good.
100 Ibid., 239.
101 Ibid., 239. See also e.g., Augustine, On the Trinity, from The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, translated by Edmund Hill and John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), VIII.12. In this passage Augustine writes, “But he sees his brother with human sight, with which God cannot be seen. But if he loved with spiritual love him whom he sees with human sight, he would see God, who is love itself, with the inner sight by which He can be seen.” Hill suggests that one of the implications of this exhortation is that loving is a kind of knowing.
However, as we will now see, Augustine’s account gives rise to specific epistemological and ethical difficulties, which can be shown to trace back to a reliance (to a certain extent) upon a Neo-Platonic mode of metaphysics. That is to say, as Hill suggests above, the answer to the question of “what” one loves when one loves God depends on a conception of love and justice as independently existing entities in which humans participate. In this sense, there is a question as to whether love and justice can be said to be truly “revelatory”: God is “beyond” comprehension, yet Augustine affirms that the one who loves “knows” God. In a Neo-Platonic framework, however, one can only have indirect knowledge of God through love and justice, insofar as they find their source in God. If love and justice provide a kind of reciprocal “link” between, on the one hand, the metaphysical movement of the outpouring of two primary aspects of God’s “essence” in the world for humans to encounter, and the ethical or religious movement of reflective return to the God through contemplation of love and justice, on the other—it could be argued that they provide a “bridge” to God—a kind of general revelation—rather than making God “present”.

Moreover, we will see that the Neo-Platonic framework carries significant, if unintended, epistemological and ethical difficulties for Augustine that are difficult to overcome. For example, the identification of love with desire presents a certain epistemological incongruity with regard to how one can gain “knowledge” of God, who is love, through love understood as desire. With regard to ethics, some Augustinian scholars—both critics and those broadly in sympathy with his work—will argue that the eudaemonist framework has difficulty avoiding the subordination of the neighbour to the pursuit of the *summum bonum*, which ultimately raises significant questions about the precise relation between love and justice as well as the specific role of love of neighbour as the primary locus for the encounter with God. Addressing these specific difficulties will serve to set up our engagement with Levinas’s work.

4. **Reconciling Augustine’s Eudaemonism with Christian Theology**

Prominent Augustinian scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Karl Holl maintain that it is possible that these difficulties arising from Augustine’s attempt to reconcile Neo-Platonic metaphysics (and an eudaemonist ethic) with Christian theology are simply irreconcilable. They both argue, for different reasons, that the weaknesses or inconsistencies in Augustine’s account can be traced back specifically to his commitment to a Neo-Platonic framework. Or more exactly both call into question the
revelatory “status” of love, but for different reasons: one is epistemological, and one is ethical. As we will see, for Arendt, despite Augustine’s claim that love has the power to “make God present”, the equation of love with the “knowledge” of God encounters serious difficulty because love is identified with desire. For Holl, the revelatory character of love is called into question because Augustine’s conception ultimately privileges self-love over that of the love of neighbour, thus instrumentalising the neighbour in the self’s pursuit of the *summum bonum*. Let us now examine these two critiques in more detail.

4.1 Hannah Arendt: The Incongruity of Desire and the Knowledge of God

According to Arendt, Augustine’s association of love with desire means that humans took their bearings for their conduct in the present world from what she calls an “anticipated future.”\(^{104}\) That is, humanity’s mode of living in the present is the hope and anticipation of the possession of the *summum bonum* in the eternal realm, an anticipation which can be expressed through love. She adds that with this anticipated future as the *telos* of all human desire, Augustine can objectively establish the order and extent of desire to be “bestowed on the things of this world”, including the neighbour.\(^{105}\) However, according to Arendt, since all desire not only aims at something but refers back to the self who seeks happiness, the anticipated attainment of the *summum bonum*, which lies in an anticipated future, invalidates all “present standards and motivations for love and desire”, including the love of neighbour.\(^{106}\) In other words, the possibility of the love of neighbour as a locus for the revelatory encounter is bypassed. Therefore, she concludes that love, understood as a kind of desire, is inadequate not only in terms of its power to make God “present” but also for positing any relation between the love of neighbour and justice. Let us explain this further.

As we have seen, if for Augustine the future anticipation of the *summum bonum* is the true aim of desire, the world never exists for its own sake. That is, one’s proper attitude to the world is not “enjoyment” (*frui*) but “use” (*uti*). As Arendt observes, such a view evokes the notion that humans use the world “freely and with the same

---

\(^{104}\) *Love and Saint Augustine*, 45.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 45.

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 45.
independence” from it that characterises “the master in his use of means and tools.”

The relevance of means and tools is thus determined by the ultimate purpose of the user. In the same way, she argues, the world is of secondary and derivative significance whose relative importance is reduced to means towards a definite (and transmundane) end. The consequence is, of course, that one is no longer primarily concerned with the present reality of human life: either life in the world or, more specifically, the relation to the neighbour. It is through the lens of the anticipated future that one determines what ought to be loved and to what extent, and thus the irony is (as Arendt also observes) that love itself becomes a consequence of this determination. Arendt concludes that it is not love either by itself (nor in relation to justice, for that matter) that leads to any “knowledge” of God, but rather hope—a hope for a future that has been decided beforehand according to order which love follows in desire but has not established.

Moreover, according to Arendt, Augustine’s correlation of love and the Neo-Platonic emphasis upon happiness is a “far cry” from Pauline Christianity. For St. Paul, at least in the context of 1 Corinthians 13, what stands in need of consummation is not love but belief; and the end of belief (not of love) is vision. She adds that in the Pauline account, love is the “bond of perfection” even in this world. As such, as Arendt suggests, perhaps Augustine’s account would be more consistent if he defined love not as a “kind of craving” but as the manifest expression or enactment of the self’s “attachment to God.” Most significantly, as Arendt rightly observes, according to St. Paul the very nature of caritas is that it will never cease, calling into question Augustine’s notion of love as a desire which will find fulfillment:

The reason that caritas contains its own reward and will remain what it is in this life and the next. That is the meaning of the famous verses on Paul’s first epistle

---

107 Ibid., 37.
108 Love and Saint Augustine, 37.
109 Ibid., 42.
110 Ibid., 31.
111 Ibid., 31.
112 Ibid., 31, 45. “The commandment ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ disclosed itself as meaningless if love is defined as desire, as an emotion whose object by definition lies in the future. From this we may conclude that the definition ‘love is a kind of craving’ is inadequate. . . . Love is not the manifestation of craving, but the manifest expression of man’s attachment to God.”
to the Corinthians. Prophecies fail, tongues shall cease, and knowledge, such as men possess it in this life, shall vanish. Only “love never fails.”

In St. Paul’s understanding, love does not realise its fulfillment when one sees God face-to-face, nor will it cease when the self has attained “happiness”, that is, when one finally “possesses” and enjoys the *sumnum bonum* in the eternal realm.

### 4.2 Karl Holl: The Privileging of Self-Love and Instrumentalisation of the Neighbour

Karl Holl, on the other hand, argues that Augustine’s incorporation of eudaemonism means that his theology cannot escape the ethical objection that all moral action is reduced to an instrumental function within the call to self-fulfilment. He argues that Augustine’s conversion represents nothing more than a change of taste. The fancy for earthly good is replaced by the sweeter fancy for heavenly good. Enjoyment reaches its peak in self-forgetfulness, and yet it is clear that the self-forgetful man (as he appears) is really busy thinking of himself all the time.

Holl suggests that Augustine is not adverse to the claim that in the love of God, “self-love at its highest is provided for at the same time.” Even when it comes to love of neighbour, “he constantly intrudes self-love between love of God and love of neighbour. It is this point of reference from which the other two articles gain their inner relationship and proportion.” Therefore, the essence of love for one’s neighbour as the “will for self-denying community” remains an alien concept for Augustine. Perhaps the most forceful aspect of Holl’s critique is his argument that the primacy of self-love has significant negative implications for Augustine’s understanding of love in general:

Under the category of grace he has never been able to comprehend more than that sudden discovery of a taste for the spiritual and eternal which eradicates man’s craving for things of the senses. . . . Augustine now designates this more exalted longing, consistently with the biblical vocabulary, preferably as *caritas*.

---

113 Ibid., 31.
115 Holl, “Augustine’s Innere Entwicklung”, 85.
116 Ibid., 87.
117 Ibid., 87.
Plato’s conception of *eros* is a desire for wholeness or completeness, and the desire is only fulfilled in the possession of the beauty or goodness of the beloved. In this conception, the desire for beauty can never be satisfied in the material world.

There are, of course, other interpretations of the role of self-love in Augustine’s thought. However, there is at least one significant problem that has been identified here, for even Oliver O’Donovan, who is otherwise more sympathetic towards Augustine’s theology than Holl, agrees in principle with Holl’s critique on two levels: first, he argues that Augustine’s use of the eudaemonist structure is incompatible with Christian ethical thought. He suggests that because Augustine’s conceives love in a way which more closely resembles Plato’s *eros* than the biblical understanding of *caritas*, Augustine’s eudaemonist structure is not appropriate for Christian ethics: “Augustine should not have taken the quest for happiness as the model for Christian ethical thought . . . Christian ethics requires a different model, a different form, to do it justice.”

Second, O’Donovan argues that the “intrusion” of self-love alongside the two loves commanded in Christ’s summary of the law indicates that both loves are conceived eudaemonistically. He points out that both love of God and love of neighbour are measured and controlled by self-love because the latter is understood by Augustine strictly as the quest for happiness, without which neither of the other two loves can be conceived.

O’Donovan concludes that Augustine’s employment of a eudaemonist framework results inevitably in the subordination and instrumentalisation of the relation with the neighbour out of the quest to fulfil one’s desire for the *summum bonum*. This is a problem that Augustine ultimately does not or cannot address, which O’Donovan acutely discerns:

> But [love] so controlled by considerations of the subject’s own welfare is not at all what is meant when *agape* is said either to consist in or to involve self-sacrifice in the neighbour’s interest. What is required is subordination in principle

---

118 Ibid., 94f.
119 *The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine*, 141.
120 Ibid., 141.
121 Ibid., 141.
of self to other; and that, according to apologist and critic alike, is what Augustine cannot concede.  

Although O’Donovan claims that for Augustine, the equation of self-love and the love of God is a “datum of revelation”, we have seen that even when he does commend the love of God and neighbour he cannot break free of the “self-referential framework.”

Everything is justified by its place in what O’Donovan calls the “acquisitive” pursuit of beatitude. As such, as we have also seen in Arendt’s critique, the possibility of the love of neighbour as a locus for the revelatory encounter is bypassed. In order to move forward constructively, and to recover a way by which the interrelation of love and justice can be a locus for revelation, there must be different conception of the status of the neighbour. Rather than view the neighbour in terms of equality, as the eudaemonist concept demands, we will see in our examination of Levinas’s work that in order for love and justice to be truly “revelatory”, it is necessary to begin with the status of the other as “higher” than me, as one who calls into question my own course of being.

5. Conclusion

Augustine’s account of the encounter with divine presence through the interrelation of love and justice provides a powerful and resonant way of thinking about divine revelation which emphasises the role of desire over cognitive knowledge as the “locus” in which such an “encounter” can take place. Or said differently, such an account promises a way of understanding divine revelation that frames the question in terms of love rather than cognitive knowledge. However, we have seen that this account depends upon a Neo-Platonist mode of metaphysics that leads to specific epistemological and ethical problems which cannot be easily resolved within this particular framework.

Augustine asks a compelling and provocative question when he asks, “what do I love when I love my God?” To frame the question in this way lends support to the biblical claim that “love” and “God” go together: The New Testament tells us that love is from God, and that everyone who loves “knows” God; moreover, we read that God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God and God in them (1 John 4:7-8, 16).

---

122 Ibid., 144. Original emphasis.
123 Ibid., 142.
124 The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine, 142.
Additionally, as we have seen, Augustine helpfully forges a positive link between love and justice, which he establishes by emphasising the obligatory aspect of love. This aspect creates the possibility of extending love beyond the private, subjective sphere and even beyond a relationship between two friends or lovers; it allows love to be expressed concretely in society through justice. Augustine’s conception of social justice runs contrary to the argument that the increase of justice means the gradual reduction or limitation of love. For Augustine, love must express itself in the concern for “what is due” to another person. Here Augustine rejoins St. Paul by affirming that love is the fulfillment of the Law. Justice is impossible without love, and love is the “fulfillment” of justice.

What is perhaps missing from Augustine’s account, owing to his reliance upon the Platonic framework, is a fully developed conception of self-transcendent nature of love. That is to say, love (and its expression in justice) does more than just provide an intermediary between the human and God; it introduces a kind of radical turning away from one’s own interest towards the concern for another person. As John Caputo observes, one of the ideas behind “love” is that it represents “a giving without holding back” or an unconditional commitment which marks love with a certain “excess”.125 Love thus brings the human into the sphere of what Jacques Derrida calls “the impossible”, meaning something whose possibility one did not and could not foresee, something that has never entered into the human mind. According to Caputo, the sphere of the impossible is not only what makes experience to be experience, an occasion in which something truly “happens”; it is also what gives experience a religious character.126 That is to say, love introduces an exposure to something that one could not manage or foresee, and in this sense one experiences the limits or “impossibility” of one’s own possibilities. This, as we will see, brings us closer to the role that love plays for Levinas in his description of the “breach” that leads to God. Love opens onto what Levinas calls the “dimension of the divine”, a dimension which brings the human being out of its element and into something which transcends knowledge, something that exceeds its grasp; in short, love introduces a “breach” of or within immanent reality. Such a conception of love is not grounded in the independent “existence” of love in which the human participates; rather, it is grounded in the self’s

125 Caputo, On Religion, 3.
126 Ibid., 9.
relation with another person, or what Levinas calls the “responsibility” for another person.

Thus, we will now turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose own conception of love and justice begins with an asymmetrical relation between the self and the human other. As we will see, Levinas’s thought can be constructively utilised to correct, modernise and deepen Augustine’s account of love, justice and revelation, and more broadly, provides a constructively ampliative way for theological discourse about revelation in the contemporary horizon of thought.
Chapter 3 – Levinas’s Ethics of Responsibility: The Asymmetry and Diachrony of the Intersubjective Relation and the Opening onto the Dimension of the Divine

In the previous chapter we briefly explored Augustine’s account of love and justice, an account which provides a provisional but nonetheless important structure for the encounter with a transcendent God within immanent reality. We suggested that Augustine’s insistence upon the primacy of love over cognitive knowledge in terms of understanding the relation between humans and God, or more specifically, for the way in which love accounts for the “presence” of God in relation to the world, along with the positive link Augustine makes between love and justice (by grounding justice upon the love of neighbour and by emphasising the “obligatory” aspect of love) provides a powerful and resonant way of thinking about a “locus” in which such an encounter with God can take place.

However, we also suggested that his account relies upon a Neo-Platonic metaphysical framework which no longer holds significant influence in contemporary epistemology. Moreover, the eudaemonist approach to ethics can be seen to have difficulty avoiding the subordination of the relation with the neighbour to the solitary pursuit of the summun bonum. To correct these problems, the relation with the neighbour must be viewed in a fundamentally different way. That is, it is necessary to proceed with a different status of the neighbour.

Nevertheless, it is certain that in these discussions Augustine has identified a framework of great importance and continuing resonance for understanding the nature of the divine-human relation—not least in the primacy it accords to the faculty of desire over that of cognition. And so it is against this backdrop that we now turn to Levinas, for whom the interrelation of love and justice is likewise “revelatory”, and, as we hope to show, is able to account for this in a way that does not appeal to a dogmatist metaphysics, nor does it risk the instrumentalisation of the neighbour as Augustine’s account can seem to do.
But before we look more specifically at how Levinas conceives the relation of love and justice in Chapters Four, Five and Six, our current task will be to examine how Levinas describes the relation with the neighbour. Or more exactly, we wish to examine, in certain focused ways, how he conceives the structure of the intersubjective or “I-Other” relation. We recall from Chapter One that Levinas claims his phenomenological analysis of the human subject not only exposes the self as fundamentally ethical, but also uncovers a “religious” dimension of human existence. As we will see, two of the primary ways in which Levinas describes these two aspects of human existence, respectively, are through his analysis of the asymmetrical relation with the other person and his analysis of time. Throughout his work, Levinas insists that the relation with the other person is not initially established in terms of equality or reciprocity but asymmetry. According to Levinas, the asymmetrical structure of the “I-Other” relation is so indispensable to his philosophy that without it, “no line of what I have written can hold”.1 This structure serves as the basis not only for his conception of love and justice as the fundamental modes of expression in the ethical relation, but also for his claim that the only route for one to gain “knowledge” of God is through the relation with another human being.2

Additionally, Levinas claims that the intersubjective relation has its ground or origin in what he calls an “immemorial time”, a past which cannot be re-presented in any representational memory as a past that was once present, and yet originates in a “past” nonetheless.3 This immemorial time is given the term “diachrony.” As we will see, diachronic time is, for Levinas, the very opening to transcendence, or what he calls the “dimension of the divine.”4 Or more exactly, diachrony constitutes a “rupture” or “breach” of the immanent order in which the subject’s ordering to responsibility for the other person constitutes the “hearing” of an order which is also the very coming of “God to mind”, and is thus the opening by which God can be “recognised” and named—in short, the opening to revelation.5

---

4 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 78.
In contrast to Augustine’s work, one could argue that while Levinas’s philosophy also seeks to describe an “immanent transcendence”—a way of establishing a relation in the world with what is “beyond” or “separate” from the world—love and justice do not function as a kind of mediatory between immanence and transcendence, but rather open a “breach” of (or within) immanent reality itself, and in this sense a specific relation between love and justice is the way in which the relation with God is “produced”. That is, openness to God depends on a breach, an absolute separation of God from the world, and this openness is “produced” in the relation with the other person. This principal claim of Levinas will be explained in greater detail over the next four chapters. The task of the present chapter, however, is to examine what Levinas claims to be foundational to all of this, namely, that the structure of the relation with another person is asymmetrical, where the other appears from a moral or ethical dimension of “height”. That is to say, in a properly ethical orientation to the relation, the other person appears to me primordially as one to whom I owe something, to whom I have a responsibility.

The chapter proceeds by examining the key features of Levinas’s phenomenological reduction that reveal both the asymmetrical structure of the relation with the other person as well as the discovery of the diachronic time which opens onto the “dimension” of the divine. As we will see, the asymmetrical relation with another person rests upon Levinas’s conception of the self in *Totality and Infinity*, a self whose uniqueness or separateness is encountered initially through the passivity of sensibility. Although the notion of sensibility will take on added dimensions in *Otherwise than Being*, here Levinas argues that through sensibility, the self is “indebted” to the exterior world in a way for which the cognitive self cannot account. The self’s attempt to persevere in its own being is called into question, or called to respond to and for another person prior to the symmetry of all reciprocal awareness and communication.

We will then turn to an analysis of how Levinas’s phenomenological reduction shows that the summons to responsibility has its priority or origin in an immemorial or

---


7 *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

8 Ibid., 75.

diachronic time. We will consider the specific ways in which Levinas’s conception of time opens onto transcendence or the “dimension of the divine”. For Levinas, the relation with God is initially accomplished as an ethical behaviour—in responsibility—and not in cognitive apprehension or comprehension of God. We will see that for Levinas, although the asymmetrical relation provides the structure by which one gains “access” to God—ethics is an “optics”—God remains unknowable and unthematisable. God is often described in Levinas’s writings as “absent”, save for the “trace” of having already passed in a diachronic time. We will conclude with a consideration of whether, and how, one becomes conscious of this “trace” of God in the responsibility for the human other.

1. The Advent of the I-Other Relation as an Ethical Relation

As we saw in Chapter One, when Levinas makes the claim that ethics is not a “branch of philosophy” but “first philosophy”, he is not arguing for the primacy of ethics as it is normally understood as a philosophical discipline, nor is he arguing for a particular way of addressing moral questions. Instead, he wishes to challenge what he sees as Western philosophy’s quest for total knowledge, a quest that leaves nothing out. In particular, Levinas argues that “ontology” epitomises this quest for a totalising knowledge in its attempt to grasp being qua being, or being in its totality. As Simon Critchley observes, Levinas uses “ontology” throughout his work as a general term for any relation to otherness or alterity that is reducible to comprehension or understanding. According to Levinas, this can only be pursued by knowing the “other” through concepts in their “generality”. As Levinas writes in Totality and Infinity,

As far as the things are concerned, a surrender is carried out in their conceptualisation. As for man, it can be obtained by the terror that brings a free man under the domination of another. For the things the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual (which alone exists) not in its individuality but in its generality (of which alone there is science). The relation with the other is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself.

10 Levinas, “Notes on Meaning”, 165-166.
11 Totality and Infinity, 78. Levinas uses the word “accessible” in the context of arguing that an invisible God is not just a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice.
12 Ibid., 304.
14 Totality and Infinity, 44.
Thus, for Levinas, ontology does not grasp the other person as an individual; it apprehends the person through the generality of a concept. In doing so, it subordinates the relation with another person to a relation with the “being of existents”, which as an “impersonal” concept permits the apprehension of the other person and hence is not actually a relation with the other person but rather a reduction of that other person to what he calls “the same”. In other words, the subject attempts to thematise or conceptualise the other person in “the same” terms as those of the “generality” that the “I” finds in itself.

As we will see, terms often associated with ethics, such as “freedom” and “commitment”, do not apply to his account of the ethical relation, at least not fundamentally, since the subject is summoned to responsibility for the other person prior to any exercise of will. For Levinas, the ethical relation has its “origin” in what he calls the “hither side” of freedom, prior to or beyond being. Responsibility is a “going outside oneself” that is addressed to the other person. Hence his claim that to address someone, to be responsible, is not a freely chosen act. Instead, it expresses an already asymmetrical relational structure: an ethical “disturbance” produced in the subject prior to any choice or commitment which “obliges” the subject to responsibility for the other person. This is why Levinas says that before it is a “celebration of being”, responsibility presupposes a relation with the one to whom expression “expresses” (or for whom “celebration celebrates”), whose presence is already required so that the gesture of such an expression can be produced.

Thus, as Jeffery Kosky observes, to claim that ethics is first philosophy not only means that ethics is a very important or even most important concern for philosophy; it is a claim about the proper orientation of philosophy itself. That is, the ethical relation is to be the basis for all subsequent thought. To understand Levinas’s radical claim about the ethical relation, we must look more closely at how his

15 *Totality and Infinity*, 44, 46.
16 Ibid., 44.
18 Levinas, “The Proximity of the Other”, in *Alterity and Transcendence*, 97. “To address someone expresses the ethical disturbance produced in me, in the tranquility of the perseverance of my being . . . [a] going outside oneself that is addressed to the other, the stranger.”
phenomenological reduction uncovers the human subject as ethical. To this end, we begin with his notion of the separable self.

1.1 The “I” of Subjectivity: Levinas and his Interlocutors

As we indicated in Chapter One, Levinas’s philosophical project is broadly phenomenological in its orientation, insofar as phenomenology is understood in terms of intentional analysis. Moreover, Levinas claims that his work is faithful to the “spirit” of Husserlian philosophy to the extent that, for the latter, intentionality signifies the locating of notions in the “horizon” of their appearing, horizons which, as we will see, have been either dissimulated or forgotten in the intending of an object.21 However, although he acknowledges his indebtedness to the work of both Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas is quick to also point out that he does not employ phenomenology in a way that closely resembles either thinker, even if he retains allegiance to certain aspects of their thought.

For example, Levinas affirms a definition of phenomenology in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* consistent with the Husserlian teaching, even if he will eventually argue that intentionality is not limited to consciousness as representation.22 Husserl argues that intentional analysis begins from the unreflective “ naïveté” of what he calls the “natural attitude”, that is, our normal orientation towards the world of objects.23 Intentionality means that all thought is directed towards its various objects, and Husserl’s phenomenological reduction seeks to describe what he calls the “concrete”: not the empirical givens of sense data, but the deep structures of intentional life, uncovering structures that have been “forgotten” in (or are hidden to) the natural attitude but nevertheless provide meaning to those sense “givens”.24 So when one experiences an object or entity in the natural attitude, the “frame” or the “horizon”—the “world”, for example—in which the object appears is something that is precisely

21 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 183. Levinas notes that the “letter” of Husserlian phenomenology consists of the attempt to establish phenomenology as a “method for all philosophy.”

22 *Totality and Infinity*, 28.


not experienced. Or again, one does not perceive space and time, causality, or actuality; one merely perceives spatial or temporal entities, caused entities, actual entities, and so on. Nevertheless, one does experience these characteristics or “categories” as basic features of the world. For Husserl, the structures of spatiality, temporality, causality, and actuality are constitutive of natural experience without themselves being objects of experience in the natural attitude. For Levinas, Husserl’s search for the “concrete” is what is most important for his purposes. As he writes in *Totality and Infinity*, the “essential teaching” of Husserl is “the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives.”

However, we have indicated that Levinas uses Husserlian phenomenology in order to go beyond that phenomenology. As we will see, what Levinas calls the “face” of the human other—the way in which the other “presents himself”—is not a phenomenon but an “enigma”, something which ultimately disrupts and overflows intentionality. Indeed, for Levinas the ethical relation expresses the movement beyond the visible, a movement which he calls “metaphysical desire”. Even though this desire is a desire for what is “beyond” the visible, it can only happen from within the realm of the visible. Hence, his account of metaphysical desire requires an account of what Husserl calls the “factual” and moral depths from which signs and their significations arise. But prior to revealing the ethical self, we find that his phenomenological analysis proceeds in Section II of *Totality and Infinity* with an account of the separated or unique self in terms of sensibility, where his ultimate aim is to articulate how alterity is possible only starting from a separated “I”. That is, the “I” *qua* “I” is a separated “I”. In many ways, Levinas’s arguments about the asymmetrical relation depend on how successfully he can describe the separated or unique self.

Heidegger, on the other hand, seeks to critique the dichotomy between subject and object, and he does so by challenging the Cartesian and Husserlian notion of the ego. He maintains that the self only acquires its identity through its being in the

---


27 *Totality and Infinity*, 33-34.

28 Ibid., 40.
As he writes in *Being and Time*: “Because *Dasein* has *in each case mineness* [Jemeinigkeit], one must always use a *personal* pronoun when one addresses it: ‘I am,’ ‘you are.’” Leora Batnitzky observes that the effect of Heidegger’s returning the personal pronoun to the ego is to show that it is impossible to describe the ego without reference to its historical relations. The ego, she claims, is for Heidegger “fundamentally relational”; that is, the ego can be called “I” only because I exist in a network of relations. Outside of these relations, there can be no subject.

One might think, based on his claim of the primacy of human relations, that Levinas’s notion of the self would be closer to Heidegger’s than Husserl’s. Yet, according to Batnitzky, Levinas argues against Heidegger by maintaining that identity is not fluid but rather concrete, in the phenomenological sense described above. In this, she argues, he returns to Husserl’s conception of the separated self, although for Levinas the ego is not to be construed merely in terms of cognitive function. Rather, as we will see, he argues that the separated self can only be encountered phenomenologically by way of an appreciation of sensibility. Unlike Husserl’s transcendental ego, Levinas’s self is primordially not a thinking self, but a self that senses itself as a separated being in the world. This is perhaps one of the central philosophical arguments of Part II of *Totality and Infinity*. Thus, as Batnitzky observes, *contra* Husserl, Levinas will argue the self is not a “cognitive matter” and *contra* Heidegger, he will claim the self cannot be reduced to social and historical relations. In the effort to develop such a notion of the self, Levinas turns to Descartes who, as Levinas argues, describes a self whose uniqueness lies not in its ability to think but rather in its sentient existence. Let us explain this further.

### 1.2 Levinas and Descartes: The Sensible Self and its Movement Towards Ethics in *Totality and Infinity*

---


30 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68. Original emphasis.


32 Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 34.

33 Ibid., 34.

34 Ibid., 34-35.

35 Ibid., 34-35.

36 Ibid., 35.
Although it is often argued that the primary Cartesian influence upon Levinas’s thought is the idea of infinity (which will be examined in more detail below), there is another important aspect of Descartes’ influence with regard to what one might call—in the language of Totality and Infinity—the “pre-ethical” separated self. That is to say, Levinas’s notion of the separated self unfolds in a certain progression, beginning with the pre-rational consciousness of primarily sensible life before it arrives at its notion of ethical separation. Moreover, without providing an extensive reading of Descartes or even of the cogito, the notion of receptivity is nevertheless paramount for Levinas’s construction of the self. Although the notion of the self as one who represents itself to itself through thought is often attributed to Descartes, Levinas contends in Totality and Infinity that Descartes also provides a framework for a separated self through sensible experience. Mid-way through Section II of the work, Levinas writes that his philosophy retains “the profound insight Descartes had when he refused to sense data the status of clear and distinct ideas, ascribed them to the body, and relegated them to the useful.”37 A few pages later, he adds that one of the constructive ideas in Cartesian philosophy is the way in which sensibility is separated from understanding:

The profundity of the Cartesian philosophy of the sensible consists, we have said, in affirming the irrational character of sensation, an idea forever without clarity or distinctness, belonging to the order of the useful and not the true.38

As Levinas says earlier, one does not “know” sensible qualities; one lives them.39 Like Kant, who also separates sensibility from understanding, Levinas claims that Descartes also affirms that sensibility is not situated “on the plane of representation.”40 Levinas states that sensibility “is of the order of enjoyment and not the order of experience.”41

According to Levinas, sensibility does not constitute the world, but rather “constitutes the very contentment of existence”, which is the unreflective sense of the self.42 As Batnitzky observes, the pre-ethical self does not possess sensibility, but is rather constituted by it.43 Before the pre-ethical self makes objects of the world,

---

37 Totality and Infinity, 130.
38 Ibid., 135.
39 Ibid., 135.
40 Ibid., 136.
41 Ibid., 137.
42 Ibid., 135.
43 Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, 37.
sensibility is for Levinas the affectivity “wherein the egoism of the I pulsates”, wherein the self undergoes and is shaped by the world in which it stands [me tiens]:

The bit of earth that supports me is not only my object; it supports my experience of objects. Well-trampled places do not resist me but support me. The relation with my site in this ‘stance’ [tenue] precedes thought and labour. . . . I am myself, I am here, at home with myself, inhabitation, immanence in the world. My sensibility is here. In my position there is not the sentiment of localisation, but the localisation of my sensibility.44

Levinas calls this sense of self a “non-quantitative surplus”, for it cannot be captured by any conscious representation. To illustrate this further, he uses the example of eating:

Eating, for example, is to be sure not reducible to the chemistry of alimentation. But eating also does not reduce itself to the set of gustative, olfactory, kinaesthetic, and other sensations that would constitute the consciousness of eating. This sinking one’s teeth into the things which the act of eating involves above all measure the surplus of the reality of the aliment over every represented reality, a surplus that is not quantitative, but is the way the I, the absolute commencement, is suspended on the non-I.45

The example of eating, as Batnitzky observes, serves to support Levinas’s broader claim that Husserl’s notion of intentionality must be expanded to describe a self that cannot be reduced to either its “thought about itself” or to the “relations that constitute it.”46 He provides a detailed analysis throughout Part II of Totality and Infinity of the ways in which the self is separated from the world in the “surplus” produced by sensibility. In doing so, Levinas seeks to critique Husserl’s reading of Descartes, insofar as Husserl contends that Descartes’s notion of the self carries with it too much of a relation with the world. Levinas argues that Descartes was correct to emphasise that the self qua self is constituted by the world prior to its ability to constitute the world.47 That is to say, for Levinas, Husserl’s aim for what Batnitzky calls “transcendental purity” must be corrected by a recovery of the Cartesian notion of sensibility.48

1.3 The Totalizing Self, The Idea of Infinity and the Advent of the Ethical Relation

44 Totality and Infinity, 135, 138.
46 Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, 38.
47 Ibid., 38.
48 Ibid., 38.
In his essay “The Trace of the Other” (1963), Levinas argues that the “I” is the “origin of the phenomenon of identity.”\textsuperscript{49} In other words, the self recognises its own identity not because of some character trait of which s/he is aware, but because the self is “from the first ‘the same’—me ipse—an ipseity.”\textsuperscript{50} It is from its position as “the same” that the “I” can then “identify every object, every character trait, and every being.”\textsuperscript{51} Alterity, to be other, requires a relation with a term whose essence is to remain “at the point of departure”, or whose essence is to be the “same” despite all that happens to it.\textsuperscript{52}

However, Levinas also refers to “the same” in another, more negative sense: it is the possibility of possessing or suspending the alterity of what is other, which he calls “the way of the same.”\textsuperscript{53} The “way” of the same is the process of representation whereby the “I” loses its “opposition to its object”; to be the same “is to represent to oneself.”\textsuperscript{54} As is well known, he utilises other terms to describe this process of representing to oneself, such as thematisation, totalisation, and synchronisation. These are terms which describe the referential act of knowing, where the object ceases to be strictly “other” and is identified according to a meaning in consciousness.\textsuperscript{55} This process of representation, of an object taking on meaning in consciousness, is another way of describing cognitive intentionality.\textsuperscript{56} Levinas argues that such intentionality is a process where essentially “the outside of me is for me.”\textsuperscript{57}

What this process assumes is that the “disclosure” of the being of the other is adequate to thought. As Stella Sandford observes, adequation implies an “a priori fit” between the objects of the world and representative consciousness, such that consciousness embracing the world through thought—nothing escapes or surprises the

\textsuperscript{50} Levinas, “The Trace of the Other”, 345.
\textsuperscript{51} “The Trace of the Other”, 345.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 36.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 37-38.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 126. “We call it ‘the same’ because in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object…[t]o remain the same is to represent to oneself.”
\textsuperscript{55} “The Trace of the Other”, 345.
\textsuperscript{57} “The Trace of the Other”, 345. Original emphasis.
“I”.

Levinas calls this process of adequation a “reduction of the other to the same”
which we see in the early pages of Totality and Infinity:

The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralising the
existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other
as such but the reduction of the other to the same. . . . Thematisation and
conceptualisation, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other
but suppression or possession of the other. For possession affirms the other, but
within a negation of its independence.59

It is important to note here that Levinas is not arguing against the legitimacy or even
the necessity of representational intentionality. He acknowledges elsewhere that the
reduction of the other to the same is part of the egoism’s natural striving to persevere
in its own being, which is its conatus essendi.60 But for Levinas, this is not the
fundamental mode of existence. He argues there is a relation where the “same” enters
into a relationship with the “other” in which the other’s alterity is nevertheless
maintained. To support his argument, he makes a claim which is quite complex: the
ethical relation to the other person is described in terms of the idea of infinity, which
he borrows from Descartes.

As Critchley observes, Levinas argues that the ethical relation has a formal
resemblance to the relation, in Descartes’ Third Meditation, between the res cogitans
and the idea of infinity.61 As we will now see, the Cartesian picture of the relation
between the res cogitans and God through the idea of the infinite provides Levinas
with a formal model of a relation between two terms that is based on “height”, non-
reciprocity and asymmetry.62 What is most of interest to him in Descartes’ argument is
that the human subject has an idea of infinity, and that this idea is by definition a
thought that, as Levinas puts it, “thinks more than it thinks.”63 What intrigues Levinas
about the Cartesian idea of infinity is the way in which it posits a kind of relation to
something that always exceeds any idea I could possibly have of it, and thus the

this notion of “adequation” entails the sovereignty of the “I” in Husserl’s thought. The phenomenological reduction
reveals that the world fits consciousness, and not the reverse.

59 Totality and Infinity, 45-46.

60 Emmanuel Levinas, “The Philosopher and Death” (1982), in Alterity and Transcendence, translated by Michael
B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 166.

61 Critchley, “Introduction” to The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, 14. See also, e.g., Emmanuel Levinas,
“Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” (1957), in Emmanuel Levinas: Collected Philosophical Papers, translated by
Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 53. “But what we find most distinctive is the
Cartesian analysis of the idea of infinity, although we shall retain only the formal design of the structure it outlines.”

62 “Introduction” to The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, 14.

63 “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” 54.
alterity of the infinite is not “extinguished” in the thought that thinks it. In other words, although I may have an idea of infinity, I cannot think infinity as any sort of “referent” that could *eo ipso* be determined or circumscribed; and yet this idea persists nonetheless.

However, as Hilary Putnam explains, it is not that Levinas accepts the letter of Descartes’ argument. Instead, Levinas transforms the argument by substituting the human other for God. Levinas writes, “the idea of infinity is the social relationship”, or again, “[t]he way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we name here face.” The ethical relation produces what he calls a “curvature of intersubjective space”, one that eludes totalisation apart from falsely imagining oneself occupying a “God-like” position outside of the relation. How is this “curvature of intersubjective space” produced? As we will now see, Levinas argues that it is produced in the encounter with the “face” of the human other, where the human subject is “called into question” by the other from a position of both height and destitution.

1.4 Height and Destitution: The Encounter with the Face

Because the spontaneity and agency of intentionality is called into question by something the “I” cannot grasp, the ethical relation produces a certain “shock” when the “I” passes under the gaze of the other. The shock occurs, in part, because the answer to the question “Who is it?” eludes comprehension, just as the idea of infinity eludes any concept of it. By claiming that the human other always exceeds any idea one has of him or her, Levinas seeks to establish the basis for which the “I” in its natural position or concern for its own perseverance—its conatus essendi—is called into question by the human other.

---

64 Ibid., 54.


66 The first quote is from “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity”, 54, and the latter quote is from *Totality and Infinity*, 50 (original emphasis). While in the earlier essay Levinas states that the idea of infinity occurs in the relationship with another person, in *Totality in Infinity* he introduces the face as the way in which the other person infinitely exceeds one’s categories of the other person.

67 *Totality and Infinity*, 291.

68 “The Trace of the Other”, 350-351. “The movement unto another, instead of completing me and contenting me, implicates me in a situation which [viewed from] one side should not concern me and should leave me indifferent . . . whence comes to me this shock when I pass, indifferent, under the gaze of another?”

69 “Diachrony and Representation” 145. “A putting into question within me of the natural position of the subject, of the perseverance of the I – of its morally serene perseverance – in its being; a putting into question of its conatus essendi, of its existential insistence”.

---
However, the calling into question does not simply consist of usurping the primacy of the *conatus*. There is also an “elevation” of the human other in relation to the self. Tamra Wright explains that this elevation is the result of the inability of consciousness to contain or neutralise the alterity of the other human being while at the same time recognising it is already obligated to the other.\(^{70}\) Her explanation does well to introduce Levinas’s concept of the “dimension of height”. The dimension of height, or a dimension of transcendence, confers the authority to command the “I” to responsibility.\(^{71}\) As we will see below, the face conveys its authority because in its expression, it overflows any idea or “plastic image” one may have of it. Yet precisely the absence of such an image also conveys the “nudity” of its very exposure; it is without defense.\(^{72}\) The “nudity” of the face presents a destitution which cries out for justice.\(^{73}\) Thus, there arises in the encounter with the face of the other what Michael Morgan calls a “plea that commands and a command that pleads.”\(^{74}\) As we will see, the concepts of height and destitution together form a critical component to the structure of the asymmetrical relation. But to understand further how the human other is encountered in terms of both height and destitution, we must say a little more about Levinas’s notion of the face.

As we saw earlier, the relation with the human other is not a relation that can be reduced to the thematising and thus totalising efforts which comprise the “way” of the same. Instead, the relation with the human other remains absolute, remains exterior precisely because the other is not a “species of consciousness”, is inaccessible to me; the other puts the “I” in question, and this putting in question emanates from the other person.\(^{75}\) Levinas argues that such a relation, whereby the other “overflows” or exceeds the sphere of the same determines its “status” as infinite.\(^{76}\) However, he


\(^{71}\) *Totality and Infinity*, 215. “The being that presents himself…comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy”. See also Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy*, 6-7, where she argues the “I” feels obligated toward the other human being “because he appears from a dimension of height…which confers the authority to command me. He commands me to ‘welcome’ him, to assume my responsibility for him, without trying to deny or neutralise his alterity.”


\(^{73}\) *Totality and Infinity*, 215. “To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being the presents itself in the face”.

\(^{74}\) Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 185.

\(^{75}\) *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 195.
clarifies that the metaphor of “overflowing” is to be distinguished from the image of “liquid overflowing a vessel”, because the overflowing presence is “effectuated as a position in face of the same.” This facing position, he argues, has an ethical significance: “The facing position, opposition par excellence, can only be a moral summons. The movement proceeds from the other.” From here, Levinas makes an important claim: he does not simply define the other person in purely negative terms (as a being of whom I can never have an adequate idea). Rather, he maintains that the other “reveals” himself to me, calls me into question. Thus, the exteriority of the other person is “produced” as an “epiphany” that occurs as a face:

The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the other with respect to the same, despite this relation. Thus a structure analogous to the ontological argument is here produced: the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence. But what is produced here is not a reasoning, but the epiphany that occurs as a face.

As Robert Gibbs observes, this relation of the face-to-face is not merely an idea that is more than I can conceive; it is also an “intercourse”, where the idea of infinity is produced in what Levinas calls the “opposition” of conversation, in “sociality”. To respond to this revelation of the other person is the situation which Levinas calls the “welcome of the face.”

The destitution of the human other stems from his or her frailty and mortality, the reality of which the face cannot hide. That is, the relation with the face is a relation with what is alone, is isolated, and can undergo death. In the “Preface to the German Edition of Totality and Infinity”, Levinas describes the encounter with the “nakedness” of the face of other in his or her destitution:

Within the world of appearances, [the face] cries out the shame of its hidden misery, it cries out with a grieving heart [la mort dans l’âme]; human nakedness without protection and without defense, from nakedness.

---

77 Totality and Infinity, 195-196. Original emphasis.
78 Ibid., 196.
79 Totality and Infinity, 196.
81 Totality and Infinity, 197.
The nakedness of the face, precisely because its expression is beyond mere presentation, reveals its essential vulnerability and defenselessness. Levinas states that the face expresses itself in the “total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes”, whose gaze forbids me from reducing his or her alterity to a theme or possession within representative consciousness. Paradoxically, however, precisely in his or her destitution, the human other commands the “I” from an ethical dimension of height: the other “puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the same and the I”.

The human other stops or resists the thematising efforts of the “I” not by a greater force, but because of the transcendence of the other’s being by relation to the whole. Levinas calls this resistance the “infinity of [the other’s] transcendence.”

The resistance the human other expresses in the face calls upon me with what Levinas calls the “primordial expression”, which is “you shall not commit murder.” The command is not a verbal command against the physical possibility of killing, but is rather an ethical resistance that paralyses the thematising possessive power of the “I”. This resistance is achieved in the very “unforseeableness” of the other’s reaction. It is a calling into question of the freedom of the “I”; but instead of the “I” losing its natural foundation and confidence, the calling into question results in its “elevation”: consciousness finds in itself more than it can contain. This is what Levinas calls the “dimension of height that opens within being.” That is, he argues that this opening is accomplished as a positive movement of the responsibility of the “I” for the human other. It is this “revelation” of the height and destitution of the other which establishes what Levinas calls the very “proximity” of the other person:

The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbour, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself.

---

83 See e.g., “Notes on Meaning”, 162. Levinas describes the essential defenselessness of the face to hide itself with the contention that “[p]rior to any particular expression, and beneath a particular expression that – already as a pose and a countenance given to oneself – covers over and protects, the face is nudity and destitution of expression as such, that is, extreme exposition, the defense-less itself.”

84 “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity”, 55.

85 Ibid., 55.

86 Totality and Infinity, 199.

87 Ibid., 199.

88 Ibid., 199.

89 Ibid., 199.

90 “Transcendence and Height”, 18.

91 Totality and Infinity, 78.
We will return to examine the notion of proximity in more detail in Chapter Four. For our current purposes it is important to see that it is precisely in this solicitation by the other, from a position of both height and destitution, that imposes upon the “I” an exigency, a morality, which calls into question one’s freedom and marks the end of one’s powers over the other person.92

To be called into question is to become conscious of the injustice caused by the exercise of one’s freedom and powers, which Levinas argues leads to a sense of “shame that freedom feels for itself.”93 The shame of one’s injustice in the presence of the human other is an accusation: it is the birth of conscience.94 Levinas’s critique of “freedom” and what may be called “responsible self-interest” will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four. For our present purposes, let us just briefly say a bit more about the significance of the notions of guilt and shame for Levinas with regard to his conception of the asymmetrical relation with the other person, particularly for the way these notions open onto Levinas’s broader discussions of diachronic time.

Levinas writes in Otherwise Than Being that shame and guilt, which arise from the “I” being called into question by the human other, do not have their origin in any misuse of freedom. Levinas denies that the responsibility characteristic of the “I” can be interpreted as either a guilt-complex or the apportionment of blame, for both would presuppose an initial freedom.95 Instead, the “I” is in debt from the very beginning.96 Returning to the notion of sensibility, Levinas argues that sensibility is not just apprehension of sense data, but is fundamentally exposure, already susceptible to being affected.97 In an added dimension from the analyses of Totality and Infinity, sensibility in Otherwise than Being is described as assuming an already existing vulnerability with regard to pleasure and pain. Thus, not only is there no apprehension of sense data without susceptibility or vulnerability with regard to what one is exposed

92 Totality and Infinity, 86.
93 Ibid., 86.
94 Ibid., 84. Levinas defines conscience this way: “Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.”
95 Otherwise Than Being, 124. “The for-the-other characteristic of the subject can be interpreted neither as a guilt complex (which presupposes an initial freedom) nor as a natural benevolence or divine ‘instinct’, nor as some love or some tendency to sacrifice.”
96 Ibid., 87.
97 Ibid., 15.
to, but the very susceptibility to alterity is the basis for the sensibility by which the subject opens itself to the objects of the world.  

Contrary to the idea that the ethical relationship is derived from an a priori condition or from an exigency derived from measuring what is possible through reflection on oneself, Levinas argues in *Otherwise than Being* that “[t]he inability to decline [the command to responsibility] indicates the anachronism of a debt preceding the loan, of an expenditure overflowing one’s resources. . . .” Additionally, this is a loan that one could never fully repay: “the more just I am, the more guilty I am.” This notion represents a continuation of his thought from *Totality and Infinity*, where we find the same quote. In the latter context, Levinas explains that the “I” is summoned to an “infinite” responsibility. However, here he adds that this infinity does not denote its “immensity” but a responsibility “increasing in the measure that it is assumed.” Levinas explains that this infinite responsibility arises in the self’s effort to “purge” itself from its centre of gravitation “in itself”:

The I, which we have seen arise in enjoyment as a separated being, having apart, in itself, the centre around which its existence gravitates, is confirmed in its singularity by purging itself of this gravitation, purges itself interminably, and is confirmed precisely in this incessant effort to purge itself.

Here Levinas marks the shift from what we have discussed above as the “pre-ethical” separation to “ethical” separation, where the call of metaphysical desire, through shame, limits the movement of the “I” of enjoyment. Moreover, while *Totality and Infinity* introduces the notion of guilt as the self’s discovery of its “murderous” exercise of its right-to-be, which is then purged in the response given to the other person, the emphasis in *Otherwise than Being* is upon the presence of guilt prior to any fault. As the self becomes more aware of this, the more it discovers itself to be responsible. But if this “debt” was contracted prior to the “loan”, at what point in time did the transaction take place? When did the “I” become responsible for the

---

98 Alphonso Lingis, in the “Translator’s Introduction” to *Otherwise than Being*, xxiv.
99 *Otherwise than Being*, 112.
100 Ibid., 112. “The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am ‘in myself’ through the others.”
101 *Totality and Infinity*, 244.
102 Ibid., 244.
103 Ibid., 244.
104 *Otherwise than Being*, 112.
other? Levinas argues that the “origin” of the summons from responsibility is from a “diachronic” time, a time that is “unrepresentable and was never present, more ‘ancient’ than any ‘consciousness of’. . . .”105 We will now see that Levinas’s analysis of diachrony not only provides the “foundation” for the structure of the asymmetrical relation whereby the “I” is obliged to the human other, but it also provides the very opening to the religious dimension of existence, the “beyond” being, which Levinas calls the “dimension of the divine”. For our purposes, we will concentrate our analysis of diachrony primarily as it is presented in Otherwise Than Being as well as in essays written after its publication.106

2. Diachrony and the Structure of the Asymmetrical Relation

In the opening sentences of Otherwise Than Being, Levinas asks whether transcendence can still have meaning in modern philosophical discourse. And if it does have meaning, how can it be described? He articulates the question this way:

If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the event of being, the esse, the essence, passes over to what is other than being. But what is Being’s other?107

Levinas clarifies his use of the word “essence” in his introductory note to the book, which is to be understood as “being” distinct from particular beings, or in a manner similar to the distinction Heidegger makes between Sein and Seiendes.108 Levinas argues that since Plato’s Republic, the question of what is beyond essence, or what he will call the “otherwise” than being, has been persistently raised.109 Before developing his argument about what the “otherwise” than being “is”, Levinas makes clear what it is not. First, it is not equivalent to death. It is not the equivalent of passing over from being to non-being, which all existents share by virtue of their mortal existence.110 Second, the “otherwise” than being is not a transcendent being situated in an eternal order extracted from time which necessarily exists and operates from a “world behind

---

106 Although Levinas’s discussions of diachrony mostly occur in Otherwise than Being and the works published thereafter, he in fact introduces the notion in the 1963 essay “The Trace of the Other”, which we also cite below.
107 Otherwise Than Being, 3. Original emphasis.
108 Ibid., xlvi. “The term essence here expresses being different from beings, the German Sein distinguished from Seiendes, the Latin esse distinguished from the Scholastic ens.”
109 Ibid., 3. “…since [Plato’s] Republic there had been the question of what is beyond essence…Transcendence is passing over to being’s other, otherwise than being.”
110 Ibid., 3. “…passing over is not here equivalent to dying. Being and not-being illuminate one another, and unfold a speculative dialectic which is a determination of being.”
the scenes”, in which a heavenly city is situated above a terrestrial city below. Instead
Levinas, following Kant, argues that the “otherwise” than being must be understood as
transcending the world as comprehended by reason, though he will conceive of it in a
different way than Kant. The key to Levinas’s argument rests upon his analysis of
time.

Levinas distinguishes between time as “synchrony” and “diachrony”.
Synchrony is the lived time of sensory and phenomenal consciousness, with its
assembly of the varieties of time (past, present and future) into the processes of
representation. In the essay “Notes on Meaning”, Levinas describes synchrony this way:

The past is only a present that was. It remains commensurate with the presence of
the present, of the manifestation that is perhaps only its emphatic perseverance. It
re-presents itself. . . . Immanence connotes this assembling of the varieties of time
[du divers du temps] in the presence of the representation. For the varieties of
time, this way of not withholding themselves from synchrony, and thus . . . their
aptitude to enter into the unity of a genus of form are the logical conditions of
synchronisation, or synchronisation’s results. In the present . . . everything can be
brought together.111

Synchrony is the process by which the “I” becomes the common site of representing
the divergences of time in the present.112 In other words, synchrony consists in
privileging the present in relation to the past and future.113 Perhaps more significant is
Levinas’s claim that in assembling the past and future into what can be brought
together within the cogito, all alterity is brought together in presence with the “I
think”; that is, alterity is “taken up by the thought of the identical” as one’s own, and
this process of synchrony again reduces what is other to the same.114

Diachrony, on the other hand, refers to a “lapse of time that does not return”, a
time which is refractory to synchronic time.115 As a lapse of time, diachrony signals an
event that can never be reduced to a present moment. In this sense, Levinas speaks of
diachrony as an "immemorial past".116 The initial significance of diachrony is that, as
an immemorial past, it cannot be represented or recalled as part of a past, no matter

112 Ibid., 158.
113 “Diachrony and Representation”, 138.
114 Ibid.,138-139.
115 Otherwise Than Being, 9.
116 “The Trace of the Other”, 355. “No memory could follow . . . this past. It is an immemorial past – and this is also
perhaps eternity . . . .”
how ancient. The lapse of time signalled in diachrony is forever foreign to every recalled or anticipated event in time: it signals what Levinas calls a “pre-original and anarchical passed.”

With the introduction of diachrony, Levinas challenges the priority of the commonly understood synchronic view of time, especially as it relates to the encounter with the human other. It provides an account of time in which the self comes to the recognition of a summons that was always already present, prior to any act or decision. He argues that the synchronic view of the encounter with the human other involves communication, but such communication depends upon a prior intentionality and synthesis into representation. Furthermore, according to Levinas, the synchronic view of the encounter with the human other does not sufficiently explain the “motive” for this communication: Why does the self enter into communication with the other? He suggests that it is because “we have something to say”, but then he asks why is this communicated considered something to say? To answer, Levinas asserts that there is a “prior sociality” which is irreducible to the knowledge one can have of the other person as a known object. It does not have its origin in any representable time, but arises instead from a diachronic time, prior to and outside of all recollection available to the “I” for representation. But what does this “prior to” and “outside of” all recollection mean?

Levinas argues that the summons to responsibility is not an innate idea like Plato’s theory of reminiscence, for even such an idea could be resuscitated and represented by memory and thus the privilege of synchronic time would be maintained. Instead, diachronic time signifies not in a “mimetic” interiority but rather an “ethical interiority” as responsibility-for-the-other, a responsibility that was never contracted, never in one’s power to decide, never recalled from memory. Thus, Levinas suggests that the reversion of responsibility to a diachronic time, the “for” of the for-the-other, indicates a total gratuity, a gift that is presupposed even in something as simple as a salutation:

117 Otherwise Than Being, 9.
118 “Diachrony and Representation”, 139.
119 Ibid., 139.
120 Ibid., 139. Original emphasis.
121 Ibid., 141.
122 “Philosophy and Transcendence”, 31.
123 Ibid., 32.
The face of the other obligating the I, which, from the first—without deliberation—is responsive to the other. From the first: that is, the self answers “gratuitously”, without worrying about reciprocity. This is the gratuitousness of the for-the-other, the response of responsibility that already lies dormant in a salutation, in the hello, in the goodbye. Such a language is prior to the statements of propositions communicating information and narrative.\textsuperscript{124}

Diachrony, then, signifies as a rupture of synchronic time, the entry of an utter gratuitousness into the self as responsible for the human other prior to any consciousness of a commitment to be responsible that can be recalled or anticipated. Such is the movement of diachrony: it is as though a command “slipped into my consciousness like a thief.”\textsuperscript{125}

The significance of this diachronic understanding of time is not only the way in which it signals a resistance to the synchronisation of remembrance and anticipation, but also the way in which it opens onto what Levinas calls a “surge of a thought” which is not reduced to a thematisation but which is a “thought for…”\textsuperscript{126} In other words, it calls into question whether the “human” is defined only in terms of being. It asks whether the summons to responsibility has an origin other, and older, than this ontological question.\textsuperscript{127} For Levinas, the meaning of the human is not measured by presence, but by that which “overflows” human essence; it is the very opening to the transcendence of thought, which he also calls the way of the “unto-God” [à-Dieu].\textsuperscript{128}

We will return to this point later in the chapter.

Insofar as it provides a description of time whereby the self becomes “aware” of the order as something that was always already present, Levinas’s analysis of diachronic time is not dissimilar to Augustine’s notion of “discovering” God in the “beyond” of memory. There is a conceptual affinity between the diachronic or “anarchic” origin of the summons to responsibility and Augustine’s notion of the love of God “poured into our hearts” by the Holy Spirit. In both cases, there is the suggestion that the human subject is a creature due to his or her lack of being the originating agent of the ability to love or the decision to be responsible for the human other.

\textsuperscript{124} “Diachrony and Representation”, 143. Original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{125} Otherwise than Being, 13. “There is a paradox in responsibility, in that I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in . . . .”
\textsuperscript{126} “Notes on Meaning”, 166.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 167.
To illustrate the notion of the self’s “obedience” to the summons to responsibility prior to any awareness or commitment, Levinas often uses an example from the Jewish tradition—Exodus 24:7—which tells of the Israelites’ response to the commandments of God: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear [understand].” This is a significant text for Levinas which, as we will see in later chapters, extends beyond its immediate resonance here as an illustration of what Levinas means by diachrony. According to Levinas’s reading of this text (following the Talmudic commentary of Rav Simai), the Israelites respond to the commands of God by doing before hearing and understanding.\(^{129}\) As Jeffrey Kosky notes, one can hear in such a shocking inversion of logic and the logical order of moral action the structure of diachrony and responsibility: “the self is responsible before it commits itself to responsibility, before it knows or understands who and what it is responsible for.”\(^{130}\)

If it is true that the “I” is affected by a command before any consciousness of it, what is the origin of this command? For Levinas, the origin of the command always “remains an irremissible disturbance”, and thus does not reveal or indicate its source except through what he calls the “trace”.\(^{131}\) The trace “signifies” or opens to the transcendent without making it “appear” within an immanent order, yet paradoxically it is the trace that “points” to the source of the command to responsibility.

2.1 The Trace and Illeity: The Opening to the Religious Through the Ethical

As we have seen with his conception of guilt and shame, Levinas argues that the “I” discovers itself as already responsible prior to any act of will, with responsibilities that only increase the more they are taken. Such is the condition of the subject in an asymmetrical relation with the human other, or the condition of what Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* calls the subject as “hostage” to the other. It is in this sense of being hostage that he says “[t]he I before the other is infinitely responsible.”\(^{132}\) The human other, whose face “signifies” or opens to us this indeclinable order, provokes an ethical movement in consciousness which involves an


\(^{130}\) Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 168.

\(^{131}\) “The Trace of the Other”, 355.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 353.
overflowing of thought for which intentionality is inadequate. As Kosky explains, unlike concepts which comprehend or contain that which they conceive, the ethical movement does not grasp that to which it aims precisely because it lets remain the infinite “distance” that separates this ideatum from the idea of it. Because of this overflowing of thought, Levinas claims that what ultimately “attaches” the I to the human other in relationship is, again, the “idea of infinity.” According to Levinas, this infinity, or this “beyond”, which the face expresses, is not an idea which is disclosed, in the sense that it is somehow made manifest, nor is it a background from which the face appears. Thus, as Edith Wyschogrod observes, the face “functions” as the “corporeality of spiritual existence” just as the hand is the “corporeality of effort” or the eye of vision.

As we have seen, Levinas argues that the origin of the face lies “beyond” being, beyond the possibility of appearing within the limits of a horizon. If this is so, then the “beyond” is not a background against which the face appears; for Levinas, there is no “world behind the world.” The face is “abstract”, although not in the sense of conceptualisation in which its appearance leads from the particular to the general nor is it an instance where time crosses with eternity. The face of the other person disturbs the natural order without settling into immanence, like the ripples caused by a stone thrown into smooth water. In Levinas’s words, “[i]t is an incision made in time that does not bleed.” He also calls this disturbance a “visitation” and “coming”, but a visitation of who, or what? For Levinas, the “beyond” from which the face comes appears as the “trace” of God.

The face “appears” in the trace of a diachronous past, which we have seen is described by Levinas as an utterly bygone time that cannot be recovered by any memory. Levinas also calls this past “eternity”, insofar as eternity is the very

---

133 “The Trace of the Other”, 353. “The other who provokes this ethical movement in consciousness, and who disorders the good conscience of the coinciding of the same with itself involves a surplus for which intentionality is inadequate”.

134 Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion, 8.

135 “The Trace of the Other”, 353.


137 Otherwise than Being, 185; “The Trace of the Other”, 354-355.

138 “The Trace of the Other”, 354.

139 Ibid., 354.

140 Ibid., 355.
irreversibility of the past as well as its “source” and “refuge”. Wyschogrod observes that what is important for Levinas with these ideas of diachrony and eternity is the way in which they speak of a time that cannot be synchronised into the present as beginning, commencement, or origin, which are all lived modes of the subject’s “egoity”. As we suggested at the outset of this chapter, Levinas insists that the opening onto transcendence and the dimension of the “divine” is found in a diachronous structure of the “past” which is inaccessible to cognition and to historical knowledge. In Wyschogrod’s words, Levinas seeks to articulate the “temporal dimension” of the beyond of being without it being “eroded” by the historical process.

Moreover, as Michael Morgan observes, Levinas wishes to steer the reader away from concluding that the “moral force” of the face—that which conveys the face as a command or summons—is an epiphany of God. Indeed, Levinas argues that the face of the other person proceeds from the “absolutely Absent”, but the face’s relationship with this “Absent” from which the other comes “does not indicate, does not reveal this Absent.” And yet, he insists that the “Absent” has a meaning in the face of the other person: it is the ethical, the response to a summons whose origin remains an irremissible disturbance of the immanent order from an utterly bygone past. In other words, the “signifyingness” of the trace is in the way in which it orients the subject to a personal order, to responsibility for the other person.

Because the “source” of the trace is not encountered, yet is somehow personal, Levinas gives this “Absent” from which the trace comes a name: illeity (a neologism meaning “that-ness” or more exactly, “he-ness”). We will examine Levinas’s notion of illeity in more detail in Chapter Four. For our present purposes however, we wish to briefly show how illeity describes the paradox of the trace as absolutely unavailable and withdrawn into an an-archical past while orienting the subject to the “personal” order of responsibility for the other person. The “origin” of the “trace” is thus neither

141 “The Trace of the Other”, 355-356.
142 Wyschogrod, Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, 159.
143 Ibid., 160.
144 Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 188.
145 “The Trace of the Other”, 355.
146 Ibid., 355. “In the presence of the other do we not respond to an ‘order’ in which signifyingness remains an irremissible disturbance, an utterly bygone past? Such is the signifyingness of a trace.”
an “I” nor a “Thou”; the “beyond” is in the third person: “He”.147 Nevertheless, because of the way the “trace” disturbs the immanent order through the encounter with the face of the other person, Levinas insists that the other person stands “in” the trace of illeity.148 As Wyschogrod rightly observes, this is the origin of the other person’s alterity; it is the way in which the face “shines”.149 What is important to stress here is that the trace of illeity in the face of the other person is the trace of what is forever absent and never present. As we saw earlier, Levinas writes that “the face of the other obligat[es] the I which, from the first—without deliberation—is responsive to the other. . . . [T]he response of responsibility . . . already lies dormant in a salutation, in the hello, in the goodbye.”150 As Michael Morgan observes, the “already” indicates that the relation between my conversation with the other person—a social act which occurs in the everyday—and this original responsibility is not synchronous; they do not “occur” at the same time.151 For Levinas, we are always already responsible; such responsibility is never undertaken but is always already how self and other are related. In this sense, responsibility is only diachronous, or again, there are not other events or states with which responsibility is synchronous. This irremissible disturbance from an utterly past absence is what Levinas calls the “signifyingness of the trace.”152 And yet, Levinas also argues that although it is never present in itself, the obliging character of the trace of illeity opens onto the “dimension of the divine”, or in the language of Otherwise than Being, opens onto the circumstances in which “God” is first pronounced.153 Let us explain this further.

2.2 The Trace and the Image of God

Wyschogrod maintains that what comes to mind with Levinas’s discussion of the “trace” is related to the theological conception of the imago dei.154 Indeed, Levinas himself does not disavow such notions; on the contrary, for he writes at the end of “The Trace of the Other”: “The God who passed is not the model of which the face would be an image. To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but

147 “The Trace of the Other”, 356. “Through a trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a ‘He’.”
148 Ibid., 359.
150 “Diachrony and Representation”, 143. Original emphasis.
151 Discovering Levinas, 222.
152 “The Trace of the Other”, 355.
153 Otherwise than Being, 162.
to find oneself in his trace.” He insists that one cannot pursue a relation with God by following the trace; God has always already passed by and the trace God leaves behind is in the face of the other person: “To go toward him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.” To follow the trace, as Wyschogrod observes, is not to be “guided as by a map to an outlying region” but to be oriented by a unique summons to the other person. Moreover, Levinas claims that his analysis of the trace is given witness in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where God only shows himself by his trace (as in Exodus 33), yet his absence maintains all its “infinity” in the ethical relation itself. One can gain “access” to God, or discover the circumstances in which God first “comes to mind”, only through the relation with the other person. Levinas describes the ethical relation as “the illuminated site of being [that] is but the passage of God.”

As we have seen, one of the fundamental insights of phenomenology is that there is no “world” behind the world that appears that is available for investigation. But if this is so, it raises the difficulty of how one can give the source of the command a name as if it were a term of a relation. Wyschogrod suggests that the introduction of the trace in Levinas’s work after Totality and Infinity arises in some measure out of his attempt to reconcile this difficulty:

The difficulty of simultaneously attesting the upsurge of the divine in social relations while maintaining that the divine is a fixed point of reference making possible the judgment of totality gives rise, in my view, to Levinas’s subsequent development of the notion of trace, a way of attesting divine presence within the totality as coming from beyond totality and as that which gives to the face its power and quality.

She adds that the significance of the trace is that it refers to a diachrony of time, a past immune to all attempts to bring it into the “light” of the present. Recalling Levinas’s contention in “The Trace of the Other” that the face of the human other “shines” in the

---

155 “The Trace of the Other”, 359.
156 “The Trace of the Other”, 359.
157 Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, 163.
158 Levinas is here referring to Exodus 33: 18-23, where Moses asks God to show him God’s glory, and God replies by saying he will pass by, but in passing Moses will only see his back; his face will not be seen.
159 Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon” (1965), in Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings, 77.
160 Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, 109. “The difficulty of simultaneously attesting the upsurge of the divine in social relations while maintaining that the divine is a fixed point of reference…gives rise, in my view, to Levinas’s subsequent development of the notion of trace, a way of attesting divine presence within the totality as coming from beyond totality and as that which gives to the face its power and quality.”
161 Ibid., 161.
trace of “God”, we are reminded that the relation with the human other does not lead to a relation with God per se, but rather reveals that the human other is “in” the trace of God.\textsuperscript{162} For Levinas, the significance of the face of the other person is the way a meaning that is beyond meaning is inserted as a trace within the order of being. Yet precisely because Levinas considers the trace from which a face “appears” as that which retains its hiddenness (or what Levinas calls an “enigma”) rather than a phenomenon, the “exorbitant” meaning is already effaced in its apparition: the “God who spoke” said nothing, has always already passed, to the extent that everything in the light of phenomena can be interpreted as a possible revelation or merely as a natural event.\textsuperscript{163} The “enigma” of the trace in which the face of the other is found is a disturbance in which there is an entry into the order of being of another (transcendent) order which does not accommodate itself with the first. Such a disturbance, for Levinas, only occurs as a divergence of time, a diachrony in which a past “passing” has never been made present.

3. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to examine two key features of Levinas’s phenomenological reduction: First, the asymmetrical structure of the relation with the other person, where the other is encountered from a dimension of “height” as well as “destitution”; and second, the temporality or temporal modality that is primary for sociality is an always-past or a diachronous past. These two features, as we have seen, are essential for his argument that the relation to the other person opens onto the dimension of the divine. Moreover, it could be argued that in addition to the reasons already stated above, the relation with the other person is asymmetrical precisely because the “origin” of this relation cannot be assimilated as a noematic correlation of any thematisable presence. That is, as Levinas suggests, it is an awakening to the other without knowledge.\textsuperscript{164} Responsibility does not amount to a thought going back to an a priori idea previously given to thought and somehow recollected by and through thought, nor is it possible to go back to the thematic presence of a being that could be identified as the cause or even the willing of the commandment. Thus, it is a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item 162 Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, 161. See also Levinas, “The Trace of the Other”, 358: “But it is in the face of the other that a face shines . . . someone has already passed.”
\item 163 “Enigma and Phenomenon”, 71.
\item 164 “Diachrony and Representation”, 145.
\end{thebibliography}
responsibility that is utterly gratuitous, which, as we will see in Chapter Five, Levinas increasingly calls the love of one’s neighbour or love “without eros”.

However, it is important to understand, as Morgan observes, that the asymmetrical relation with the other person is not intended to be an “extraordinary, isolated event”, as if the relation with the other person functions as a kind of substitute for mystical experience.165 Rather, Levinas takes all human existence to be social and interpersonal, and his analysis of asymmetry and diachrony with regard to the relation with the other person is meant to call attention to the transcendent dimension of social existence that gives the relation its ground, proportion, and (perhaps most of all) meaning. In many of his works, one can see the ways in which Levinas elaborates the link between social relations in the context of his broader discussions about access to the dimension of the divine, the “trace”, illeity, God, and so on. Yet how is this social relation expressed in such a way as to constitute the circumstances in which God first comes to mind? Or, put another way, what are the modes of expression in the ethical relation itself which can be said to constitute the disruption or “breach” of the immanent order?

Although the summons to responsibility proceeds from an immemorial past, inaccessible to consciousness, Levinas argues that the “I” does indeed become conscious of this summons. We recall in Otherwise than Being Levinas’s assertion that the summons to responsibility has slipped into consciousness “like a thief”. Responsibility for the human other is the presence in consciousness of something that was not posited, welcomed, recalled or assumed by consciousness.166 It is irreducible to consciousness, but it is nevertheless thematised in consciousness which, in the works published after Totality and Infinity, constitutes the beginning of what he calls justice. Levinas considers justice to be the way in which the trace of the “beyond” being is brought into the immanent order.

Justice begins with the approach of what Levinas calls the “third party”, or another neighbour. When the third party comes on the scene, the “I” is immediately faced with a dilemma: Which one receives the priority in my responsibility?167 In

165 Discovering Levinas, 191.
166 Wright, The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy, 55.
167 “The Proximity of the Other”, 142. “The third party is other than the neighbour, but also a neighbour, and also a neighbour to the other, and not just his counterpart. What am I to do? What have they already done to one another? Which one comes before the other in my responsibility?”
Otherwise than Being, Levinas argues that this question is a question of consciousness, which he also calls a question of “justice”:

The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying [of responsibility] whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematisation, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.\textsuperscript{168}

But how, and in what way, does justice in itself give witness of the “trace” of God in the immanent world, even if justice is merely derivative of a prior movement of God who has forever already passed? It is in an exploration of Levinas’ notion of justice that we may hope to find answers.

\textsuperscript{168} Otherwise than Being, 157.
Chapter 4 – The Work of Justice and the Dimension of the Divine in Levinas

In a frequently cited passage from *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that the “dimension of the divine” opens forth from the human face. As we saw from the previous chapter, this argument can be understood to mean that the asymmetrical relation with the face of the human other, mediated by the idea of infinity, is the site in which an unthinkable and unthematisable God first “comes to mind”. Yet we were left with a problem which now needs to be addressed: If “God” only signifies as the absence of that which has always already passed in an immemorial time but nevertheless leaves a “trace” of this absence in the face of the human other, how is it that Levinas is able to use the language of being to describe this an-archical event? For our purposes, this question must be put into sharper focus, for we are concerned with which acts within an asymmetrical relation can be said to illuminate one’s awareness of an “encounter” with God. Or in the language of *Totality and Infinity*, how does the ethical relation become a “spiritual optics” in which God is made “accessible”, made “visible”, within immanence?

Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that the moment in which the transcendence of God becomes “accessible” is in the “work of justice,” where the upsurge of the ethical relation into being has its advent in the domain of language, or what he calls in later works the “said.” Although justice is a shifting term in Levinas’s thought, all of its uses more or less provide Levinas with the means to pass from the ontology of self-interested being to ethics (in *Totality and Infinity*) or from ethics to the “said” of language (in *Otherwise than Being* and subsequent texts) while maintaining their separation. It is this movement and countermovement that for Levinas opens up the “dimension” of the divine. Hence, when he says in the same passage from *Totality and Infinity* that the work of justice “is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced”, or again, “God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men”, he is suggesting that

---

2 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.
3 Ibid., 78. “The work of justice . . . is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced—and “vision” here coincides with this work of justice.”
while the ethical relation is the only locus or site for the “encounter” with God, justice is integral to its recognition, even if such “recognition” merely consists of catching sight, diachronically, of a momentary glimpse of the trace of God who has always already passed.

The task of this chapter is to show how the work of justice produces this “breach” that opens onto the dimension of the divine. Before we pursue this task in more detail, we will first take a closer look at what Levinas means by justice more generally. We will begin with his critique of a commonly accepted conception of justice founded upon the freedom and “responsible” self-interest of the subject. We will then examine Levinas’s own conception of justice, which is instead founded upon the relation to the other person and, by extension, other “others” (which he calls the “third party”) or society as a whole. The focus of our analysis of justice in Levinas’s work will be upon two of his major texts, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. We will see that in *Totality and Infinity*, the work of justice functions as the way in which the ego is disengaged from self-interested being through an interruption or breach which the “encounter” with the face of the other person inaugurates. *Otherwise than Being* emphasises the movement from ethical subjectivity to the necessity of a return to what he calls the “question” of justice; that is, the return to the question of how one’s infinite responsibility is “shown” in being, out of consideration for weighing responsibilities towards other others, or what he calls the “third party”.

Moreover, as we will see, another vital component to Levinas’s examination of justice with regard to the third party in *Otherwise than Being* is his argument that the attempt to weigh infinite responsibilities necessarily means that assembling and ordering will always to some extent be inadequate or incomplete. The self and its claim to possession of the world through comprehension is constantly called into question, that is, called to justify itself before the other and the third party. The work of justice is the way the ethical relation becomes visible and is presented to thematising consciousness. Indeed, as we will see, part of how Levinas conceives the work of justice lies precisely in his conception of scepticism which, as a statement of the rupture or impotence of discourse, forms an interval between the “saying”—the primordial exposure to the human other which is the “ground” for all language, thought and communication—and the “said” itself. Justice emerges in the space

---

between the necessity for representation and the equal inadequacy of every such representation in light of the infinity of the face of the human other.

Finally, we will consider the question of justice and the “dimension of the divine”. According to Levinas, the dimension of the divine reflects the notion of justice as prophetic witness both beyond and within philosophy. Whilst Hegel would view justice as a reconcilement of opposed claims in a third mediated concept, Levinas argues that justice is not reconcilement but rather the interruption of both ontology and the ethical relation. Levinas’s argument hinges on his concept of the neologism *illeity*, which we introduced in the last chapter but will return to again in this chapter in a different context to show how *illeity* orders the subject to responsibility but also interrupts that responsibility out of consideration for the third party.

We will conclude with a brief reflection upon an important question: Although Levinas argues that the “said” does not negate the “saying”, it nonetheless introduces a “betrayal” of the saying whereby the work of justice would always bear a trace of injustice, since it can never adequately represent the saying of ethical responsibility. But if justice can never be perfect justice, can justice by itself be said to produce the “breach” that leads to God? We will suggest that for Levinas, there must be a return to a consideration of the unique individual, the face-to-face relation with the other, which Levinas increasingly calls charity. He argues that such charity “without concupiscence”, a love which marks the ethical relation with the human other, is required in order for the question of justice and the subsequent revelation of the dimension of the divine to appear.

1. **The Critique of Justice Founded Upon Freedom and “Responsible” Self-Interest**

In order to discern more fully what Levinas means by justice and why it is an integral theme of his philosophical project, it is first helpful to review his critique of the foundation that “Western philosophy” has presupposed in building the commonly accepted theory of justice founded upon freedom and “responsible” self-interest, or the self’s natural effort to persevere in its own being. What Levinas generally refers to with the term “Western philosophy”, as Michael Morgan observes, is the view that what is meaningful about human life is determined by thought or reason—the self’s capacities of synthesis, thematisation, and organisation as the ordering principles of the whole of the cosmos—and that this view has been asserted by Parmenides and Plato,
through the medievals to Spinoza, Kant, the German Idealists, Husserl, and even, Levinas argues, Heidegger.\textsuperscript{6}

Levinas contends that the political order, much like that of the ego’s “being” in general, is constantly beset by the temptation to locate its “centre of gravitation” in itself, and thus conceiving justice on its own account.\textsuperscript{7} Roger Burggraeve observes that Levinas considers the question of justice in “Western philosophy” (and by extension the political order) to be founded upon two fundamental tenets: what he calls “individual freedom” and “well-managed private interest.”\textsuperscript{8} According to Levinas, these tenets are inherently egocentric and ultimately violent in their aims. Consequently, this approach to justice has covered over its proper foundation. What is required to discover the true foundation of justice is to return to the real but forgotten conditions of experience and existence that are prior to the establishment of freedom and self-interest, which for Levinas is the ethical relation. He begins his critique of justice as conceived by the broad spectrum of Western philosophy by calling into question what might at first appear to be an absolute condition for justice: the necessity of individual freedom before responsibility. This apparent necessity is what Burggraeve calls “responsibility in the first person.”\textsuperscript{9}

### 1.1 “Responsibility in the First Person”

In \textit{Otherwise than Being}, Levinas describes the being of the ego as self-interested: its “esse” (essence) is “interesse” (interest).\textsuperscript{10} Such a description recalls both Spinoza’s analysis of the \textit{conatus essendi}, where the human being does everything it can to persist in its being, and Heidegger’s description of human \textit{Dasein} as the being for whom being is a concern.\textsuperscript{11} For Levinas, this initial description of the ego should not be thought of immediately in negative terms, for he acknowledges that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Michael Morgan, \textit{Discovering Levinas} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 88.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 159. “. . .being, the totality, the State, politics, techniques, work are at every moment on the point of having their centre of gravitation in themselves, and weighing on their own account.”
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Roger Burggraeve, \textit{The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace and Human Rights}, translated by Jeffrey Bloeschl (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 41. Burggraeve notes that Western philosophy, as Levinas sees it, approaches justice according to a responsibility “defined in terms of individual freedom and well-managed private interest.”
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Burggraeve, \textit{The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love}, 42. “. . .autonomy is seen as the absolute condition for the possibility of responsibility, and as the guarantee for one’s own project of existence. We can also refer to this as responsibility in the first person, since it begins in the ego and aims at the ego’s development.”
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Otherwise than Being, 4.
\end{itemize}
the self’s effort to be is the “natural” and healthy attachment to itself. Burggraewe notes that for Levinas, the *contatus essendi* of the human ego is simultaneously a manifestation of the whole of reality, articulated in the word “essence”. Levinas writes that the meaning of the ego refers to “a being whose meaning is . . . the exercise of the activity expressed by the verb of verbs, by the verb to be which one lightly calls auxiliary.”\(^{12}\) Burggraewe argues that it is clear in this context that Levinas’s use of the term “essence” is not to be understood in the sense of nature (*eidos* or *quidditas*), but in terms of what Plato indicated with the expression *nomen actionis*, or active noun.\(^{13}\) In the introductory note to *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas emphasises what can also be found in Heidegger, namely, that “essence” refers to the event of being, whereby one understands “being” in its verbal sense, as a dynamic process.\(^{14}\) The emphasis upon the verbality of “being” makes it possible for Levinas to speak of a “now” or “present” in this essence, because it is marked by a natural self-interest to persevere in this being: “the adventure of essence . . . consists in persisting in essence and unfolding immanence, in remaining in an ego, in identity.”\(^{15}\) Thus, for Levinas “being” is more than the simple fact of existence; it is the self-contained, self-generating act of being and persistence in this being.

Levinas maintains that the essence or *contatus essendi* of the human ego remains fixed in its being, giving it the character of a *pour soi*, a “for-itself”.\(^{16}\) As a being for-itself, the human resists all disintegration and embarks on a struggle for life, or what Levinas calls (in a clear throwback to Heidegger) an “originary valorisation that articulates itself in those needs called natural or material: attachment to the existing, to the event of being, to the very *esse* that matters to men and about which they worry”.\(^{17}\) To the degree that humans are driven and defined by their struggle to be, Levinas speaks of the ego as an “instructive ontology” or “animality”: an originary, natural and naïve “interestedness”.\(^{18}\) This interestedness is characterised by an appetite

---


13 The *Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 43.

14 *Otherwise than Being*, xlvi.

15 Ibid., 16.


17 Levinas, “Sociality and Money”, 204.

18 Ibid., 204.
for existence, a hunger for being by means of the objects of the world. The ego partakes of the elements of the world (breathing its air, for example) and perceives it through knowledge of things and places. He describes this interestedness of the ego as a “takeover of being by beings; striving to be—an act”, and it is in this sense Levinas says that the being—the esse—of beings is marked by interesse.

Although Levinas acknowledges that the ego’s interesse first appears in innocence, and thus has a positive (or at least natural) dimension to it, it contains a negative dimension as well. The ego’s striving to be involves a dependence upon the world which Levinas calls an “economic” relationship. The ego is not part of a whole in which it participates out of a need or any “lack” of being, but rather makes itself the centre of its own totality. The world therefore becomes useful and necessary for one’s own project of existence; the ego’s relation to the world begins to be transformed into what could be described as instrumental. This will, of course, have broader implications for the interpersonal and socio-political realm, and thus upon the question of justice. But first we must say more with regard to Levinas’s description of the ego’s economic relationship with the world.

From Levinas’s analysis of need, one is then faced with the paradox that it is through one’s dependence on the world that it also gains its independence. Driven by its needs, the ego tries assure itself of the continuing satisfaction of these needs by a mastery of the “elements” that nourish them. Hence the paradox: on the one hand, the ego is dependent upon the world, but on the other hand, the ego develops a mastery over the world as it “lives from” the world in the fulfillment of its needs. The initial disruption that flows out of need itself is transformed into a source of liberation and self-establishment. It is what Levinas is describing in Totality and Infinity when he writes that the “I” is not a “container” but “a site where I can”, where the “I” establishes its freedom.

---

19 “Society and Money”, 204.

20 Ibid., 204; see also e.g., Otherwise than Being, 4: “Esse is interesse; essence is interest. This being interested does not appear only to the mind surprised by the relativity of negation . . . it is not reducible to just this refutation of negativity. It is confirmed positively to be the conatus of beings.”

21 Totality and Infinity, 61. Levinas argues here that to break with participation in the totality is to “no longer derive one’s being from this contact [with the totality]”; he adds that it is necessary that a being derive its being from itself and not depend either upon relations that “designate its place within Being [or upon] the recognition that the Other would bring it.”

22 Ibid., 61.

23 Ibid., 37.
One can therefore begin to see that the ego’s effort to be involves a relationship with the world where the world becomes subordinate to this effort, thus making the world “economically” useful.\textsuperscript{24} In addition, as Burggraeve observes, one might say that this economic relation with the world can also be described as totalising, insofar as the ego establishes its identity only when it masters the world upon which it nourishes itself; the world is “for” the self.\textsuperscript{25}

According to Levinas, the eventually totalising ego first establishes its relation to the world as enjoyment, as participation in the elemental world. One’s first experience of the world does not occur by standing apart from it, which could then be analysed and used, but occurs “in” and “of” the world.\textsuperscript{26} The nascent “ego” is immersed in and nourished by the elements of earth, air, water and light from which it lives. In other words, the ego’s immersion into the elemental world does not occur as if by conscious thought or reflection but is rather the condition in which it already finds itself. The condition of the possibility of this immersion, as we saw in the previous chapter, is what Levinas calls “sensibility”: sensual perception or a primordial affectivity without the intervention of representational consciousness.\textsuperscript{27} However, the ego comes to the realisation that this enjoyment and happiness is also exposed to serious threat. The self-security of its identity is struck by the unreliability and indeterminacy of the elemental world. The ego therefore tries to counter this insecurity as much as possible by mastering that which nourishes it. In this way, Levinas contends that the effort to be evolves into a situation where what is “other” loses its alterity: “in satiety the real I sank my teeth into is assimilated, the forces that were in the other become my forces, become me.”\textsuperscript{28} This is the first instance of the reduction of the “otherness” of what is other to the same.

Although enjoyment initially occurs unreflectively, as a participation in the elemental world, reflection becomes necessary when the ego feels threatened by the unreliability of the world and anxiety with regard to its future. This reflection is not a kind of peaceful contemplation; to the contrary, reflection involves a movement from

\textsuperscript{24} Totality and Infinity, 116. Levinas defines the ego’s effort to be as an “economy” in a very broad sense.

\textsuperscript{25} The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love, 50.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{27} See e.g., Totality and Infinity, 136: “ . . . sensibility is therefore to be described not as a moment of representation, but as the instance of enjoyment. Its intention (if we may resort to this term) does not go in the direction of representation . . . . Sensibility is not an inferior theoretical knowledge bound however intimately to affective states: in its very gnosis sensibility is enjoyment; it is satisfied with the given, it is contented.”

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 129.
insecurity into action, and it is precisely in this action that reflection emerges as a means to aid its effort. Reflection, in turn, leads to knowledge as the means to pursuing a more “stable” course to return to its mastery over the world. One immediately notices, as Burggraeve does, that this inner combination of economic activity and objective knowledge has the same basic structure: the reduction of the other to the same.²⁹ By understanding the world and “grasping” it through knowledge, the ego can place it in the service of its own self-interested effort to be, reversing its original dependence upon the world into an ever greater independence and hence, freedom. Knowledge seeks ceaselessly to give everything a place, function or meaning within the world of the ego’s self-interest.³⁰ Levinas argues that this view of knowledge is one of the essential teachings of Hegel’s philosophy, insofar as he reads the latter as making the argument that comprehensive knowledge has as its end absoluteness: it permits nothing to escape it or remain outside it.

From the analysis thus far, one can say that for Levinas, the ego positions itself in its natural essence as a free and self-interested being: it is responsibility originating in the “first person”. For Levinas, freedom understood structurally as autonomy from the world is exercised concretely as an endless striving toward identity. Freedom can thus be understood as free will, for in its effort to be, freedom moves toward itself and for itself. Importantly, it is also for the protection, maintenance and expansion of this freedom that theories of human rights and justice are derived.³¹ Such theories serve as a means to guarantee the exercise of this freedom. This brings us to the interpersonal and socio-political dimension of the ego’s effort to be, which as we will see forms the basis of Levinas’s critique of justice understood as the protection of individual freedom and responsible self-interest.

1.2 Society and Responsible Self-Interest

As the ego strives for autonomy and self-development, it encounters not only the elements and objects of the world but also other human beings. In accordance with

²⁹ The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love, 54. Action and knowledge “flow from the fact that knowledge exhibits the same basic structure as does action: the reduction of the other to the same.”

³⁰ See e.g., Totality and Infinity, pp. 40-48, where Levinas discusses the role of ontology, which in this context involves a “reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being”, which is secured by knowledge. Later in the work (p. 296), in a specific reference to Hegel, Levinas says that “Objectivity is absorbed in absolute knowledge, and the being of the thinker, the humanity of man, is therewith conformed to the perpetuity of the solid in itself, within a totality where the humanity of man and the exteriority of the object are at the same time conserved and absorbed.”

³¹ The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love, 57.
its originary and natural “interestedness” (interesse) as Levinas describes it, the ego is inclined to apply the same totalising approach with regard to other people as it does to the world that nourishes it. In other words, it seeks to draw others into its own project of self-becoming. As we will see, this in turn leads naturally to an egocentric vision of society and, more crucially, to expressions which are inherently violent and unjust towards the human other.

Roger Burggraeve notes that for Levinas, the ego’s relation to human others exercises a reduction of these others in a manner which is both practical and noetic. He observes that the practical reduction relates to the other in an instrumental fashion, in a way which “tries to overpower or ‘functionalise’ him or her.” Levinas describes this reduction as a form of “use”: an “application of force to a being . . . [which] denies that being all its individuality, by taking it as an element of its calculus, and as a particular case of a concept.” In addition to this practical reduction, Burggraeve observes that the ego reduces the human other in a noetic manner, insofar as it subordinates the relation with another person to the relation through a “horizon” which dissolves the other’s alterity by submitting the other to concepts. Or in his words, it is a reduction which reduces the individual as a “that” or a “what”, and in so doing “undoes their difference and selfhood.” In Totality and Infinity, Levinas claims that this “noetic” reduction can be found in classical idealism, where the other person “arises from a concept” and thus he or she is “converted into intelligibility; [the other’s] independence is a surrender in radiation.” He adds that this reduction takes on added dimensions in Heidegger’s Being and Time:

To affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent (the ethical relation), to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relation of knowing) [and] subordinates justice to freedom.

This last phrase is perhaps most significant: the reduction of the other to an impersonal concept makes freedom “opposed to justice” by affirming the primacy of freedom over

---

32 The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love, 58.
33 Ibid., 58.
35 The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love, 58.
36 Totality and Infinity, 45.
37 Ibid., 45. Original emphasis.
More concretely, as Burggraeve observes, when the human other is no longer seen as “this-individual-here-and-now” but instead is comprehended in view of a general type or concept, he or she is comprehended “only according to the wider horizon of their history, culture, environment, habits, characteristics, psychological structures and social conditions.” He adds that while this may be done in all innocence, the noetic reduction of the human other “takes them in hand”: it results in control, possession, and suspends their freedom. This is why Levinas argues that the reduction of the other to a concept subordinates justice to freedom.

Thus it becomes clear that an approach to the question of justice which originates from the ego’s own self-interest (or more exactly, out of concern for one’s own perseverance in being) does not lead to a just relation with others but rather an unjust one. It is unjust in that even the concern for the freedom of others has its origin in a calculation that will better protect one’s own interests and opportunities. One can thus see that for Levinas the compromise which maintains “justice”, so conceived, is founded not upon the Kantian “good will” or practical reason but on economic or utilitarian concerns. “Justice” is here conceived as a reciprocal ordering of opposed forces, a limiting and postponement of violence. However, as he argues in the opening pages of Otherwise than Being, the problem with this approach to justice is precisely its inability to prevent the constant instantiation of self-interest:

But this rational peace, a patience of length of time, is calculation, mediation and politics. The struggle of each against all becomes exchange and commerce. The clash of each against all in which each comes to be with all, becomes reciprocal limitation and determination, like that of matter. But the persistence in being, interest, is maintained by the future compensation which will have to equilibrate the concessions patiently and politically consented to in the immediate. . . . Nothing is gratuitous. The mass remains permanent and interest remains. Transcendence is factitious and peace unstable. It does not resist interest.

We see that Levinas criticises this notion of peace and justice through mediation because there does not appear to be any possibility of genuinely putting oneself in question, in order to ascertain whether the justice founded to protect the self-interest of the ego could be “unmasked” as improper or unjust. In an essay from Difficult

---

38 *Totality and Infinity*, 45.


40 Ibid., 59.


42 *Otherwise than Being*, 4-5.
Freedom, Levinas asks whether this unmasking does not indeed take place with the
dawn of the ego’s awareness of the violence rendered by the reduction of the human
other, an awareness which he calls conscience:

What is an individual, a solitary individual, if not a tree that grows without regard
for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun,
a being that is fully justified in its nature and its being? What is an individual, if
not a usurper? What is signified by the advent of conscience, and even the first
spark of spirit, if not the discovery of corpses beside me and my horror of existing
by assassination? Attention to others and, consequently, the possibility of
counting myself among them, or judging myself—conscience is justice. 43

Conscience, for Levinas, begins when the self discovers itself to be arbitrary and
violent towards others in its pursuit of self-interest. It is in this sense that Levinas
argues in Totality and Infinity that conscience “welcomes the Other”: conscience
discovers its usurpation of others and as such calls into question the “naïve right of my
powers” and my “glorious spontaneity as a living being”. 44 This calling into question
is accomplished as shame or what he elsewhere calls a “bad conscience”. 45

1.3 Egocentrism and Bad Conscience

In the previous chapter, we introduced Levinas’s conception of shame or “bad
conscience”—taking as our point of departure Levinas’s arguments from Totality and
Infinity—where we saw that the human other for Levinas is not primordially a “fact
nor an obstacle and does not threaten my existence, but he or she is “desired in my
shame.” 46 That is, the human other calls into question the self’s “naïve” exercise of
freedom, which results in freedom discovering itself to be “murderous in its very
exercise.” 47 For the self-interested “effort to be” to be unmasked as improper or unjust,
one must not consider the other as an object but rather, as Levinas argues in Totality
and Infinity, one must “measure oneself against the idea of infinity, that is, desire [the
other].” 48 We recall that for Levinas, infinity is not an idea but desire. Such desire is

43 Emmanuel Levinas, “Place and Utopia” (1950), in Difficult Freedom, translated by Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 1990), 100.
44 Totality and Infinity, 84.
45 Bad conscience is a term that is employed by Levinas in later essays found in Of God Who Comes to Mind, such
both contexts Levinas uses the term to describe the utterly passive self, already guilty prior to any fault, already
called into question. Levinas even goes so far as to claim that the interiority of mental life is “perhaps originally
this” state of bad conscience, by reference to which the “I” already posits and affirms itself in the world and in
being (174).
46 Totality and Infinity, 84.
47 Ibid., 84.
48 Ibid., 84.
what he calls the “welcoming of the Other” or the “commencement of moral consciousness”. Shame, according to Levinas, has its advent when freedom “discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.” The human other, who presents herself as interlocutor rather than object, is discovered to be someone over whom I can have no power. Indeed, shame signifies as the human other’s resistance to the ego’s powers by calling into question the “justice” of its effort to be.

We have seen thus far that Levinas critiques any theory of justice which is based upon freedom and “responsible self-interest” of the ego because such theories fail adequately to take into account the justification of one’s own being; that is to say, such theories do not allow for the possibility of calling into question the totalising efforts of the ego. By contrast, Levinas proposes what he calls in *Totality and Infinity* the “work of justice”, which Levinas equates with the welcoming of the face of the other person. Having therefore examined Levinas’s critique, we now turn to an analysis of what Levinas means by the “work of justice”, particularly as it is addressed in *Totality and Infinity*.

2. **Peace and the Work of Justice**

Levinas introduces the work of justice in *Totality and Infinity* by making a distinction between justice and its traditional associations: the “true”, “being”, and “freedom”. Instead, he aligns justice with both the ethical relation and what he calls the “dimension of the divine” which, as we will see, is developed in even greater depth in *Otherwise than Being* and subsequent works. The groundwork for this development, however, is first laid out in *Totality and Infinity*.

One of the first distinctions Levinas makes when formulating his concept of justice consists in separating justice from its Platonic subordination to truth. In his discussion of Section B of Part I—“Separation and Discourse”—Levinas claims that “Society does not proceed from the contemplation of the true; truth is made possible by relation with the Other our master. Truth is thus bound up with the social relation, which is justice.” Thus, for Levinas, justice introduces an inversion in its relation

---

49 *Totality and Infinity*, 84.
50 Ibid., 72, 83, 89. For a detailed discussion of Levinas’s distinction between the work of justice and these three terms, see e.g. Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 120-127.
51 *Totality and Infinity*, 72.
with truth: it is not the idea of justice that is revealed in discourse, but the relation with the human other that invites the need for the idea.

Levinas is equally insistent that his conception of justice is separate from that of being, distinguishing himself again from the position of Heidegger. He states clearly that his conception of justice is “radically opposed to [that of] Heidegger who subordinates the relation with the Other to ontology . . . rather than seeing in justice and injustice a primordial relation to the Other beyond all ontology.”52 As Howard Caygill observes, Levinas also rejects any political ideology that follows from the attempt to subdivide the ethical to the ontological, where sociality is understood in terms such as “shared being”, the competition with the other for the “enhancement of one’s own being” or the “sympathetic absorption of the other’s differences.”53 In Levinas’s own words:

The existence of the Other does not concern us in the collectivity by reason of his participation in the being that is already familiar to us all, nor by reason of his power and freedom which we should have to subjugate and utilise for ourselves, nor by virtue of the difference of his attributes which we would have to surmount in the process of cognition or in a movement of sympathy merging us with him, as though his existence were an embarrassment. The Other does not affect us as what must be surmounted, enveloped, dominated, but as [O]ther, independent of us: behind every relation we could sustain with him, an absolute upsurge.54

In this passage Levinas returns to the recurring theme that the ontological subordination of alterity—that the human other must be “surmounted, enveloped, dominated”—results in a reduction of alterity to the same. Peace, in this formulation, can only come from a resolution of every difference into a higher or deeper unity.55 By contrast, the proper relation to the human other is described in Totality and Infinity as one of “welcome”, a relation in which one discovers both justice and injustice. We will return to this point in a moment.

In addition to separating the concept of justice from truth and being, Levinas argues that justice should not be aligned with freedom. Although it may be tempting to view the terms used to describe the human other (“independent”, “absolute upsurge”) as an alignment between the human other and freedom, the welcoming of the other is, as we have seen, precisely the calling into question of what he argues are the

52 Totality and Infinity, 89.
53 Caygill, Levinas and the Political, 121.
54 Totality and Infinity, 89.
55 The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love, 74.
prevailing notions of freedom. When justice is conceived as the reconciliation or balance of one’s freedom with the freedom of others, as Caygill rightly observes, such weighing of freedoms assumes that the self and the human other are part of a totality in which their “freedoms may be qualified according to a common measure.”

Against these problems with this particular notion of freedom, Levinas proposes the priority of the work of justice. Rather than rejecting freedom in favour of justice, however, Levinas argues for the investment of the self’s freedom by the human other. That is to say, the investment in freedom is its justification by the other person, justification which is defined as “lifting from it its character of being a fact, accomplished, past, and hence irrevocable, which as such obstructs our spontaneity”, thus calling into question the claim of freedom to be an absolute. As we have seen, in these terms the work of justice, as the “welcoming” of the other person, commences with the discovery of the unjust nature of the self’s freedom.

Levinas defines the “work of justice” as the “uprightness of the face to face” or the welcoming of the “Other” in the other person, and argues this welcoming is necessary in order that the “breach that leads to God” be produced. We have yet to discover, however, how this breach is “produced” concretely, and how Levinas is able to say that this “breach” (or indeed the character of this breach) leads to “God”. To answer this question fully, it will first be necessary to turn to the expansion of Levinas’s notion of justice in Otherwise than Being and other subsequent writings. We will see that in these writings that he moves from ethical subjectivity to the necessity of “rejoining” being, now conceived ethically rather than ontologically. As we shall see below, this movement is described as the movement of justice, and it involves the giving of signs in language, the entry of other others (what he calls the “third party”), and what Levinas calls scepticism or a contestation of the adequacy in which the “said” of language represents or synchronises the “saying” of ethical responsibility and its an-archical “origin”. As we will see, all three aspects of the work of justice give “witness”, in a quite specific way, of the trace of illeity or “God” in the realm of being.

---

56 Levinas and the Political, 122.
57 Totality and Infinity, 82.
58 Ibid., 78.
3. The Justice of Society: Language, the Third Party, and Scepticism

As we have seen in the previous chapter, although Levinas consistently and unambiguously argues for the primacy of ethics over the ontology of self-interested being, he does not do so in order dismiss the necessity of a return to a consideration of being. Rather, he argues in Otherwise than Being that the ethical relation is where “being takes on its just meaning.” The summons to responsibility is the path which leads to justice, which he now brings to bear on thematisation and the act of representative consciousness. This new association is introduced in the context of the acknowledgment of the presence of another other, or what he calls the “third party”.

Levinas distinguishes between the human “other” and the “third” with the claim that the “third” is approached not directly but indirectly. He claims this is so since the “third” already maintains a relation with my “other”, and therefore “the relationship between the neighbour and the third party cannot be indifferent to me when I approach.” Thus, responsibilities must be weighed and compared; it requires the use of reason, or what Robert Bernasconi calls the “third person” perspective. This perspective is a thought alien to the ethical relation since that relation is always singular. Thus, Levinas claims comparison belongs as a function of being:

There must be a justice among incomparable ones. There must then be a comparison between incomparables and a synopsis, a togetherness and contemporaneousness; there must be thematisation, thought, history and inscription. But being must be understood on the basis of being’s other.

In other words, in order for justice to arise, ethics must enter into the realm of being, just as being must show that it takes on its meaning from ethics.

Although the movement between the ethical and being permits the unfolding of justice, the return to being also makes it possible for the ethical relation to be inadequately represented, which reintroduces the possibility of irresponsibility, injustice and violence. How then is “peace”, which issues from the work of justice,

---

59 Otherwise than Being, 16.
60 Ibid., 16.
61 Ibid., 16.
62 Ibid., 16.
63 Bernasconi, “The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political”, 81.
64 Otherwise than Being, 16. Original emphasis.
maintained or synchronised in being? This is one of the key questions to be addressed in *Otherwise than Being*, and Levinas begins to structure his answer with a reconsideration of the subjectivity of the subject in terms of proximity.

### 3.1 Subjectivity as Proximity

In the opening note to *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas states that one of the aims of this text consists in confronting subjectivity with the “trauma of transcendence” and so to explore the “human possibility” of hearing a “God not contaminated by Being.” He insists that this “human possibility” in question is inseparable from “praxis and knowledge in this world”, adding that the dimension of the ethical is of this world and not of the “Heavenly City gravitating in the skies over the terrestrial city.”

A few pages later, Levinas describes two modalities of being: the first is the struggle of competing egoisms driven by their *conatus essendi*, while the second is a “rational peace” or “calculation, mediation and politics” where the struggle of each against all “becomes exchange and commerce.” He then attempts to undermine the notion of subjective freedom by a notion of the responsible subject “traumatised” by the persistence of the “other in the same.” As Caygill claims, Levinas’s exposition disengages the subject from the “categories of quality” or the “said” in order to present the subjectivity of the subject in terms of “modal categories of ethics.” One of the primary “modal categories of ethics” in *Otherwise than Being* (in addition to responsibility and “substitution”) is proximity.

As is well known, proximity in Levinas’s work denotes something quite different than its normal definition within “ontological categories” such as spatial distance. It is also more generally not a function of being, for which Levinas says proximity is a “limit or complement to the accomplishment of the adventure of

---

65 *Otherwise than Being*, 16. Here Levinas gives a preliminary answer, which as we will see, is an initial move towards what will eventually be associated with justice: “In this disinterestedness, when, as a responsibility for the other, it is also a responsibility for the third party, the justice that compares, assembles and conceives, the synchrony of being and peace, take form.”

66 Ibid., xlvi.

67 Ibid., 4.

68 Ibid., 4.

69 Ibid., 112.

70 *Levinas and the Political*, 133.
essence, which consists in persisting in essence and unfolding immanence.”71 He dismisses these categories of proximity as an “exteriority conjured.”72 Instead, he conceives proximity in terms of the subject’s sensibility, now expanded beyond the analysis of enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity* to include contact, exposure and vulnerability to the human other, which he calls a “saying” prior to the “said” of any language and without which language would not be possible.73 We will explain this further below. Indeed, as we will see, Levinas argues that the very character of language depends upon contact or proximity. Language is meaningful precisely because, in the self’s proximity to the human other, the other person already concerns or means something to the self.74

Levinas’s presentation of the subject in terms of proximity begins with his argument that sensibility itself, in its expanded sense, is animated by responsibility, and then claims that “proximity [is] to be the sense of . . . sensibility.”75 We see in Chapter III of *Otherwise than Being* that Levinas’s task is to show that sensibility emerges not from a relationship between an intention and the intended object, but from proximity. He proceeds by reassigning sensibility to passivity, vulnerability and exposure rather than activity, which then leads to his argument that subjectivity emerges from its relation with the human other. Accordingly, Levinas defines sensibility as “exposedness to the other” and compares this exposure to an “inversion of the *conatus* of *esse*, a having been offered without any holding back, a not finding protection in any consistency or identity of a state.”76 Yet Caygill sees the implications of locating sensibility in the proximity of the other as more radical than a mere inversion of activity and passivity. First, he argues, sensibility is separated from any agency, even that of giving oneself to the other, since the act of giving would suggest that some trace of commonality of being persists in order for the gift to be made.77 Furthermore, Caygill observes that the exposure to the other in sensibility is anachronous, without foundation.78 As Levinas himself says:

71 *Otherwise than Being*, 16.
72 Ibid., 16.
73 Ibid., 16.
74 *Discovering Levinas*, 127.
75 *Otherwise than Being*, 19.
76 Ibid., 75.
77 *Levinas and the Political*, 136.
78 *Otherwise than Being*, 136.
In the having been offered without any holding back the past infinitive form underlines the non-present, the non-commencement, the non-initiative of the sensibility. This non-initiative is older than any present, and is not a passivity contemporaneous with and counterpart of an act. It is the hither side of the free and the non-free, the anarchy of the Good.79

This passage, of course, recalls the discussion in the previous chapter regarding the theme of diachrony. Here he describes diachrony or the “hither side” in terms of the subject’s vulnerability prior to any cause; sensibility is “put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause, before the appearing of the other. It is pre-original not resting on oneself, the restlessness of someone persecuted.”80 As Caygill observes, the move from an exposed and vulnerable sensibility to a “persecuted” subject marks a shift in Levinas’s argument from sensibility to the notion of the subject as “persecuted” by the proximity of the human other.81

Levinas will consistently use the term “persecution” along with the terms “obsession” and “trauma” beyond their rhetorical force to contrast his notion of subjectivity with that of the subject as conatus essendi. The subject is under accusation “by the other”, which understood grammatically signifies the accusative case. The human other is the topic of my regard (il me regarde) only because I am the accusative of his look (il me regarde).82 The subject is an accusative: me, which Levinas argues is not a declension from a nominative but rather an absolute accusative like the French pronoun se for which he argues Latin grammars “know no nominative form”.83 In this sense, the subject is exposed and vulnerable to the human other. What Levinas emphasises here, as Caygill observes, is that proximity is not a modality of knowing or recognising the other in his or her freedom (as in Hegel), or of loving them as much as I love myself (as in Augustine), but is rather an ordering, an orientation, to be traumatically affected or under accusation by the other.84

After describing the “trauma” of proximity and its role in sensibility and the constitution of the subject, Levinas proceeds to extend his discussion of proximity in two separate but related directions, both of which seek to link proximity with justice. First, he traces the “trauma” of proximity back to the “otherwise than being at the basis

---

79 Otherwise than Being, 75.
80 Ibid., 136.
81 Levinas and the Political, 136.
82 Otherwise than Being, 112.
83 Ibid., 112.
84 Levinas and the Political, 136.
of proximity” which he calls “substitution”. The second direction Levinas takes in his discussion of proximity is what Caygill calls a “synthetic” movement that passes from substitution and proximity to the question of justice, and thus the movement into being. As we will see, the tracing of proximity to substitution forms the central core of his argument to locate the dimension of the divine in justice, linking the “trauma” of proximity with what he calls at the outset of the work “a merciless exposure to the trauma of transcendence.” This exposure consists in showing that what appears to the “substantiality of the subject” or “my unparalleled identity” is in fact an ethical modality: substitution. We will say more about what Levinas means precisely by “substitution” in a moment. After our brief analysis of proximity, we now need to show how the ethical modes of proximity and “substitution” move into modes of being, including justice.

3.2 Proximity, Substitution, The Third Party and the Question of Justice

The description of the ethical modality of “substitution” at the basis of proximity is found in Chapter IV of Otherwise than Being ("Substitution"), which Levinas calls the “centrepiece” of the book. The movement of substitution can be formally described in terms of the “by the other” of proximity converted into the “for the other” of responsibility. In this chapter, Levinas critiques the Western (Hegelian) tradition which seeks to unite subjectivity and substantiality. According to Caygill, Hegel’s political speculative proposal is to align the “objective” freedom of the state with the “subjective” freedom of the subject. This is accomplished by means of recognition, with the subject recognising itself in substance and then substance recognising itself in the subject. Levinas seeks to interrupt the principled movement—which works through the principle of identity, the rule or arche of the One—with anarchy. He declares that the subject must be conceived outside all “substantial
Proximity disrupts any possible mediation between subject and substance, or between subjective and objective freedom; it is an-archical, literally without principle or ideality. The an-archy of proximity does not constitute anything; it is rather a disturbance or “breach” which only leaves its mark or “trace” in the present. Yet, as Caygill rightly observes, Levinas cannot leave the subject in proximity, a “beautiful soul” unable to unite subject and substance. It is necessary for Levinas to show that proximity can and does indeed become responsible, which Caygill argues can only be shown if he can forge a link between proximity and substitution. As we will now see, Levinas moves from the subject being called into question by the other person in proximity to being responsible for the other through substitution.

Levinas begins to forge this link when he argues that proximity involves the “suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as the other in me. The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification”, is infinite, or “beyond its capacity to endure.” Yet he insists this does not lead to the dissolution or slavery of the self because—and this is a key moment in his argument—

[b]ecause, since an “immemorial time”, anarchically, in subjectivity the by-the-other is also the for-the-other. In suffering by the fault of the other dawns suffering for the fault of others, supporting. The for-the-other keeps all the patience of undergoing imposed by the other. There is substitution for the other, expiation for another.

With this move from proximity “by the other” to responsibility “for the other” through substitution, Levinas considers himself to be naming the “otherwise than being” or the primordial condition of “hostage” which constitutes the very subjectivity of the subject. The substitution or “expiation” for the human other are terms interconnected with responsibility, but according to Levinas, with expiation the “trauma” of proximity is made more intense by the self substituting itself for not just the human other, but all others. That is to say, the self suffers the proximities suffered by all the others; it is a “hostage expiating for the violence of the persecution itself.”

---

93 Otherwise than Being, 114.
94 Ibid., 100.
95 Levinas and the Political, 138.
96 Otherwise than Being, 124-125. Original emphasis.
97 Ibid., 125.
98 Otherwise than Being, 127.
Adding to this intensification is Levinas’s insistence that this act of expiation is infinite: “The self, the subjection or subjectivity of the subject, is the very overemphasis of a responsibility for creation. Responsibility for the other, for what has not begun in me, is responsibility in the innocence of being a hostage.”99 The weight of this responsibility is emphasised by the term “hostage”, for responsibility both radically singularises the subject while at the same time investing it with a universal, indeclinable vocation. As Levinas writes, “No one can substitute himself for me, who substitutes myself for all”.100 Thus, in this way the subject qua subject assumes an infinite responsibility beyond its capacity, and this movement inaugurates the contraction of the infinite via an expansion of the subject, for whom substitution is never fully discharged.101 Thus, Levinas summarises the movement from proximity to substitution which arrives at substitution “in” proximity:

Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation – persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without archē characteristic of identity, is a hostage. The word means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone.102

Proximity and substitution are central tenets of Levinas’s argument that the subjectivity of the subject consists in responsibility prior to freedom, for without them the subject could just as easily renege on its infinite responsibilities. Yet in what might seem like a surprising move, Levinas accepts precisely this possibility when he acknowledges that there is indeed a possible (and as we will see below, necessary) passage from substitution and proximity to a mode of being which he calls justice. In the final sections of Otherwise than Being, Levinas seeks to link the ethical categories of proximity, substitution and responsibility with the order to responsibility. To do this requires an account of the third party and the question of justice.

In the latter part of Chapter V, entitled “Subjectivity and Infinity”, Levinas marks out the path which leads to the return to being. He asks: “Why would proximity, the pure signification of saying, the anarchic one-for-the-other of beyond being, revert to being or fall into being, into a conjunction of entities, into essence showing itself in

99 Otherwise than Being, 125.
100 Ibid., 126.
101 Levinas and the Political, 139.
102 Otherwise than Being, 114. Original emphasis.
The return to being is necessary in order to address the question of justice that is provoked by the entry of another neighbour, the “third party”. Levinas moves between the human other and the third party, finding that proximity is supplemented or “corrected” by the advent of the third and the subsequent demand to weigh one’s responsibilities. This demand introduces what Levinas calls the “question of justice”, which he also calls a “question of consciousness”:

Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematisation, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality the intelligibility of a system and the intellect and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.

Although the return to being is necessary, Levinas insists that any return has already been transformed by proximity and substitution. Indeed, he argues that the entry of the third party is not an “empirical fact” that leads to the advent of consciousness. Instead, the third party already “obsesses” the subject in the proximity of the human other, and this obsession demands justice, that is, the weighing of responsibilities. He adds that justice is not to be conceived apart from proximity:

Justice is not a legality regulating human masses, from which a technique of social equilibrium is drawn, harmonising antagonistic forces. That would be a justification of the State delivered over to its own necessities. Justice is impossible without the one who renders it finding himself in proximity.

Levinas’s concept of justice thus emerges in *Otherwise than Being* as the ethical qualification of being, a calling into question and correction of the potentially totalising operations of the self-interested subject and by extension, the political realm and its institutions which seek to protect freedom and responsible self-interest. Yet one must ask how this tentative relation between the ethical and thematised political is maintained? How can justice show itself, that is, be “pronounced” without the ethical being dissolved into the ontological, yet also preventing the ethical from being subsumed into a private, interior realm? Levinas’s answer is to assign a new (and yet strangely familiar) role to philosophy, or discourse: For being to remain ethical, philosophy must be called upon to “justify” and “criticise” the “laws of being.”

---

103 *Otherwise than Being*, 157.
104 Ibid., 157.
105 Ibid., 157.
106 Ibid., 158.
107 Ibid., 159.
108 Ibid., 165.
other words, it must be fundamentally engaged in what he calls “scepticism”. Indeed, he argues that this “scepticism” institutes justice in its recognition of the “breakup of consciousness.” As we will now see, justice issues neither in the certainty of a principle nor in the certainty of a face, but in the forever uncertain, unfulfilled desire for certainty. In *Otherwise than Being* and subsequent works, Levinas emphasises that it is the *uncertainty* of responsibility that constitutes ethical life and hence justice.

### 3.3 Scepticism and Justice: Justifying Oneself before the Other

In our analysis of proximity and substitution, we have seen that for Levinas, the an-archical relation to the human other and the advent of the third party is the “condition” for properly oriented reflection. Understood this way, reflection is not a naturally occurring capacity, but is the evidence and expression of a prior social relationship. Yet equally it is a relationship which summons or constitutes the subject who is then said to be one of the terms of that relationship. Thus, it is by a gratuity of the other and the third party that “ethical” reflection—the measuring and acceptance of responsibility—becomes possible. Once the subject is introduced into the practice of such reflection, s/he can reflect on reflection itself and recognise both its origin and operation. Or in Levinas’s terms: “Men have been able to be thankful for the very fact of finding themselves able to thank; the present gratitude is grafted onto itself as onto an already antecedent gratitude.”

With this understanding of reflection in mind, the act of questioning or demanding justification can be seen in a new light, in light of the movement between ethics and being. The act of questioning itself is the enactment of justice. Let us explain this further.

Diane Perpich gives the example of a sceptic’s question with regard to Levinas’s philosophy, in which the sceptic asks for evidence that the human other should be his or her concern: “What is my brother to me or I to him that I should

---

109 *Otherwise than Being*, 165.
110 Ibid., 165.
112 Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 143.
113 *Otherwise than Being*, 10.
concern myself with his welfare?" 114 The sceptic is, in effect, demanding a reason that would justify the human other’s indeclinable summons to responsibility. Perpich observes that in so doing, the sceptic is already implicated in the very practices of reflection which express or enact the relation that is put in question. That is, the sceptic uses a practice which is already grounded in the ethical relation in order to question whether such a relation could really be demanded of him or her. The sceptic’s question, therefore, involves her in a kind of “performative contradiction” that is in a sense “self-defeating or self-refuting.” 115

Before we elaborate upon the implications of this example further, two further points need to be reemphasised. First, despite locating proximity in sensibility itself, responsibility is never a natural state in Levinas’s thought: “Nothing in this passivity of possession by the Good . . . becomes a natural tendency. The relation to the other is not convertible into a nature.” 116 What Levinas means by “possession by the Good” does not result automatically in natural sentiments of care, affection, love or compassion; it does not envisage a naturalised concern for the other as the site or expression of anarchical responsibility. 117 The advent of responsibility is a matter of an anarchical subjection to the Good, such that, as Perpich observes, any posterior affirmation of it “cannot amount to an experience of this Good.” 118 It is only one’s election to responsibility that can be affirmed.

Second, and more importantly, reflection (as the measuring and acceptance of responsibility) does not guarantee moral principledness in the conventional sense; that is, the anarchical summons to responsibility does not guarantee that we will be able to discover and articulate in universal terms that one might call “ethical goodness” or “right” moral action. What is important about this claim is that while the election to responsibility is certainly, according to Levinas, the condition for moral responsibility in a non-Levinasian sense, it is equally the condition for what he calls the “seductions of irresponsibility.” 119 Indeed, he calls this temptation to irresponsibility “the very

114 Otherwise than Being, 143.

115 The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, 143-144.


117 The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, 144.

118 Ibid., 144.

119 “Humanism and An-Archy”, 137.
incarnation of the subject or his presence in being.” He is quick to point out, however, that the “temptation” to irresponsibility is not due to a “fallen nature” or a body that corrupts an otherwise righteous will. Rather, one is faced with the choice between responsibility and irresponsibility only because one has to be already constituted as a subject, which as we have seen involves an exposure to an “other” that remains other. This raises a significant question: Does Levinas’s analysis not inevitably lead to moral relativism? To answer this question, we must return to the role of scepticism as it is discussed in Otherwise than Being.

Late in Chapter V of the work, Levinas argues that scepticism is one of the main functions of philosophy, or more exactly, it is the moment of the ethical “saying” within philosophy. In the demand for justification, the fact of the sceptic’s recognition of the demand qua demand (even as possibly illegitimate but nonetheless meaningful) means, as Perpich observes, that the sceptic remains bound by an ethical obligation which is enacted in her own discourse. Scepticism therefore, for Levinas, is an enactment of justice: “It is as though scepticism were sensitive to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice.” If the “truth” of ethical “saying” (exposure to the other) is put on the same level as the truths made possible by it (the signification of that exposure stated in the “said”), scepticism would no longer figure as ethical. Thus, justice itself demands that even the claim of the indeclinable summons to responsibility must be open to the demand for justification.

Philosophy, insofar as it engages in the demand for justification, enacts justice inasmuch as it is the work of at least two incarnate “philosophers” engaged in discourse. For Levinas, philosophy is not an internal monologue nor is it the disclosure of a world spirit or universal reason. The demand for justification—scepticism—prevents the “saying” from being “frozen” in the “said”. To demand justification for responsibility is already to be implicated in the very responsibility—the subjection to the “Good”—that the sceptic’s question above would presumably like to contest. The

120 “Humanism and An-Archy”, 137.
121 Otherwise than Being, 168-169. “The philosophical speaking that betrays in its said the proximity it conveys before us still remains, as a saying a proximity and a responsibility. Philosophy circumscribes the life of the approach and it measures obligations before the third party with justice and knowledge, with wisdom; it does not undo this life.”
122 The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, 146.
123 Otherwise than Being, 168.
124 The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, 123.
sceptic can challenge particular moral claims, but she cannot, without denying herself or her own uniqueness, challenge her engagement.\textsuperscript{125}

Perpich argues that for a Levinasian conception of scepticism, then, norms may be contestable, but what is incontestable is the moment of normativity: the subject cannot be indifferent to the demand of the human other.\textsuperscript{126} While disagreements will persist with regard to the moral “rightness” or “wrongness” of a particular action, the obligation to seek justice, to weigh one’s responsibilities to the human other against the responsibilities to all others is constitutive of who we are. As Levinas says, “[l]anguage is already scepticism”, meaning that language already expresses the ethical relation that makes the demand for justification possible.\textsuperscript{127}

Contrary to those who would question the normativity of Levinas’s ethics of responsibility, we have sought to show that his account actually seeks to articulate a concept of normativity whereby the self is bound to recognise the command to responsibility as a moral command which solicits a response, even though it must be granted that this normativity does not yield any principles for action. But one question remains: what gives his account its normative force? Or more exactly, what is this authority which compels the subject to respond? This question now calls for a consideration of the relation between justice and the “dimension of the divine”. We are now ready to begin considering the answer to our original question: how does justice produce the “breach” that leads to God?


In a somewhat enigmatic passage in Chapter V of \textit{Otherwise than Being}, Levinas makes a link between responsibility, society (justice) and God. He argues that although it is necessary for the third party, out of the concern for justice, to introduce a “correction” of the asymmetrical relation of proximity with the human other, such a correction is also a “betrayal”—a necessary “betrayal”—of the subject’s “anarchical relation with illeity.”\textsuperscript{128} We recall from the previous chapter that Levinas introduces the neologism \textit{illeity} to describe the “beyond” from which the face comes, and in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas}, 122.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 170.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 158.
\end{footnotesize}
several of his texts he often uses *illeity* and “God” interchangeably. He, in this section of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas argues that the concern for justice is the way in which the an-archic relation with *illeity* is conveyed before us, yet justice also introduces what he calls a “betrayal” of this relationship. Justice—understood in *Otherwise than Being* as the measuring of responsibility—seeks to thematise the “saying” of responsibility in the “said” of language, but because the saying has its origin in the an-archical passing of the Infinite (the “otherwise” than being), the said of language will always express these themes “unfaithfully” or inadequately. However, while the shift from responsibility to justice introduces a “betrayal” of *illeity*, of the trace of the divine in the human face, Levinas makes the paradoxical claim that it is also the case that there is a “new relation” with *illeity*:

There is a betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, but also a new relationship with it: it is only thanks to God that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an other by the others, that is, “for myself”. “Thanks to God” I am another for the others. God is not involved as an alleged interlocutor: the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity. The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society.

In other words, this new relation means that the subject is only put in a position, like everyone else, to be concerned for justice insofar as s/he is encountered by others as “other”. Richard Cohen calls this passing of God the ethical “force” which binds me to the other person in responsibility. Moreover, it is only because the human other concerns the subject that one is bound to set about developing principles, institutions and laws for a just and benevolent society.

The implication of this passage is that society and the responsibility that precedes it are both grounded in the ethical “force” of God. Yet how is this force made

---

129 See e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts” (1969), in *Beyond the Verse*, translated by Gary D. Mole (London: Continuum Books, 1982), 126: “This anteriority of responsibility must be understood in relation to freedom as the very authority of the Absolute which is ‘too great’ for the measure or finitude of presence, revelation, order and being, and which . . . is the ‘excluded third party’ of the beyond being and non-being, a third person that we have called ‘illeity’ and that is perhaps also expressed by the word God.” See also “The Trace of the Other”, 359; “God and Philosophy”, 69; *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 147-149.

130 *Otherwise than Being*, 158.

131 Ibid., 6.

132 Ibid., 158.

133 Richard A. Cohen: *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 185. Cohen argues that what Levinas means by “height” is the moral force encountered in the face of the other person as the subject’s obligation to and responsibility for that other person.

134 Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 193.
evident so that Levinas can claim that it is through justice that the relation with *illeity* is “conveyed”? To answer, we must look more closely at Levinas’s conception of *illeity*.

### 4.1 *Illeity* and the Normative “Force” of Ethics in Justice

Levinas introduces the neologism “illeity” in three essays written between the publication of *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*: “The Trace of the Other” (1963), “Meaning and Sense” (1964) and “Enigma and Phenomena” (1965). It seems that in the years after writing *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas gave considerable thought to the relationship between ethics and religion, between the face of the human other and God. This train of thought is developed in greater depth in *Otherwise than Being* and continues in the 1975 essay “God and Philosophy”. As Michael Morgan observes, with the increasing use of vocabulary choices that are often used in religious discourse, such as “trace”, “glory”, and “witness”, it might *prima facie* be assumed that Levinas seeks to describe the moral force of the face—what conveys the face as a command—as God or as an “epiphany” of God. Yet Levinas clearly wishes to have the reader avoid such a conclusion, and the term “illeity” is employed to disrupt the assumption that God is a being who authorises through command the responsibility for the human other.

In “Meaning and Sense”, Levinas describes the face-to-face relation and its significance as a “return to Platonism in a new way.” This is an illuminating claim, to which we will return to examine in greater detail in Chapter Six. For our current purposes we wish to show that for Levinas, to catch sight of a situation that “precedes culture”, or more exactly, to conceive the relation of the face-to-face which exists “prior to history and culture”, is to return in a new way to Platonism insofar as Platonism is (according to Levinas) an affirmation of the human independently of culture and history. In the last section of the essay, Levinas asks whether the “beyond”, from which the face comes, is not just another philosophical idea or principle. In other words, perhaps there “is” no transcendent “beyond”; perhaps the One, or God, is just another element in the totality of the same. To avoid this

---

135 *Discovering Levinas*, 188.


137 Levinas, “Meaning and Sense”, 58.

138 Ibid., 58. “Is not the ‘beyond’ from which the face comes, and which fixes consciousness in its straightforwardness, an idea understood and disclosed in its turn?”
conclusion, Levinas must clarify how the face does not point beyond itself to something transcendent “behind the scenes” to which it is a referent. And yet, for the face to carry any kind of authoritative or normative force, Levinas argues there must be such a “beyond” or absolute ground, like the One of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*; either the face itself must be the ground or it must point beyond itself.139 Levinas suggests one possible way out of this dilemma is with his analysis of *illeity*.

The previous chapter showed that the face appears in the trace of a diachronous time, the “utterly bygone, utterly past Absent.”140 Thus, *illeity* or “God” who has passed by is forever absent, never present. *Illeity*, understood as the “He” of the I-Thou relation, is not in direct relation with the subject, but is rather the trace left behind in the face of the human other. Hence, as he writes in “Enigma and Phenomenon”, to draw close to God is to respond to the face of the human other. He calls it the “illuminated site of being [that] is but the passage of God.”141 Therefore, for Levinas, to speak of the locus in which one can “encounter” God, one can only describe it as a modality of being (that is, as a “said”) which testifies to the trace of an event already passed, yet the passing signifies only in this modality, in ethical action or justice given to the neighbour and the third party.142 It is not known or experienced but lived, given without having decided to give. However, it not yet clear how Levinas links God, responsibility and social justice such that they can be “conveyed” in the way he describes it in *Otherwise than Being*.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas distinguishes the “third person” character of *illeity* from the “third party” that is the entry into society, language or justice: “This ‘thirdness’ [of *illeity*] is different from that of the third man; it is the third party that interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other man, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbour; it is the third man with which justice begins.”143 While the third party inaugurates the question of justice and is not identical to *illeity*, the two are nevertheless related. As Morgan observes, in every social interaction, whether or not it

139 “Meaning and Sense”, 59. Levinas here is referring to Plato, *Parmenides* 137e.142a. Also, I use the term “ground” somewhat tentatively here, since the relationship between what is transcendent and what is immanent is not, in Levinas’s thought, one of ground to grounded, but as I hope to show, the term does provide at least a helpful analogy for this relationship.


142 *Otherwise than Being*, 147.

143 Ibid., 150.
is actually just, responsibility is assumed. The face of the neighbour orders me to responsibility; as Levinas himself says, “the order [is] in my response itself,” and *illeity* is “this way for the order to come from I know not where”, or again, “It is the coming of the order to which I am subjected before hearing it.” Morgan suggests that all that Levinas describes here is “present in society” and gives society the “urgency of justice” and hence its grounding and significance. As we will see in a moment, Levinas calls this social condition and striving for justice a “betrayal of my anarchic relation with *illeity*” that is also a “new relationship with it.” Here, as Morgan observes, Levinas claims that there is a sense in which the relationship with the third party—the relationships of social life—compromise the utter particularity of the asymmetrical relation with the other person. The self’s infinite responsibility for the other person is now qualified or measured; that is, it enters into a kind of calculation that Levinas argues is central to the work of justice.

However, it is clear that for Levinas, infinite responsibility cannot be adequately qualified, restricted and thematised. This is why the role of scepticism is so essential for Levinas’s overall argument. As Perpich observes, scepticism is both a figure for and an enactment of the fate of the ethical dimension of justice. In Levinas’s words: “It is as though scepticism were sensitive to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition of the statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice.” In other words, Levinas argues that the Infinite, in order to remain infinite or transcendent, will always lead to the contestation or even refutation of the attempt to thematise it. Transcendence “requires ambiguity”, which for Levinas points to a “blinking of meaning.” This blinking of meaning alone dislodges the Infinite or “God” from becoming fixed in the said of language, which at the same time signifies as the “breach” that leads to God, for the ambiguity or question mark—the appeal to justify or provide an answer contained in the question itself—is already the affirmation of an otherwise than being.

---

144 *Discovering Levinas*, 192.
145 Ibid., 192. See also, e.g., *Otherwise than Being*, 150.
146 *Discovering Levinas*, 192.
147 *Otherwise than Being*, 158.
148 *Discovering Levinas*, 192.
149 *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 146.
150 *Otherwise than Being*, 168.
151 Ibid., 152.
The necessity of preventing the fixing of the word “God” in the said is also why in Levinas’s thought God is always posited as a “dimension” rather than a being. He is “encountered” not in any kind of direct revelation or participation but rather in a modality or dimension of the ethical relation. However, “God” is not purely exterior or transcendent. Without losing its transcendence, the dimension of the divine is nonetheless internal or immanent. This immanence flows from the justice given to the human other. The command to responsibility does not merely remain external to me, but infiltrates me as an affectation by the human other for the human other.\(^{152}\) It is God’s having always already passed via the trace left in the face of the human other that gives the other person’s presence to me its obligatory status, its ethical or “normative” force.\(^{153}\) This relation is what compels one to speak, to thematise and utter the “said” in the attempt to measure responsibilities, but it is also what compels me to contest or justify what is spoken—in Levinas’s words, to go beyond the “straight line” of justice for a better justice\(^{154}\)—because the infinite demands of responsibility can never be fulfilled or thematised absolutely. As we have attempted to show, both thematisation and its contestation (both of which arise out of concern for the other person and the third party) constitute the work of justice.

5. Conclusion

The task of this chapter has been to show how Levinas conceives the work of justice as the “dimension” in which the “breach” that leads to God is produced. The relation with God is therefore not conceived as a kind of coincidence or spiritual friendship which motivates one to the work of justice. Instead, the “revelation” of God is accomplished in the work of justice. That is, because the relation with God is not direct but rather indirect through the face of the human other, the “encounter” with God does not incite one to justice but rather accomplishes the dimension of the divine through justice given to the neighbour and to the third party. Because the relation with God is accomplished in justice rather than in acts responding to a given theme, and because justice has a positive signification both in terms of ethical responsibility (the saying) and language (the said), Levinas’s conception of justice does not provide a

\(^{152}\) *Otherwise than Being*, 119.

\(^{153}\) *Discovering Levinas*, 194.

\(^{154}\) *Totality and Infinity*, 245. “... justice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice, and henceforth nothing can mark the end of this march; behind the straight line of the law the land of goodness extends infinite and unexplored ... I am therefore necessary for justice, as responsible beyond every limit fixed by an objective law.”
locus where God is present in the act itself; it rather provides a locus which gives meaning or significance to the notion of revelation. God is “brought to mind” by justice.\textsuperscript{155}

However, while Levinas argues that the said does not negate the saying, we have seen that it nonetheless introduces a “betrayal” of the saying whereby the work of justice would always bear a trace of injustice, since it can never adequately represent the saying of ethical responsibility. But this raises an important question: if justice can never be perfect justice, can justice by itself be said to produce the “breach” that leads to God?

Levinas himself comments in an interview that despite the consciousness of justice in Europe after the Holocaust, the persistence of violence discloses that the quest for justice will always be incomplete and not yet wholly just, and therefore must always become better.\textsuperscript{156} Justice, he argues, cannot become a universal principle or merely a “moment of justice” like a law; one must return to a consideration of the unique individual, otherwise justice becomes totalitarian.\textsuperscript{157} For Levinas, therefore, one must return to what he calls charity or mercy; that is, one must reconsider the “personal appeal” of the unique individual in order for justice to become more just.\textsuperscript{158} Although Levinas does not make a distinction between love (understood as charity) and justice in Totality and Infinity, he remarks in the introduction to the German Edition of this work—as he also argues consistently in his works published after Totality and Infinity—that the responsibility for the other is equivalent to “love without all concupiscence.”\textsuperscript{159} In a late interview, Levinas acknowledges that although the State is an institution in which the idea of justice is superimposed upon love or the face-to-face relation, the true essence of the human resides in that “initial goodness” and that justice must be traced back to it.\textsuperscript{160} Elsewhere, he goes so far as to say that

\begin{itemize}
\item[155] Otherwise than Being, 162.
\item[157] Levinas, “Being Towards Death”, 134.
\end{itemize}
justice “comes from love” and that “love must always watch over justice.”\textsuperscript{161} Or again, the charity which marks the ethical relation with the human other is required in order for the question of justice and the subsequent revelation of the dimension of the divine to appear.

If the (inter-)relation between justice and love carries greater significance for Levinas’s conception of revelation than we have seen in our analysis thus far, a deeper analysis of charity or love with regard to justice is necessary to understand fully the relation between ethics, justice and the dimension of the divine, which is the subject of our next chapter.

Chapter 5 – A “Love Without Eros”: The Evolution of the Interrelation Between Love and Justice as the Modalities of the Ethical Relation which Compose the Movement “Unto-God”

In the foreword to his 1986 collection of essays entitled Of God Who Comes to Mind, Levinas writes that one’s relation to God has its advent in the relation with the face of the human other, in the “sociality” which is one’s responsibility for the neighbour.¹ He describes responsibility in terms which are now familiar to us: it is a way of “being dedicated” prior to any act of will, but then adds to this description another term: it is a “love without eros.”² Not only does he align responsibility with love, but he also makes the claim that this love is an essential aspect of the movement “unto-God” [à-Dieu]. Indeed, in the following short but remarkable passage, Levinas argues that love (as responsibility) is an essential modality of the ethical relation which makes the “unto-God” possible:

This [responsibility] . . . is like a devotion that, in its dis-interested-ness, misses precisely no goal but is diverted—by a God “who loves the stranger” rather than showing himself—toward the other man for whom I have to respond. A responsibility without concern for reciprocity: I have to respond for an other without attending to an other’s responsibility in regard to me. A relation without correlation, or a love of the neighbour that is a love without eros. For-the-other-man and thereby unto God! . . . As demand and responsibility . . . such is the concrete origin or the original situation where the Infinite places itself in me, where the idea of the Infinite commands the spirit, and the word God comes to the tip of one’s tongue. Here is inspiration and, thus, the prophetic event of the relation to the new.³

There are several ideas introduced here that warrant further explanation, such as the notion of God as one who “loves the stranger”, or what he means by “love without eros”, or again how love of the neighbour constitutes the “prophetic event of the relation to the new.” In what follows, this chapter will examine each of these ideas more closely, but first we must ask a broader question with regard to this passage: Why has love entered into Levinas’s conception of the encounter with God or “dimension of the divine” when in much of his earlier work he has identified this almost exclusively with the work of justice?

² Levinas, in the Foreword to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xv.
³ Ibid., xv.
In one sense, by utilising the term “love” Levinas is expanding his vocabulary for responsibility, and is also associating “God” with the encounter with the face of the other person. Although this is not a new idea in Levinas’s thought, what is new in this passage is the way in which Levinas moves beyond merely associating God with responsibility. He is exploring the notion of responsibility in order to uncover where God “fits” into the encounter with the face. Or more exactly, as Michael Morgan observes, Levinas seeks to expose what it is about this relation that the word “God” expresses, and why it is that the human context or site that is the “venue” for God, as it were, consists of the “ethical” modalities of both love and justice.

The central task of this chapter is to explore how Levinas develops his claim that justice and love are the modalities of the ethical relation which compose the movement “unto-God” [à-Dieu]. Moreover, we seek to determine whether this claim informs the broader task of discerning whether Levinas’s argument that the ethical relation is the indispensable site of the revelatory “encounter” with an unthinkable, unthematisable God can provide a grounding for theology to engage with the biblical God. This task is admittedly neither simple nor straightforward, for at least two reasons. First, the notion of love is an evolving term in Levinas’s thought. As we will see, in Levinas’s work up through Totality and Infinity, not only is love not related to justice, it is a genuine hindrance to its accomplishment. From Otherwise than Being onward, however, Levinas clearly asserts that love and justice are in fact interrelated and, even more remarkably, that justice itself is derived from love. Our first task, therefore, will be to examine what accounts for this shift in his thought. It is a shift that moves from a conception of love primarily understood as eros to one which more closely resembles caritas or the more specifically Jewish notion of hesed.

Second, Levinas often laments that love is a word with which he is not entirely comfortable. In “Philosophy, Justice and Love” (1982), for example, he states that he doesn’t like to use the word “love” much because it is “worn-out” and “ambiguous”. And yet, the word appears quite often in his later works, both as a way to juxtapose the face-to-face relation with justice and as one of the modalities of the ethical relation which constitute the movement towards God. As we will see, Levinas’s increased use of the word “love” with regard to the ethical relation, along with the notion of God

---

4 Michael Morgan, Discovering Levinas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 199.
who “loves the stranger”, comes with an increased acknowledgement of his debt to Franz Rosenzweig’s association of love with the concepts of revelation and redemption even while maintaining significant differences from Rosenzweig’s thought more generally.

Additionally, Levinas devotes greater attention in his later work to the interrelation between responsibility for the singular other person (love) and for that of the third party or political realm (justice). They are interrelated because the one cannot find its full expression without the other. As we suggested in the previous chapter, Levinas claims that justice is always incomplete and vulnerable to becoming unjust, and therefore must always become better. Once justice becomes law, out of a concern for universality, one must return to a consideration of the unique individual; otherwise justice runs the risk of becoming totalitarian. Thus, Levinas argues that one must return to what he calls love or mercy; one must reconsider the singular and unique face in order for justice to become more just.6 However, love also requires justice for its expression in the social realm. It is in this sense that Levinas argues that love is “impossible” without justice.7 Another way of stating this is that love, in Levinas’s conception, is unintelligible without justice, since justice is associated with the birth of consciousness and reason.

We will then seek to understand how the word “God” first comes to mind out of the encounter with the face of the human other, in the relation which is increasingly called in Levinas’s later works the love of one’s neighbour. This will be examined through a succinct comparison of Levinas’s notion of love in his later works with that of Charles Taylor’s contemporary retrieval of an Augustinian notion of love. We hope to show that while there are similarities, ultimately for Levinas it is not the love of God per se that empowers the subject to be responsible (and subsequently discover the source of that empowerment)—one is not the beneficiary of loving grace in a strictly Augustinian sense—but rather love is “generated” by the summons to responsibility.

Finally, we will evaluate whether Levinas’s claim that the context in which “God” and other theological notions arise—in the ethical relation, or more precisely the ethical modalities of love and justice—can in fact be “attested” to in these modalities themselves. Do love and justice, when enacted, cause one to recognise that

---


7 Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice and Love”, 104.
they are in fact the modalities which comprise the “prophetic event of the relation to
the new”, or the movement “unto” or “towards” God? To answer this question, while
acknowledging certain specific difficulties, is the goal of this chapter.

1. The Evolution of Love in Levinas’s Thought

In the 1954 essay “The Ego and the Totality”, which is a key indicator of his
early thought on the relation between love and justice, Levinas claims that love is
distinct, if not opposed, to justice. In one passage, Levinas writes:

To love is to exist as though lover and the beloved were alone in the world. The
intersubjective relationship of love is not the beginning, but the negation of
society. . . . The love of neighbour depends on chance proximity; it is hence love
of one being to the detriment of another, always privilege even if it is not
preference.8

He adds that the elevation of love as the “essential situation” of religious existence is
in part responsible for not only misunderstanding the true nature of love as a closed
society of two, but also for not acknowledging the harm that it does to justice for the
third party. He explains:

The love which contemporary religious thought, cleared of magical notions, has
promoted to the rank of the essential situation of religious existence, does not
contain the social reality. Society inevitably involves the existence of the third
party. The real you is not the beloved, detached from the others; he presents
himself in a different situation. The crisis of religion in contemporary spiritual life
is due to the consciousness that society goes beyond the confines of love, that a
third party is wounded as he witnesses amorous dialogue, and that the society of
love itself does him wrong. The lack of universality is not here due to a lack of
generosity, but due to the intimate essence of love. All love—unless it becomes
judgment and justice—is the love of a couple. The couple is a closed society.9

However, thirty years later, we see a very different presentation of the relation between
love and justice. For example, in “Philosophy, Justice and Love” (1982), we read that
when Levinas is asked if love and justice are alien to each other, he responds this way:

They are very close. I have tried to make this distinction: justice itself is born of
charity. They can seem alien when they are presented as successive stages: in
reality, they are inseparable and simultaneous. . . . Justice comes from love, [and] 
love must always watch over justice.10

8 Emmanuel Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality” (1954), in Emmanuel Levinas: Collected Philosophical Papers,
9 Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality”, 32.
10 “Philosophy, Justice and Love”, 91-92.
What is remarkable here is that not only does Levinas now posit love and justice as “inseparable” and “simultaneous”, but he adds the claim a few sentences later that love and justice comprise the movement in which the “word of God” is inscribed.11

The above quotes, when presented side by side, reveal—if not simply interpreted as a contradiction or muddling of terms—what appears to be a profound shift in Levinas’s thought over time on the subject of love and its relation to justice. What, then, accounts for this shift? It can be traced to two parallel yet closely related developments in his philosophical project: The first is the introduction of a kind of love more primordial in origin to *eros*, which Levinas calls charity or *hesed*; and the second is a greater concern in his later work on the interrelation and interdependence between the ethical realm and the socio-political realm. As we will see, these two domains become virtually synonymous with love and justice.

The first development sees Levinas making an explicit distinction between love as *eros*, on the one hand, and a love which more closely resembles *caritas* or the Jewish notion of *hesed*. Levinas defines *hesed* as “charity in its absolute gratuity,” a responsibility for the other which is not at all concerned with reciprocity.12 This distinction between erotic and non-erotic love in Levinas’s later work is barely discernible in his work up through *Totality and Infinity*. In the earlier work, the erotic relation provides a concrete instance of alterity and transcendence, insofar as Levinas posits that radical alterity must be the feminine and that the erotic relation aims at a future which is beyond itself, namely, fecundity. This is an argument which Levinas makes in *Existence and Existents* (1947), where for example one sees that “alterity par excellence” is the feminine.13 However, as Stella Sandford notes, what is remarkable about Levinas’s analysis of *eros* in the work up through *Totality and Infinity* is that Levinas’s conception of the themes related to the erotic relation will ultimately lead to their transformation, where love as *eros* becomes explicitly subordinate, even opposed to a prior, non-erotic form of love.14 As we will see, this new (and prior) relationship is

---

11 “Philosophy, Justice and Love”, 92.


no longer conceived on the plane of eros but rather on the plane of the face-to-face, which in Otherwise than Being is signified as maternity.\textsuperscript{15}

The second development sees Levinas devote greater attention in his later work to the interdependence between the ethical relation and that of the third party or political realm. As we saw in the previous chapter, Levinas generally refers to the relation with the human other in his work up through Totality and Infinity as part of the work of justice. However, in his work from Otherwise than Being onwards, the ethical relation is increasingly said to have its origin in a primordial “charity”, and this love provides the foundation for the establishment of justice.\textsuperscript{16} We see this described, for example, in his 1984 essay “Peace and Proximity”, where he maintains that the responsibility of the “I” for the human other is always already concern for the neighbour, which constitutes “the peace of proximity” and “the gravity of the love of one’s neighbour, of love without lust.”\textsuperscript{17}

Although Levinas offers no explicit explanation for the shift in his thought from a conception of love as eros to love as hesed or charity, there are, nevertheless, some clues in his work that signal this transformation in its various stages. To trace the evolution of Levinas’s thought on the relation between love and justice, we will begin with a brief survey of two of his post-war works, Time and the Other (1947) and Existents and Existence (1947), along with an essay written a few years later: “The Ego and the Totality” (1954), culminating with a brief examination of his analyses of eros and fecundity in Totality and Infinity.

1.1 Love as Isolated from the Work of Justice in Levinas’s Post-war Works

Levinas’s post-war works prior to Totality and Infinity are mainly concerned with the themes of alterity, transcendence, and asymmetry, all of which are features of the relationship with the human other, and appear in their original form in eros.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being (1974), translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 75.

\textsuperscript{16} See e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, in an interview entitled “Violence of the Face” (1985), in Alterity and Transcendence, translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press), 180. Levinas here describes the foundation of justice in love this way: “We live in a state in which the idea of justice is superimposed on that initial charity, but it is in that initial charity that the human resides; justice itself can be traced back to it.”

\textsuperscript{17} Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity” (1984), in Alterity and Transcendence, translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 141.

\textsuperscript{18} Emmanuel Levinas, Time and the Other (1948), translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 84-87. Levinas states that in civilised life “there are traces of this relationship with the
These themes are employed by Levinas partly out of a concern to demonstrate a break in Eleatic or Parmenidean unity; that is to say, he seeks to demonstrate how a break with totality is established.\(^{19}\) As Claire Katz observes, Levinas begins by positing that the relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual;\(^{20}\) instead, he claims that the feminine is the original “form” of alterity (which is not yet ethical alterity), and it is on the plane of \textit{eros} that one encounters the alterity of the feminine and subsequently, the possibility of transcendence in fecundity:

\begin{quote}
Intersubjectivity is not simply the application of the category of multiplicity to the domain of the mind. It is brought about by eros, where in the proximity of another the distance is wholly maintained, a distance whose pathos is made up of this proximity and this duality of beings. . . . It is in eros that transcendence can be conceived as something radical . . . the possibility of not inevitably returning to itself, the possibility of being fecund and . . . having a son.\(^{21}\)
\end{quote}

Fecundity is an essential element in Levinas’s early analyses of \textit{eros}, for it provides a concrete instance of an opening of the “closed society” of the couple to the third party or justice. As we will see, the themes articulated in these early works, established through the erotic relation with the feminine, lay the foundation for the analysis of the erotic relation in \textit{Totality and Infinity}.

In \textit{Time and the Other}, Levinas begins to sketch out the structure of the relation with another human being. He argues that for a relationship to be truly intersubjective, it cannot be reciprocal. As we saw in Chapter Three, Levinas characterises the intersubjective relationship as asymmetrical, already an encounter with the other as alterity. Here, we read that the human other’s alterity consists in simply being “what I myself am not.”\(^{22}\) However, the other’s alterity is not encountered as a mere negation of the “I”; instead, alterity is encountered as asymmetry: the other approaches from a position of command as well as solicitation. Yet who is this other? In \textit{Time and the Other}, the concrete form of alterity is marked by sexual difference.

\begin{footnotes}
\item [19] Levinas, \textit{Time and the Other}, 86. Here Levinas critiques the Eleatic notion of being, dominant in Plato’s philosophy, where “multiplicity was subordinated to the one.” Levinas argues here that sexuality and fecundity “introduce a duality into existence, a duality that concerns the very existing of each subject. Existing itself becomes double.”
\item [22] \textit{Time and the Other}, 85.
\end{footnotes}
Katz observes that for Levinas in the 1940s, it is on the plane of *eros*—and in relation to the feminine more specifically—that one encounters the “original form of this alterity.”\(^{23}\) She adds that the feminine is described by Levinas as the “absolutely contrary contrary [le contraire absolument contraire],” whose contrariety is unaffected by any relationship established with it, and where its terms remain absolutely other.\(^{24}\) By making this claim, Levinas contends that the feminine constitutes an alterity which cannot be characterised as merely “the reverse side of its identity”, or the opposition of two species within a genus.\(^{25}\) The feminine, therefore, is neither the “opposite sex” nor a simple negation; she is alterity.

After introducing the notions of asymmetry and alterity in *Time and the Other*, Levinas can now articulate how this relationship with alterity contains the possibility for transcendence, in which love as *eros* plays an essential role. We find his analysis of transcendence introduced in the final pages of *Existence and Existents*, published the same year as *Time and the Other*. Here he argues that this relationship with alterity is not merely to be described as a pathos forever denying the quest for union; the relation also becomes the site for transcendence, whereby the self does not return to itself, but projects itself toward the future. Yet it is not a future understood as being-toward-death, as in Heidegger, but rather a future characterised by life; that is to say, a future characterised by fecundity. According to Levinas, fecundity is the means by which the return to self is made incomplete. Love in itself, as he interprets the myth of Aristophanes, is a return to the self in satisfaction, where the “ego [is] satisfied by the you, apprehending in the other the justification of its being.”\(^{26}\) Yet he asserts that love, so understood, fails to see that love transcends itself; it is a relationship with the future.\(^{27}\) Transcendence is achieved through the erotic relation with alterity, through a love which engenders the birth of a child.

The introduction of fecundity is important for the development of Levinas’s philosophy not just for its interruption of the ego’s ineluctable return to itself, but also for the way in which it interrupts the “closed society” of the couple and opens them


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 39. She is commenting here on a passage from *Time and the Other*, 85, where Levinas argues that the alterity of the feminine “is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other.”

\(^{25}\) *Time and the Other*, 85.

\(^{26}\) “The Ego and the Totality”, 31.

\(^{27}\) *Time and the Other*, 87.
onto society. Society, Levinas argues, goes beyond the confines of love, beyond the closed society, by taking into account those who exist outside of the erotic relation. Fecundity thus allows love to extend beyond itself and into society.

It appears that in these post-war works, love in itself cannot have a relationship with justice except in negative terms: either as opposition or interruption. The possibility of opening up to society through fecundity is derivative of *eros*, but *eros* itself is insufficient to prevent the return to self. And yet, Levinas also claims that the erotic relation is an encounter with the alterity of the feminine. How can he reconcile the apparent contradiction between *eros* as a return to self (apart from fecundity) and the encounter with alterity? Would not the feminine lose her alterity in love if it is a movement that returns to self? To answer these questions, we must now turn to Section IV of *Totality and Infinity*.

1.2 Eros and Fecundity in *Totality and Infinity*

In Chapters Three and Four, we saw that *Totality and Infinity* introduces the face-to-face or ethical relation with the human other as the site or locus for transcendence. One of the central arguments for Levinas’s conception of the ethical relation as transcendence is the distinction made throughout *Totality and Infinity* between need and desire. We recall that for Levinas, need is experienced as a lack; it is an “immanence” whose origin springs from the “I”. Conversely, desire—or more exactly, metaphysical desire—is precisely not a lack, but rather has a “transcendent” origin as a demand coming to the “I” from the human other. Need finds its satisfaction in the fulfillment of whatever was lacking, whereas desire cannot be satisfied because it is not derived from any sort of lack.

In view of this distinction Levinas makes between need and desire, *eros* will be introduced in Section IV of *Totality and Infinity* as an “equivocation” between need and desire.28 That is to say, love as *eros* will be shown to involve both need and desire at the same time; it is marked by a fundamental ambiguity. Edith Wyschogrod describes this ambiguity in love between need and desire this way:

> Love, insofar as it is a relationship with other persons, is a desire; nevertheless, it finds its satiety as need. Yet this need is aimed at what is incorporable, as that which can never become part of the same, the other person, the beloved. Love is the unique phenomenon in which the Other appears as the object of need while

---

still remaining fully other. Love . . . offers not the disjunction of opposing phenomena desire and need, but their coexistence. It is at one and the same time “lust and transcendence,” and the utterable and the unutterable.29

When she says that love is a desire, Wyschogrod is drawing attention to the fact that for Levinas, the erotic relation presupposes the face-to-face relation with the human other.30 Yet at the same time, love finds its satiety in need; as Levinas says, it “throws us back this side of immanence itself.”31 The ambiguity in love, conceived as eros, thus creates the possibility of a “new” relation with the human other, one which could be characterised as the enjoyment of the other. In contrast to the enjoyment of sensibility, in Totality and Infinity the erotic enjoyment introduces the possibility of the human other appearing as an object of need without losing his or her alterity. This new possibility, Levinas argues, means that love goes both “further” and “less far” than the discourse of the ethical relation.32 It goes “less far” because the fulfillment of need as it relates to the enjoyment of the other in the erotic relation is prior to language. Yet it also goes “further” insofar as the erotic relation creates another possibility that the face-to-face relation by itself cannot produce: fecundity, or the birth of the child. This new relation to the other, marked by an ambiguity between immanence and transcendence, need and desire, going further and less far than language, is what Levinas means by “equivocation”.

To summarise, Levinas’s post-war works up through Totality and Infinity seek to describe the concrete instances for the encounter with alterity and the movement of transcendence. Through fecundity, love as the erotic relation has the possibility of transcending itself, of not returning to itself, projecting instead toward the future. It also breaks up the “closed society” of love, which would otherwise exclude the third party. In this sense, as Wyschogrod notes, fecundity opens onto the possibility for love to be engaged in a “redemptive” work in history—namely, transcendence of the self and through that transcendence, the opening onto society, or justice.33 It allows the self

---


30 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 253. Levinas describes love here indicating a plane both “presupposing and transcending the epiphany of the Other in the face…”

31 Ibid., 254.

32 Ibid., 254. “The metaphysical event of transcendence - the welcome of the Other, hospitality - Desire and language - is not accomplished as love. But the transcendence of discourse is bound to love. We shall show how in love transcendence both goes further and less far than language.”

33 Wyschogrod, Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, 131. “Eros is not a hopeless impasses of subjectivities trapped in one another’s gaze but a redemptive engagement in history.”
to surpass itself while maintaining the integrity of the self. Richard Cohen notes that the desire present in *eros* desires “complete alterity,” and he argues that only for a being capable of fecundity can such a desire find fruition. As Levinas says, the child both is and is not me, and thus for Cohen fecundity represents “the concrete condition of all desire for transcendence, and hence . . . for ethical transcendence also.” His argument seems to suggest that for Levinas, fecundity, while clearly distinct from the ethical relation, provides a concrete instance of the ethical relation. The child, the transcendence of love itself, redeems the perpetual return to self.

However, in the works published after *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will undertake a significant reconsideration of the themes of alterity and transcendence, and part of what marks the reconsideration of these themes is a reconsideration of the notion of love itself. It could be argued that one of the reasons Levinas reconsiders these themes is because of certain critical responses to his analyses of the erotic relation, and to the themes of the feminine and fecundity in particular. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address these critiques in detail, not to mention the various readings of the erotic relation by other Levinas commentators who are broadly more supportive of what he seeks to accomplish. However, for our purposes it is important to briefly examine the critiques of Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray with regard to the erotic relation, for as we will see, the questions in these critiques cause Levinas (whether consciously or unconsciously) to reconsider the notions of the feminine and fecundity in his work following *Totality and Infinity*, and indeed transform these notions along with the notion of love itself.

1.3 *Eros*, Fecundity and the Feminine: Key difficulties and the Beginning of their Transformation

For both Derrida and Irigaray, the notion of the feminine—or more broadly, the question of sexual difference—creates certain problems for Levinas that, in their view, are difficult to overcome. Ironically, they are each concerned with the question of

---

36 The question of Levinas’s “conscious or unconscious” reaction to Derrida’s critique in particular has been the subject of speculation amongst Levinas commentators. Robert Bernasconi, for example, questions to what extent *Otherwise than Being* was written as a response to Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics”. We know from interviews that Levinas clearly read and considered Derrida’s essay, but because he never explicitly mentions what influence, if any, it might have had, Bernasconi admits that whatever arguments one might have, however plausible, remain conjecture.
sexual difference, but for different reasons. Derrida, on the one hand, wonders if the elevation of “humanity” in Levinas, referring to the ethical relation prior to the establishment of sexual difference, is in fact male privilege in the guise of neutrality. Irigaray, on the other hand, argues that Levinas does not take sexual difference into sufficient consideration. In addition, Irigaray insists that Levinas’s notion of fecundity creates significant problems for his account of the erotic relation, and the woman in particular, problems which ultimately hinder the possibility of the erotic relation as a concrete instance of the ethical relation. Let us now look at these critiques in more detail.

In an interview entitled “Choreographies” (1982), Derrida asks,

> What kind of an ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality of moral laws were modeled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular?\(^{37}\)

Although he does not say so explicitly, it is clear from the context that Derrida’s questions are directed towards Levinas’s account of the feminine and sexual difference. In the interview, Derrida speaks of how Levinas sees the status of woman as secondary. He clarifies that she is not secondary in relation to man, but rather, humanity is first, and only afterwards does sexual difference arise.\(^{38}\) If Derrida’s reading is correct, then Levinas’s account implies that the ethical relation marks the relationship between the “same” and the “Other” prior to the establishment of sexual difference. We see a similar argument in Derrida’s essay “At this Moment In This Very Work Here I Am” (1980). Though the essay is mainly devoted to an analysis of Otherwise than Being, Derrida comments on the problem of sexual difference in Totality and Infinity via the observations of the “female reader”:

> But, as well as this, E.L.’s work seems to me to have always rendered secondary derivative, and subordinate, alterity as sexual difference, the trait of sexual difference, to the alterity of a sexually non-marked wholly other. It is not woman or the feminine that he has rendered secondary, derivative, or subordinate, but sexual difference. Once sexual difference is subordinated, it is always the case that the wholly other, who is not yet marked is already found to be marked by

---


38 This is the subject of Levinas’s Talmudic Essay “And God Created Woman” (1972), in Nine Talmudic Readings, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Levinas here engages in a hermeneutical analysis of Genesis 1-2 and argues that God originally created two beings in one, equal in dignity, that were then divided into male and female. Thus, he argues that sexual difference is subordinate to what is human.
masculinity (he before he/she, son before son/daughter, father before father/mother, etc.).

Essentially, Derrida is highlighting the fact that Levinas assumes the structure of sexual difference without acknowledging it. Thus, Derrida concludes that Levinas presupposes male neutrality and male privilege in the guise of the “human”. In other words, Levinas always uses masculine pronouns to describe what he claims is sexually neutral. In Derrida’s view, the stakes—or the risks—of Levinas’s analyses cannot be underestimated. As he points out, Levinas appears caught between two options, neither of which is desirable: he either assumes the structure of sexual difference with a priority given to one sex or the other, or he assumes masculine neutrality, which is, of course, not neutrality at all.

The question of sexual difference is also of concern for Luce Irigaray in one particular essay she wrote about Levinas’s work: “The Fecundity of the Caress” (1984). Her primary concern in this essay is why the erotic relation, and the feminine in particular, cannot be an “other” like the son of fecundity. That is, why is the erotic relation in itself unable to contain the possibility for transcendence, to render incomplete the return to self? Irigaray questions Levinas’s conception of the erotic relation on the basis that he seems to determine its value only for its utility: the potential for engendering a child. She contests this view of love on at two counts. First, she questions the necessity of procreation as the “ethical” end of the erotic relation; and second, she calls into question the role of the beloved in the erotic relation.

Regarding her first critique, Irigaray contends that without the child, Levinas’s erotic relation cannot have any ethical dimension to it, and thus no possibility for transcendence within the context of the relation itself. She explains:

When the lovers, male or female, substitute for, occupy, or possess the site of those who conceived them, they founder in the unethical, in profanation. They neither construct nor inhabit their love. Remaining in the no longer or the not yet . . . Sterile, if it were not for the child.

---


40 See e.g. Jacques Derrida, “A Word of Welcome” in Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, translated by Bettina Bergo (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 40. He makes this comment about the stakes and “risks” of Levinas’s conception in a discussion about the feminine and eros, still maintaining that Levinas is privileging the male perspective in the name of neutrality.


The consequence, for Irigaray, is that while Levinas seeks to found transcendence on the birth of the son, the result is merely the closing of a circle: “The aspect of fecundity that is vouched for only in the son obliterates the secret of difference. As the male lover’s means of return to himself outside himself, the son closes the circle...”43 If fecundity is really just the means for the male lover to return to himself outside himself with the birth of the son, the role of the beloved in this process seems to be reduced to another kind of utility – that of a “bridge” between the father and the son.44 The beloved, through *eros*, maternity, and birth, makes fecundity possible, but it is the man who transcends.45 This leads to Irigaray’s second critique of the erotic relation in Levinas’s work, which questions the role of the beloved.

Irigaray argues that the problem with the role of the beloved is signalled in its very wording as “beloved” rather than “female lover.” Such wording, Irigaray argues, could be interpreted as an objectification of the woman: “Beloved woman. Not female lover. Necessarily an object, not a subject with a relation, like his, to time.”46 She adds that the woman becomes an object because her own expression of love and desire to transcend is either restricted by the male lover or renounced herself:

But thus shielded, how does one live? For the woman who is so protected, what future remains? Inside this male territory, even if she plays at disguising herself in various showy and coquettish poses which he “strips away” in the act of love, she still lacks both the identity and the passport she needs to traverse or transgress the male lover’s language. . . . But what of her own call to the divine? About this he has little to say.47

In other words, by describing the woman as “beloved” rather than “female lover,” Levinas—in Irigaray’s view—reduces the woman to a role where her own expression is restricted. By falling into the identity of the “beloved”, she is stripped of her own ability to give, to be responsible in love. In short, she quits her own “ethical site.”48 We see here that for Irigaray, the woman provides the conditions for the male lover’s entry into the ethical world of fecundity. She does so, however, at her own expense.

44 Ibid., 169.
45 *Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine*, 67.
47 Ibid.,163.
48 Ibid, 165.
She is, as Katz observes, “left without subjectivity, without access to the ethical, outside any relation to God.”

Irigaray’s critique raises the question of why the erotic relation in itself is exempt from the ethical relation. She objects that rather than conceiving the erotic relation as a repose from the ethical, the erotic relation should be conceived as a confrontation with the alterity or mystery of the other person.

The critiques of Derrida and Irigaray reveal possible limitations of Levinas’s conception of the erotic relation, particularly with regard to sexual difference, the role of the feminine and the notion of fecundity as transcendence. However, despite the unintended consequences of the way he conceives love as eros, Katz argues that Levinas’s intention is not to suggest that love can only be “redeemed” through fecundity. Rather, she remarks that following Rosenzweig, Levinas believes that “love cannot help but exceed itself.”

We should recall that for Levinas, the phenomenological analysis of the erotic relation makes possible the father-son relationship, which in turn is a paradigm of the ethical relation. The “I” is responsible for the human other to the point of being responsible for the other’s responsibility. This kind of responsibility can be clearly seen in the concrete relation between the father and his son.

Nevertheless, perhaps in response to the criticisms of his account of the erotic relation, coupled with his own concern not to reduce the feminine to a role of utility (especially with his insistence that the feminine is the encounter with alterity, and thus higher than me), Levinas moves no longer to exclude the feminine from the ethical relation. Indeed, as Katz observes, in Otherwise than Being we see that the feminine becomes the very paradigm not of erotic love, but rather of a love that is more closely associated with charity or hesed. Here Levinas uses the notion of “maternity”, or the “gestation of the other in the same”, to describe the subject’s affectivity and vulnerability to the human other, and as we will see this inclusion of the feminine in

---

49 Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine, 68.
50 “The Fecundity of the Caress”, 171.
51 Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine, 85.
52 See e.g. Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 277, where Levinas says that “The son is not only my work like a poem or an object, nor is he my property. Neither the categories of power nor those of knowledge describe my relation with the child.” Thus, the son shatters Eleatic being since he is me and yet not me. With fecundity, there is a “multiplicity and a transcendence,” but one where the “I” maintains its identity.
53 Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine, 89. “[T]he feminine, no longer defined by hospitality, can no longer be excluded from the ethical relation; it must be the very paradigm of that relation.”
the ethical relation will eventually lead to the transformation of Levinas’s view of love itself.

2. **Otherwise Than Being: Maternity as the Paradigm of Love as Responsibility for the Other**

Stella Sandford, when commenting on the main differences between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, argues that *Totality and Infinity* presents sensibility and enjoyment as affective structures associated with the pre-ethical or “atheist” ego (section II). The linear structure of the book leads from this initial sensibility and enjoyment to the non-totalising relation with the human other. She adds that in *Totality and Infinity*, sensibility is not distinguished from enjoyment. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, there is a shift in the relation between sensibility and enjoyment. They are no longer so closely associated, which leads to what Sanford calls a “change of accent or tone.” In *Totality and Infinity*, the association of sensibility and enjoyment leads to an emphasis upon pleasure, whereas in *Otherwise than Being* the emphasis is upon sensibility as suffering and vulnerability. Enjoyment is still part of the analysis, but it is now conceived as what must be given up in the ethical relation. For example, Levinas says that “[t]o give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to tear the bread from one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting.” To do this, however, first requires the enjoyment of one’s own nourishment: “One has to first enjoy one’s bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart, to give oneself in giving it.”

The mouth and bread metaphor is but one example of how *Otherwise than Being* describes the ethical relation in more visceral terms than *Totality and Infinity*. We see this clearly when Levinas argues that the “for-the-other” of the ethical relation only has meaning “among beings of flesh and blood.” Sandford observes that the reference to the composition of the human being as “flesh and blood” implies

---

54 Sanford, *The Metaphysics of Love*, 82.
55 Ibid., 82.
56 Ibid., 82.
57 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 56.
58 Ibid., 72.
59 Ibid, 74. “Signification, the one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood.”
vulnerability and susceptibility, not only to the elements and—taken to the extreme—one’s own death, but also towards the neighbour, in what Levinas calls proximity.⁶⁰ We recall from Chapter Four that to be in proximity with the human other is not a spatial term denoting distance or closeness; it consists of an immediate relation of exposure to the human other, which then enables the “I” to respond.⁶¹ Now Levinas adds that the paradigm for this conception of proximity is to be characterised as “maternity”. Maternity describes the relation of proximity to the human other, a proximity which Levinas calls “the torsion of the Same and the Other . . . intrigue of the Other-in-the-Same.”⁶² Maternity is an archetype of the nourishment and self-sacrifice associated with the theme of mouth and bread.⁶³ Both pre- and post-natal maternity provide examples of nourishing the human other with food that one has already enjoyed. Maternity thus gives Levinas a visceral as well as a metaphorical example of care and responsibility.

As we will see, Levinas’s introduction of maternity into his analysis in Otherwise than Being not only affords greater prominence to the feminine in the ethical relation, but essentially replaces the relation of eros and fecundity presented in Totality and Infinity. Instead of enjoyment and desire described on the plane of eros, they are presented on the plane of a non-erotic relation: maternity. This, in turn, inaugurates a transformation of Levinas’s treatment of love, where he will describe responsibility for the other—epitomised as maternity—as a love without eros.

2.1 Maternity and the Visceral Human Being

Edith Wyschogrod notes that what is crucial in the notion of maternity is the disruption or fissure that proximity or the for-the-other of responsibility places upon the psyche.⁶⁴ Such disruption, she notes, is marked by visceral images of the ego’s passivity that undergoes suffering, not unlike the maternal body:

[T]he depiction of the psyche as fissured by an alterity that cannot be expelled, is troped as the maternal body. Inscribed in a chain of images—vulnerability, respiration, wounding, susceptibility—it is not the body of eros but rather the

---

⁶⁰ The Metaphysics of Love, 83.
⁶¹ See e.g. Otherwise than Being, 139. This passage is but one example of Levinas’s conception of proximity: “Proximity . . . is responsibility. It is a response without a question, the immediacy of peace that is incumbent upon me. It is the signification of signs . . . . It is the passivity of exposure, a passivity itself exposed.”
⁶² Ibid., 25.
⁶³ The Metaphysics of Love, 83.
⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, xxv.
body that is linked to fecundity that becomes signification itself, the gestation of otherness in the same.65

Wyschogrod is careful to add that while the body is still linked to fecundity, the emphasis in *Otherwise than Being* is not upon the child breaking up the closed society of the erotic relation, as in *Totality and Infinity*. Instead, it is the “gestation of the other in the same” and the pain of childbirth that signifies the election to responsibility. She writes, “As a figure of the psyche, the maternal body does not signal the expulsion of the child into the world but rather is lived as the pain of childbirth in the most interior regions of the body.”66 Levinas argues that in maternity what signifies (or is indicated) is a responsibility for the human other and suffering from the effect of exposure to the other, or what he calls “persecution”: maternity suffers the “effect of the persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks.”67 In this sense, Levinas says that maternity is “bearing par excellence.”68

The notion of maternity encompasses the terms Levinas uses in *Otherwise than Being* to describe the ethical relation: vulnerability, responsibility, exposure, proximity. As Katz observes, maternity is the example of being claimed by the human other, a responsibility effected prior to choice.69 Unlike *Totality and Infinity*, in which the ethical relation is described with the spatial metaphors of distance and height, *Otherwise than Being* describes it with the non-spatial, affective notion of proximity. Catherine Chalier argues that the maternal body best exemplifies the immediacy of the ethical relation, devoted to the other prior to any devotion to itself. In her essay “Ethics and the Feminine” (1991), Chalier underscores the importance of maternity for Levinas’s conception of the ethical relation in *Otherwise than Being*:

Levinas describes the maternal body as “a pre-original not resting on itself” (OTB 75), as a body of goodness that is devoted to the Other before being devoted to itself. In this unselfish and maternal body, subjectivity loses the substantiality and identity that would already be acquired. As a subjectivity without substitute, the maternal body has to answer for the other and is irreplaceable in this task. . . . It is the very contrary of the *conatus*. It is signification for the other and not for

---

65 Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics., xxv.
66 Ibid., xxv.
67 *Otherwise than Being*, 75.
68 Ibid., 75.
69 Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine, 129.
itself. . . . The maternal body knows in its flesh and blood what subjectivity means.70

What is remarkable in this analysis is the description of the maternal body in Otherwise than Being as devoted to the other before devotion to itself, experienced viscerally in the pre- and post-natal stages of maternity. The paradigm of maternity, with its devotion to the other prior to concern for oneself, articulates what Levinas elsewhere calls “mercy.” It is not without significance for Levinas that maternity (or more specifically, the womb) and mercy have an etymological connection in the Hebrew language. Let us explain this further.

2.2 Maternity as Mercy: The Possibility of a “Love without Eros”

In his Talmudic essay “Damages Due to Fire” (1976), Levinas explains the etymological connection between the Hebrew word for mercy (Rakhamim) and the womb or uterus (Rekhem). He notes that in the Talmud reading he is commenting upon, God is described as both merciful (Rakhmana) and just. He then argues that because of the etymological similarity between mercy and the womb, to say that God is merciful is to say that God is “defined” by maternity:

Rakhamim (Mercy) . . . goes back to the word Rekhem, which means uterus. Rakhamim is maternity itself. God as merciful is God defined by maternity. A feminine element is stirred in the depth of this mercy.71

By equating maternity with mercy, Levinas appears to be moving towards calling the subject’s devotion—the “for-the-other” of responsibility prior to choice—a non-erotic form of love. We see this link forged in the essay “God and Philosophy” (1975), published one year after Otherwise than Being. Here he describes the responsibility for the other as “love without [e]ros” for the first time:

We have shown elsewhere the substitution for another at the heart of this responsibility, which is thus an enucleation of the transcendental subject, thus also the transcendence of goodness, the nobility of pure enduring, an ipseity of pure election. Love without Eros.72

Levinas now appears to be drawing a distinction between love as eros and what will increasingly be described as love as mercy, hesed, or charity. Stella Sandford observes

---

that following *Otherwise than Being*, non-erotic love takes centre stage for Levinas, almost to the point of opposing it to erotic love, as if the former is to be regarded as more important than the latter.\(^73\) Indeed, the place of *eros* in Levinas’s philosophy following *Otherwise than Being* virtually disappears from the analysis. There are at least two reasons for making a distinction between erotic and non-erotic love. First, there is the shift in paradigm used by Levinas to describe the ethical relation, from fecundity (and more specifically, the relation between father and son) to maternity. By naming the primordial, anarchical devotion to the other *maternity*, coupled with its relation to mercy in the Jewish tradition, Levinas moves closer to associating the ethical relation with an understanding of love as charity or *hesed* than the erotic love identified with the closed society of the couple.

Second, and perhaps even more significantly, we see towards the end of *Otherwise than Being* that Levinas more clearly distinguishes the work of justice from that of the ethical relation. We recall that in *Totality and Infinity*, the work of justice was a broad concept that included the ethical relation with the human other. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, the conception of justice is narrowed to describe the relation to the third party, or the socio-political realm. Here justice, as the birth of properly oriented consciousness and reason, the need for comparison of incomparables (leading to the creation of the State, laws, institutions, etc.), is said to be impossible without the ethical relation.\(^74\) Clearly, then, Levinas now associates the ethical relation with what he calls a non-erotic love.

As Levinas’s conception of love moves from that of a hindrance to the work of justice to that which founds justice (conceived as the initial charity or responsibility for the other person), we can now consider how Levinas develops this relation between love and justice as well as consider its significance for how Levinas conceives the “dimension of the divine” and how the this relation produces the “breach” that leads to God.

3. **Love and Justice as the Movement “Unto-God”**

Up to this point in our analysis, Levinas’s thinking about “God” or the idea of God has been rather broad in these discussions: his primary concern has been to

---

\(^{73}\) The Metaphysics of Love, 71.

\(^{74}\) *Otherwise than Being*, 159. “Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity.”
articulate what the meaning of “God” is when it is used by philosophers or theologians. Moreover, Levinas often borrows theological terms only to reorient them for his own philosophical purposes. However, with the essay “God and Philosophy” (1975), Levinas’s goal becomes more specific. He now seeks to explore how Western philosophy has incorporated the idea of God and then makes an argument for how it should do so. In this essay he asks whether God can be “uttered in a reasonable discourse that would be neither ontology nor faith.” Indeed, his answer will be yes; there is a “reasonable discourse” other than the ontological, theistic or fideistic for articulating the idea of God. As we will see, this “discourse” arises out of the ethical: that is, a juxtaposed relation between love and justice.

3.1 Love as Desire for the Good

In the quote cited at the beginning of this chapter, we saw that responsibility for the other person, for Levinas, is like a devotion towards God that is diverted towards the other for whom I have to respond, rather than God “showing Himself” in that act of devotion. This reference to “likeness” is used because for Levinas, God is one who “loves the stranger.” Michael Morgan observes that when Levinas employs theological language like this, he does so to call attention to the fundamental character of the subject’s responsibility to and for the human other. More specifically, he is calling attention to the way in which the other’s face summons us, the way in which it obliges us ethically. Morgan adds that the face of the other person is both a gift and a burden; one experiences it as a summons to respond. For Levinas, then, “God” is a word used in religious and theological contexts to express or call attention to this summons. He consistently argues that one does not ever directly encounter or experience God. Instead, what one “experiences” is the appeal and command by the face of the other; this twin “experience” is what we have earlier called the “trace” of God never present but effective only here, in the face. This is what Levinas means by illeity and, more importantly, is what he means by “God”. The word is meaningful

---

75 Levinas, in the Foreword to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xi. “The various texts assembled in this volume represent an investigation into the possibility . . . of understanding the word “God” as a significant word.”
76 “God and Philosophy”, 57.
77 “Foreword” to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xv.
78 Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 198.
79 Ibid., 199.
80 Ibid., 199.
because it designates a movement towards the infinite, a movement that is expressed in a juxtaposed relation between love and justice. Let us explain further.

In “God and Philosophy”, Levinas returns again to Descartes and the way in which the “I” recognises the “idea of the infinite” as a means to support his argument for the way in which God can figure in philosophy but not as a theme or concept.81 Levinas calls this recognition of the idea of the infinite “a passivity more passive than any passivity”; it is “an idea signifying with a significance prior to presence…prior to every origin in consciousness and so an-archic”, and thus “accessible only in its trace.”82 These terms and claims are familiar to us by now. Yet there is a distinction here in Levinas’s emphasis. As Morgan observes, Levinas does not simply recall Descartes’ argument for one’s relationship with that which is transcendent to consciousness, but also emphasises that Descartes associates this transcendence with God.83 Levinas then examines this recognition phenomenologically, to show that such recognition is an “awakening”, a “putting into question”, a “dazzling”, and thereby a desire.84 But it is desire beyond satisfaction; he calls it a desire for the Good. What does Levinas mean here, and why does he invoke the notion of the “Good”?

In one sense, Levinas is associating God with the appeal and command to responsibility. At the same time, however, he is doing more than just making an association. He is exploring the nature of the appeal and command in order show where “God” works or “lives”85 in this encounter, what it is about this encounter that the word “God” expresses, or why responsibility (now called love) is the site for God. How does love accomplish this task? Levinas’s answer occurs in section 14 of “God and Philosophy”.

According to Levinas, to desire the Infinite is to have a desire that extends beyond what can be thought, beyond what is desired in ordinary ways. He argues that in this desire or this love for the transcendent, the desirable must be both “near” and yet “different”.86 Levinas calls this “holy”; he also calls it the “Good”. The subject’s

82 Ibid., 64.
83 Discovering Levinas, 199.
84 “God and Philosophy”, 66-67.
86 “God and Philosophy”, 68.
life takes on meaning because the human other summons one to responsibility, and one
desires (or is compelled) to respond. For Levinas, the subject’s desire and response is
the precise moment in which the “Good” or “holiness” disrupts the self-interested
subject. Hence, what makes one’s desire possible is “near” in that it orders me, but it is
far or “different” insofar as it orders or diverts my desire to what is the “nondesirable”
or “undesirable” *par excellence*: the human other. That is, the human other is “undesirable” insofar as the other is loved in disinterestedness: love without *eros,*
without return. Indeed, it could be argued that in this context the meaning of the
“Good” consists precisely in this re-ordering or diverting of desire.

Morgan suggests that Levinas is asking the reader to think of his or her
everyday life as a kind of sleep or delirium. This is the life of everyday experience,
relationships, language, thought and desire. He then observes that when one has a
social encounter that is suddenly jarring or disruptive, something that awakens one to a
sense of responsibility or obligation, this is the moment in which one finds oneself
already immersed in the “goodness” of the Good. In the midst of everyday
experience, one’s life suddenly takes on an ethical dimension.

Levinas claims that the desirable turns the subject towards the undesirable. That is to say, one desires the Good; the Good calls forth our love for it, but that love
is diverted and reoriented towards the other person, “and only thus towards the
Good.” It is in this way that love functions as one of the ethical modes that comprise
the dimension of the divine. Or more exactly, the reorientation of desire and the
disruption of the subject’s self-interested perseverance in being constitutes the
“breach” that leads to God; love, along with justice, are the ethical modes which
produce the movement in which God first “comes to mind”. But in this movement,
God is “neither an object nor an interlocutor” but rather “absolute remoteness”, which
“turns into my responsibility.” God is not the other but “other than the other” and
“prior to the ethical bond with the other.” The face of the other engages the self as an

---

87 “God and Philosophy”, 68.
88 Ibid., 68.
89 Discovering Levinas, 200.
90 Ibid., 200.
91 “God and Philosophy”, 69.
92 Ibid., 69.
93 Ibid., 69.
appeal and command, and the self experiences that person ethically and worthy of my response, yet what is essential for the ethical force of this summons is this notion of God as “He” or *illeity*. But how does this notion of God determine the ethical force of this summons? To respond to this question, Levinas turns to Franz Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*.

### 3.2 Love of God in the Love of Neighbour

In a footnote to “God and Philosophy”, Levinas compares his notion of *illeity* whereby God solicits one’s desire then diverts it to the other person with a similar dialectic in Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*: “Franz Rosenzweig interprets the *response* given by Man to the Love with which God loves him as the movement toward[s] the neighbour.”

In Rosenzweig, this response is redemptive insofar as it is a response to revelation. Morgan suggests that one might read this movement, with regard to both Levinas and Rosenzweig, as the response to God’s gratuitous gift of love by sharing love for one’s neighbour. For Levinas, this love for the neighbour is responsibility or proximity. When viewed from one angle, Levinas’s notion of love shows us to be drawn to and burdened by the neighbour. We respond to this summons through acts of responsibility to and for the other person. For Rosenzweig, revelation is God’s loving gift to us of a meaningful human existence, of love for the neighbour. For Levinas, revelation is the trace of what is holy, absolutely absent or separate in the face of the neighbour. Revelation is always “He” and never “You”. This is why the “encounter” with God is a movement of love for the neighbour and is expressed, as we will see in a moment, in acts of justice. Morgan notes that while there are similarities in the two accounts, the distinction between Rosenzweig and Levinas can be articulated as different understandings of the relation between revelation and redemption. He suggests that for Rosenzweig, revelation and redemption are distinct ways that the “I” experiences the world, God, and others in a narrative structure; whereas for Levinas revelation is the background or precondition for redemption. That is, the possible redemptive acts which follow from responsibility for the other

---


95 Discovering Levinas, 201.

96 Ibid., 201.

97 Ibid., 201.
person arise in the summons by the “revelatory” or ethical “force” of the face of the other. 98

Moreover, for Levinas, love is identified with the “saying” of responsibility which always precedes everyday thematizing discourse—the “said”—which we saw in Chapter Four is associated with justice. Understood this way, justice arises as a response to the command of the face that derives its ethical force through *illeity*, through revelation as the “background” of redemption. Hence, as Morgan observes, love is “witness” to God as “He”; it is the readiness to respond, the biblical “here I am” *(hineni)*, the “saying” prior to the “said”. What Levinas means precisely by witness is the subject of the next chapter; for our current purposes what is significant is that we can show how the movement and counter-movement between love and justice is what composes the movement “unto-God” or *à-Dieu*.

If Morgan’s analysis of Levinas’s notion of love is correct, that is, if it is correct to say that God’s gift to human beings is the “inspiration” to love others, it is possible to argue that Levinas’s notion of love is not that distinct from that of Augustine’s notion of the “love poured into our hearts” by God. One of the strengths of Augustine’s account, prior to the problems Augustine’s eudaemonism imposes upon it, is its description of the utter gratuity of the love of God, a love which then directs the self to love others. Perhaps these similarities warrant further examination to see what Levinas’s notion of love both has and has not accomplished with respect to improving upon the difficulties we have seen in Augustine’s account. To that end, we will briefly compare Charles Taylor’s incorporation of a broadly Augustinian notion of love and justice in *Sources of the Self* with that of Levinas.

### 3.3 The Role of God in the Ethical Character of Love and Justice

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor discusses the roles of God and religion as part of his examination of what he calls the “malaise of modernity” and the deficiencies of contemporary secularism. 99 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the breadth of Taylor’s critique; for our purposes a brief sketch will suffice. Modern societies, according to Taylor, are committed to freedom and reason and yet cannot fully realise these values. The inability to do so, Taylor argues, leads to oppression,

---

98 *Discovering Levinas*, 201.

frustration and distress. Nevertheless, these modern societies maintain some positive features, such as the idea that the moral life should be directed towards alleviating the suffering of others and implementing a system of justice. He argues that the reason modern societies cannot realise these values (which he calls “benevolence” and “justice”) is that there is a “dissonance” created between the goods that are supremely valued and the moral sources that claim to “empower” or provide the “force” for those goods.

One of the key features to Taylor’s solution to the modern crisis is theistic; it involves a reconsideration of the ways to accomplish access to “the divine affirmation of the human.” In brief, Taylor claims that we continue to affirm the goods of benevolence (or love) and justice, but such an affirmation requires an “unconditional love” since the demands of society are extraordinary and beyond “secular” resources. In Taylor’s words, “the question which arises from all this is whether we are not living beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence.” Only if we are “overwhelmed” with an unconditional love for the neighbour can we be obligated to benevolence and thus have the power to carry out such actions.

This last aspect of Taylor’s proposed solution reflects a kind of Augustinian perspective. That is, this recommendation on behalf of God as required to ground an unconditional love for others sounds very familiar to Augustine’s notion of the love of God “poured into our hearts” by God, which then enables the subject to love one’s neighbour. Morgan suggests that this recommendation of grounding theology in an unconditional love for others also carries resonance for those readers familiar with Rosenzweig. Taylor’s tacit appropriation of an Augustinian framework will aid our quest to discover how, while sharing some important features with Augustine (and by extension Taylor), Levinas’s account of love, justice and the “encounter” with God is different in some decisive ways.

---

100 See e.g., Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 266-74.
101 Ibid., 266-269.
102 Ibid., 274.
103 Ibid., 516, 521.
104 Ibid., 517.
105 *Discovering Levinas*, 205.
One of the key differences between Levinas and Taylor, as Morgan observes, is that they approach their discussion of God from different points of departure. Levinas begins with theological language and religious practices and asks what hidden significations are connected with these terms and practices as they are first reflected upon or experienced; the language of “God” comes to mind, in his view, when there is a recognition of one’s responsibilities and seek for ways to express it.\textsuperscript{106} By contrast, Taylor begins with an analysis of the moral dimension of the modern human identity, only to claim that humanity’s commitment to love and justice are inadequate and improperly grounded. God emerges for Taylor as the most plausible and compelling way to provide the ethical force and grounding for any effective commitment to love and justice. In a sense then, as Morgan observes, while Levinas seeks to describe love and justice as the movement unto “God”, Taylor argues for the necessity of a kind of theism and affirmation of certain religious beliefs for love and justice to be properly grounded.\textsuperscript{107}

Moreover, though both Taylor and Levinas claim that love and justice are somehow related to the divine, Morgan suggests that in Taylor the relationship between love, justice and the divine is more “traditional” or conventional insofar as love and justice somehow “exist” independently and, we would add, thus provide a “link” or a “bridge” to God in which one participates.\textsuperscript{108} Levinas, on the other hand, is not a traditional theist. Although love and justice function as the movement towards God, they are not the link that opens onto participation with God. Levinas is only willing to allow that our commitment to love and justice originates in the “breach” opened by the encounter with the face of the human other, and the breach itself opens onto the “trace” of a God who has always already “passed”. Levinas’s claim is less about contemplating the existence or nonexistence of God, for his notion of “God” is beyond such binary terms; yet equally he seeks not to “relocate” God in a different metaphysical space as much as he seeks to establish the locus of revelation in the ethical realm. Thus, while Taylor’s recovery of a traditional Augustinian notion of love and justice sees the ethical realm as grounded by the love and justice of God, Levinas takes the ethical realm as the locus for the meaning of theological language.

\textsuperscript{106} Discovering Levinas, 205.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 205.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 206.
and religious practices, in the non-erotic love for the other and the concern for justice in society.

This brief comparison between Taylor and Levinas aids our effort to show another way in which Levinas’s account of the divine dimension of the ethical realm diverges distinctively from the Augustinian tradition’s conception. While both Taylor and Levinas are concerned with the divine dimension of love and justice, and both realise that love and justice must be grounded and “empowered” in some way, Levinas does not argue for an ontological commitment to support ethical judgments. Instead, he sheds light on the role love and justice play in determining the meaning of human subjectivity as well as how God bears on this subjectivity. For Levinas, love and justice signify as prophetic events. That is, it is only through the non-erotic love of the neighbour and its expression in the work of justice that God “comes to the idea”, the site or “theatre of transcendence” which contains the “life of God.”

Thus, the encounter with revelation, or the “relation with the new” (which we saw in the quote at the beginning of this chapter) is not an encounter with God as if He were an object or interlocutor “in front of” the human subject, but it is rather the human subject who expresses God through the ethical realm.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that in his work up to and including Totality and Infinity, Levinas does not envisage a positive relation between love and justice. Although it has the status of a modality of the ethical relation for the encounter with both alterity and transcendence, love ultimately signals a closing of society, and it leaves the feminine in a questionable position with regard to her participation in the ethical. Both the later Levinas and his critics seem to agree that the possibility of a positive relation between love and justice requires a different conception of love. The introduction of maternity in Otherwise than Being not only refashions the relation between the feminine and the ethical, but it also inaugurates a transformation of Levinas’s understanding of love. Love is now described as a non-erotic relation, and as such is identified more closely with the ethical or face-to-face relation with the human other.

---

109 “Foreword” to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xv; see also “God and Philosophy”, 76.

110 “God and Philosophy”, 75.
By defining this non-erotic love as the anarchical “disinterestedness” or absolute devotion of the subject towards the human other, Levinas can now posit a more positive relation between love and justice. Rather than preventing the institution of justice, love is now the foundation of justice. Conceived in this way, the structural framework is set up for Levinas to claim that the ethical domain (which consists of a juxtaposed relation between love and justice) is the context which opens up the dimension of the divine. Love, whose origin in a diachronic or immemorial time orients the subject in the form of a command to responsibility for the human other, bears witness to the God who “loves the stranger,” though invisible and unthematisable.\textsuperscript{111} With its foundation in love, justice also gives witness of the divine in two ways. First, its institution witnesses this pre-original love by announcing peace to the third party, to other others. That is to say, it makes love visible by making it intelligible: through reason, language, thematisation, institutions, and the like. Second, rather than rooting itself in fixed rational principles, justice constantly strives to improve itself. Because of its rootedness in the infinite demands of love, justice always manifests a “bad conscience,” its ever-present need to make itself more just. In this sense, justice bears witness to the Infinity that always goes further than the comprehension that seeks to encompass it.\textsuperscript{112}

However, while Levinas’s account of love and justice has shown how he conceives the role of God in the ethical, we have not yet satisfactorily addressed a problem in Levinas’s account that was briefly raised in both Chapters Three and Four. In light of our analyses from the current chapter, the problem can be restated this way: if it is true that the word “God” first comes to mind in the “breach” opened by ethical responsibility (love and justice), or more exactly, that the subject’s assignation to responsibility signifies as the “modality” in which the Infinite comes to pass, then there is a sense in which theological claims about God would seem to be impossible.\textsuperscript{113} Since God, as Infinite, is “defined” by Levinas as incomprehensible, the ignorance of the responsible self reverts into a “relation” to God “as though the not-letting-itself-be-


\textsuperscript{112} Totality and Infinity, 78. “God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men...because our possibility of welcoming him in man goes further than the comprehension that thematises and encompasses its object. It goes further, for precisely it thus goes into Infinity.”

\textsuperscript{113} See e.g. “God and Philosophy”, 75, where Levinas claims that the assignation to responsibility is not a “psychological wonder” but a “modality according to which the Infinite comes to pass.”
encompassed were also an exceptional relation with me.” Paradoxically, then, the theistic affirmation that claims to know or comprehend God is just as much a denial of God as is the atheistic thought denies the existence of this “known” God.

What this means is that there is question as to how Levinas can claim that love and justice are the modalities in which the Infinite comes to pass, that they can be said to witness “God” with any more authority than the sceptical claim that love and justice witness—even if they are acknowledged as modes of transcendence—something other than God. The dilemma for Levinas, in the absence of any possible “referent”, is how he can claim that the responsible self serves as a witness to “God” without either exposing the word to an infinite number of possible significations or allowing this “witness” to become a new figure of theism. In Otherwise than Being, Levinas acknowledges that the “extent and accent of the voice in which the Infinite is thus heard” will have to be made clear. He adds that it must be made clear without either allowing the Infinite to descend into meaninglessness or interpreting the signification of ethical responsibility as merely a particular phenomenon or “ethical aspect of being.” Is such a conception possible? For Levinas, such a possibility largely rests on his notion of witness in Otherwise than Being, which is the subject of our next chapter.

---

114 “God and Philosophy”, 63.
115 Otherwise than Being, 140.
116 Ibid., 140.
Chapter 6 – “As Simple as ‘Hello’”: Love and Justice as Witness of the “Breach” That Leads to God

In the previous two chapters, we examined the evolution of Levinas’s thought on the relation of love and justice, an evolution which ultimately forges a relation between the two as that which opens a “breach” that leads to God. That is to say, love and justice are the instantiation of the passing of the Infinite in responsibility, and as such constitute the circumstances in which God first comes to mind, although such circumstances do not reveal the presence of a divine being. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that the “dimension of the divine” opens forth from the human face, and thus one’s relation with God is “established” as an ethical behavior and not a theology or thematisation of God.¹ As we saw in Chapter Three, the “dimension” of the divine refers to a non-spatial height, a moral force encountered in the face-to-face relation as the subject’s responsibility for the human other. Thus this dimensionality, as Richard Cohen notes, has its locus in the human (which Cohen describes as “what is human about the human face”) but is “of” the divine: “the face of the other manifests and is manifest in a moral height which is the dimension of G-d, the revelation of G-d. . . . [R]evelation occurs between interlocutors.”²

Having examined the way in which love and justice open up a breach within immanence, we are nevertheless still presented with a problem which we must now address: How do Levinas’s notions of love and justice articulate the possibility of divine revelation in a way that can be attested by those who enact and experience these modalities of the ethical relation in the way Levinas describes? What significance does this relation of love and justice find for the specific employment of the word “God”?

Although Levinas consistently argues that one cannot enter into a kind of “I-Thou” relation with God, he nevertheless claims that one of the purposes for writing *Otherwise than Being* is to describe the possibility wherein one can “hear a God not contaminated by being”, adding that the “voice and accent” of such a hearing must be made clear.³ We have seen that the “voice and accent” of this “God” not contaminated

by being has its locus in the ethical realm, in love and justice; but how does the enactment of love and justice “reveal” the transcendent, the moment where the word “God” enters language? This chapter will argue that Levinas’s analysis of testimony—or more exactly, witness—is a vital component to his claim that the ethical relation, expressed in the modes of love and justice, “reveals” God, but not in a way in which the witness testifies to an “encounter” with God. Instead, love and justice give witness of what Levinas calls the “trace” of God who has always already passed; to go towards others in love and justice (as he conceives them) is to give witness as one who stands in the “trace” of the “He” of illeity who has withdrawn from every relation, yet has nonetheless “ordered” [ordonné] the subject to responsibility.4

Therefore, one of the tasks of this chapter will be to show that although the relation of love and justice give witness of the “breach” that leads to God, witness is not to be understood in terms of witness to an event but rather as witness “of” the Infinite.5 That is to say, the witness does not testify to an event that has occurred (which would be implied if Levinas said that love and justice are a witness “to” the Infinite), but rather, as we shall see, the subject gives testimony of the immemorial “passing” of the Infinite in the expression of love and justice. What therefore separates Levinas’s notion of witness from its use in ordinary language is that the testimony does not belong to the witness; it proceeds from an absolute, immemorial “initiative” as to its origin and content. Thus our task will be to show how the ethical subject—in the enactment of love and justice—gives witness of the way in which “God” passes in His command.

Our analysis of witness will begin with some reflections on the relation between subjectivity and witness in Chapter V of Otherwise than Being. Here Levinas argues that the subjectivity of the subject, as responsibility, gives witness of the anarchic summons to which the subject responds. In suggesting the subject is always always already responsible, Levinas contests Husserl’s claim that the constituting ego is the origin of all meaning. He argues that the subjectivity of the subject is constituted as the exposure of this summons to responsibility, and this exposure to the other person is experienced as always already given: “the face of the other obligat[es] the I, which, from the first—without deliberation—is responsive to the other. . . . [T]he

5 Levinas, “The Trace of the Other”, 146.
response of responsibility . . . already lies dormant in a salutation, in the hello, in the goodbye.”

As we have seen, this unwilled responsibility for the other—the love “without eros”—illustrates what Levinas calls a “saying” prior to anything “said” in language; it is the “saying” which gives witness to its origin in an immemorial or diachronous time. Levinas will call this saying or exposure the “glory of the Infinite”, of which the passive subject gives witness.

Yet in an important way, the “said” will also be found to give witness of the Infinite. Accordingly, the chapter will turn to examine the relation between justice and witness. Although Levinas emphasises the primacy of the “saying” over the “said”, that is, over all of the practical and theoretical uses of everyday language with its grammar and meanings, the “said” of justice is indispensable for the “voice and accent” of the Infinite to be shown. It is shown in two ways, both of which will be explored and explained: First, the “said” gives witness of the Infinite negatively through its “contestation”, or what Levinas calls scepticism; Second, justice witnesses the Infinite positively, by speaking. As Paul Ricoeur notes, although the Infinite risks falling into the ineffable, ethical discourse prevents this when it is enacted, when it speaks. And as we will see, by speaking (which is part of what Levinas calls justice), one gives witness of the “passing” of the Infinite, yet does not thematise that which is given witness. Levinas claims that such positive witness is given with a word as simple as “hello”, in the salutation given to the other.

Finally, as a result of the analysis of how love and justice function as a mode of testimony or witness, the chapter will determine to what extent love and justice can be said positively to witness the breach which leads to God or if, as witness to the Infinite, they merely give witness of an anonymous identity, or merely that which cannot be determined or identified. Can love and justice, as the modes of the ethical relation which interrupt the self-interested being of the subject and whose “origin” is outside any commitment made in freedom by the subject, give witness of the passing of the biblical God? This brings us back to a crucial problem we introduced in Chapter One, which is whether Levinas’s account of love and justice, which is central to his attempt to extend the phenomenological reduction of the subject to embrace a religious.

---

dimension of human existence, provides a kind of pre-theological “intelligibility” for the notion of divine revelation in the contemporary horizon of thought. Can love and justice articulate the circumstances in which “God comes to mind” without recourse either to ontology or to the authority of a theological tradition, and if so, can this relation articulate an indispensable ethical ground for the recovery of theological discourse? Our examination of Levinas’s notion of witness will proceed as an attempt to address this problem in greater detail.

1. The Subjectivity of the Subject: Love as Witness of the Glory of the Infinite

In the previous chapter, we observed that in the works published after Totality and Infinity, Levinas increasingly associates responsibility for the other person with the notion of a “love without eros”. For Levinas, responsibility is the “grounding moment” of love prior to any state of mind or sentiment associated with love, since such feelings or states of mind presuppose the prior “obedience” or “being-hostage” to the summons of the face of the other person; this non-erotic love is an utter gratuity, without expectation, given to the other.8 Thus, in Levinas’s later works, love is distinguished from everything erotic, insofar as eros involves the return to self. In an interview, Levinas provides an example of how this love “without eros” is enacted by the ethical subject by citing a story from Genesis 18. He suggests that at the heart of this love is the concern to “save” the other from death (citing Psalm 10:2), but the important question for Levinas is: where has one seen love which saves from death? He suggests one can see it in Abraham’s desire to pray for the safety of Sodom even though he acknowledges that he himself is only “ashes and dust” (Genesis 18:27).9 For Levinas, this narrative gives an example of how this utter gratuity of love, to be awakened to an already present concern for the other, despite one’s own precarious effort to persevere in one’s being, is witnessed in the courage to pray for others.

Yet Levinas argues that love not only gives witness to the ethical awakening of the subject; as we will see, this “turning” contrary to one’s perseverance in being also gives witness of the breach which leads to God, insofar as this turning constitutes the

---


disruption of being in which God has “spoken”. But can one then describe how love witnesses the Infinite and thus the circumstance in which God has spoken, and if so, how? To answer this question, it will be necessary to return to Levinas’s terminology of the “saying” and the “said” which we discussed in Chapters Four and Five, this time with reference to how the “saying” and the “said” give witness of the “glory” of the Infinite. As we will see, Levinas links the “saying” (or the love which refers to the subject’s extradition from its conatus essendi) as that which witnesses the “otherwise” than being in specific ways, a saying which is then thematised—albeit inadequately—in the “said” of an ever-renewing justice.

1.1 Saying and Said, Glory and Witness

We recall from Chapter Four that in the works published after Totality and Infinity, the “said” refers to language, which, in contrast to the analysis of language in Totality and Infinity, now refers to utterances in the indicative, in all its practical and theoretical uses, with its incorporation of signs and their respective signifieds. The “saying”, on the other hand, refers to what is required for the proper articulation of any “said”: It is the proximity of the subject to the other person, or the responsibility to and for the other person. Thus, for Levinas the “saying” underlies language and, even more, is for Levinas the very meaning of language:

Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, [saying] is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.

The distinction between the “saying” and the “said” seeks to address a crucial question for Levinas about the basic context in which all language is employed: what is primary? His response is that what is primary, or what is the very “signifyingness of signification”, is not this language-as-content or the “said”, but the “saying”, the orienting of the subject in responsibility for the other person that language presupposes and that language actually enacts. According to Michael Morgan, what gives the “said” its point and purpose as a social encounter for Levinas is the notion that in

---

10 Interview with Salomon Malka, in Is it Righteous to Be? 101.


12 Otherwise than Being, 5.
conversation one always already (to one extent or another) welcomes the other person, and is responding to that person’s summons or command.13

Now, Levinas also closely links the notion of “saying” with what he calls “glory”. The “glory” of the Infinite consists in this primordial saying, where the subject has been extradited from its conatus essendi to a responsibility that one has never assumed.14 Yet “glory” also indicates preeminence and status, much like the term “height” did in Totality and Infinity; it suggests the non-indifference of the self for the other person, an asymmetry whereby the subject is unable to slip away from this pre-original identity as for-the-other.15 Levinas argues that the “traumatism” or anguish of this summons to responsibility that affects the subject must be distinguished from both the Heideggerian phenomenology of affectivity rooted in the anguish of finitude as well as the theological notion of anguish in which the “fear” of God refers to the troubling of the subject by the sanction that threatens it.16 In the essay “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable” (1981), Levinas explains that the “glory” of the Infinite signifies in the “ethical troubling of being”, in conscience, the fear or concern for the other person without fear for the subject’s own perseverance in being:

The fear for another . . . is my fear, but it is in no wise fear for me. It thus contrasts with the admirable phenomenological analysis of affectivity that Sein und Zeit proposes: a reflected structure where emotion is always emotion about something moving, but also emotion for oneself, in which emotion consists in being moved, in being frightened, in being delighted, in becoming sad, etc. Here we find a double “intentionality” of the about and the for, participating in the emotion par excellence—in anguish; being-for-death, where the finite being is moved by its finitude for this same finitude. The fear for the other man does not turn back into anguish for my death. It overflows the ontology of the Heideggerian Dasein. An ethical troubling of being. . . .17

Levinas later adds that the word “glory” signifies as the irreducibility of this ethical “fear” of God which deposes the subject of its sovereignty as an “I”; it is the possibility of dreading injustice more than one’s own death.18 This is one aspect of what Levinas means by the love of neighbour that is a love “without eros”: It is a

---

13 Morgan, The Cambridge Companion to Emmanuel Levinas, 176.
14 Otherwise than Being, 144.
15 Ibid., 144.
18 Levinas, “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable”, 177.
dedication which is unconcerned for its own need. Thus, the very subjectivity of the subject, understood as primordial love “without eros” towards the other person which breaches or interrupts the conatus essendi, is the way in which the “glory” of the Infinite is given witness. But how does this witness function if it does not testify to anything that has been disclosed? This is a question which is constructively addressed by Paul Ricoeur in an essay from Figuring the Sacred. As we will now see, Ricoeur suggests that Levinas’s notion of witness functions as a testimony to the ways in which transcendence disrupts the immanent order without revealing the original “source” of this disruption.

1.2 Ricoeur on Levinasian Witness: Two Ways in which Immanence is Disrupted by Transcendence

Levinas writes in Otherwise than Being that the identity of the subject is “flushed out”, that is, expelled from itself as self-presence, expressed in the “saying” of responsibility for the other person. He also calls it the “Here I Am” [hineni] of responsibility, offering oneself to the other, and this movement of the ego, prior to any giving of signs in the “said” of language, is what gives witness of the Infinite. He then asserts something of a paradox which reflects an attempt to intertwine immanence and transcendence: “‘Here I am’ as a witness of the Infinite, but a witness that does not thematise what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence”. Yet, paradoxically, “it is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified”. Ricoeur suggests in Figuring the Sacred that Levinas employs two strategies which weave together to form a notion of witness whereby immanence is disrupted by the movement of transcendence.

The first strategy, according to Ricoeur, is the step “to the hither side”: to the hither side of the beginning, of the archē or the idea of the “an-archy” of a demand that is what Levinas calls “the trace of the who knows where”. We recall from Chapter Three that the “hither side” is what Levinas elsewhere calls a diachronous time, the time of a past older than any rememberable past, hence not capable of being reintegrated into a present consciousness; it is the idea of a passivity that would not be

19 Otherwise than Being, 144.
20 Ibid., 144-45.
21 Ibid., 146.
22 Ibid., 146.
23 Ricoeur, “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony”, 121. The latter quote is from Otherwise than Being, 100.
the contrary of activity, thus not an undergoing. Levinas uses a variety of negative formulas to describe this “hither side” of consciousness, such as: the idea of a “responsibility that is justified by no prior commitment”; the idea of “an antecedence prior to all representable antecedence: immemorial”; the idea of a passivity that “has already been made, as something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and all recall”; the idea of “the anachronism of a debt preceding the loan” or “an accusation preceding the fault”.24 Ricoeur maintains that the reason Levinas is so insistent upon the step back to the “hither side” of consciousness is because the theme or the “said” annuls the very an-archy of the “saying”.25 That is, to thematise the “saying” is already to ossify it, to betray its original signification.26 Thus Ricoeur argues that Levinas’s recourse to the “hither side” goes back to how the self’s identity as “for-itself” is disrupted insofar as the subject discovers itself to be responsible prior to any commitment or exercise of freedom.27 Ricoeur adds that this first strategy calls into question the idealist notion of the primacy of the ego; he notes Levinas’s claim in Otherwise than Being that the self is “sub-jectum . . . it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything.”28

The second strategy Levinas employs is what Ricoeur calls the use of “excessive, hyperbolic expressions” which are employed to shake up ordinary thinking.29 He argues that Levinas employs these hyperbolic expressions (such as “obsession”, “hostage”, “expiation”, and “substitution”) in order to preserve simultaneously the exteriority of the illeity that assigns the subject to responsibility while undercutting any notion of responsibility that might signal a return to the self-affirmation of some “clandestine freedom”.30 In Levinas’s words, the self’s utter passivity—its saying “Here I Am” to the other prior to anything “said” in language—constitutes the “subjection of the allegiance to the Good”.31

Ricoeur argues that the interweaving of these two strategies provide a glimpse into the way in which, for Levinas, the “glory of the Infinite” is given witness by the human subject. He notes that an early draft of the section of Chapter V of Otherwise than Being

---

24 Otherwise than Being, 102; 115; 116; 122; 104; 112; 113.
25 “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony”, 121.
26 Otherwise than Being, 121.
27 “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony”, 121.
28 Otherwise than Being, 116. Original emphasis.
29 Ibid., 121-122.
30 Ibid., 122.
31 Ibid., 126.
than Being that discusses the “glory of the Infinite” bore the title “Truth as Manifestation and Truth as Testimony”.32 This, Ricoeur suggests, gives the reader a clue that it is within the order of truth that testimony “constitutes an alternative notion” in relation to both ontological philosophies and philosophies of consciousness.33 That is, he argues that what is at stake in Levinas’s notion of witness is the epistemic status of his whole discourse on love as the circumstance in which “God” first “comes to mind”.34 Let us explain this further.

1.3 Love as Witness of the Infinite: The Circumstance in which “God” Comes to Mind

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas contrasts the witness of love, as a mode of truth of self-exposing, with that of certitude (which would follow from what Ricoeur calls “philosophies of consciousness”): “The self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed, where the ego supports the others, unlike the certainty of the ego that rejoins itself in freedom.”35 Ricoeur observes that for Levinas, such “philosophies of consciousness” fall within the “circle of ontology”, owing to their “appeal to the intermediary of a principle or archê.”36 In other words, Ricoeur sees that in Otherwise than Being, Levinas argues that both manifestation and reflexivity (the ego that rejoins itself) stem from what unfolds in the movement of being as being. Indeed, when Levinas takes up the discussion of subjectivity again in Chapter V of Otherwise than Being, he organises his discussion under three headings: “the subject absorbed by being,” “the subject at the service of the system,” and “the subject as a speaking that is absorbed in the said.”37

In contrast to these notions of subjectivity stands “the responsible subject that is not absorbed in being.”38 Levinas argues that the responsible subject, although its responsibility “shows itself” in the said, cannot be depicted by “models of being”.39 He sums up the responsible subject this way: “In responsibility the same, the ego, is me,
summoned, provoked, as irreplaceable, and thus accused as unique in the supreme passivity of one that cannot slip away without fault.”  

The footnote to this sentence emphasises that the impossibility referred to here is “purely ethical”; hence it implies no ontological sense to the notion of “slipping away”—otherwise responsibility would be “only an ontological necessity.”

As Ricoeur correctly observes, it is against this background of the responsible subject that witness is opposed to the “certitude” of representation, which includes both self-certainty and the manifestation of every being. It is also against this background that Levinas seeks to describe the epistemic status of love as the circumstance in which God first comes to mind.

As we have seen, in Otherwise than Being Levinas conjoins the notion of “height” from Totality and Infinity with the “glory” of the Infinite. Or more specifically, “glory” (with its biblical origin) designates what Ricoeur calls the “epistemic status” of height: He notes that, for Levinas, “glory” is not a phenomenon or a theme—it “cannot appear in court”—but is rather the “unsaid” of the said. Thus, as Ricoeur observes, one can only talk about the “glory” of the Infinite given all the “resources” of the unsaid, such as “an-archy”, passivity of passivity, diachrony (or immemorial past), obedience prior to hearing the commandment, and so on. Levinas sums up the notion of glory this way:

Glory is but the other face of the passivity of the subject. Substituting itself for the other, a responsibility ordered to the first one on the scene, a responsibility for the neighbour, inspired by the other, I, the same, am torn up from my beginning in myself, my equality with myself.

Here we see again all the familiar formulations of subjectivity in Otherwise than Being but with a particular concern for language. Ricoeur notes that whether Levinas speaks of “election,” “inspiration,” “sincerity,” or “prophecy,” it is always with the concern to use expressions which bring about the “unsaying” or “resaying” of a “said”. Levinas

---

40 Otherwise than Being, 135.
41 Ibid., Chapter V, footnote 2, 198.
42 “Emmanuel Levinas: Thinker of Testimony”, 123.
43 Ibid, 123.
44 Ibid.,123-124.
45 Otherwise than Being, 144.
himself says that the “saying” prior to anything “said” gives witness of the glory of the Infinite; moreover, he emphasises that this glory is witnessed and not thematised.47

There is, of course, an important consequence to what we have seen concerning Levinas’s discourse on the witness of love. It does not appear to allow for any possibility of what Ricoeur calls a “positive, speculative” theology or even a “narrative” theology.48 As Ricoeur observes, narration and unconcealment are linked, yet for Levinas this is precisely what he rules out with his notion of witness. Nevertheless, despite the absence of a narrative, Ricoeur argues that one can detect in Levinas’s discourse a kind of “plot”, although it can only be described as a “plot without a theme.”49 Indeed, Levinas also speaks of the witness of love in similar terms: “One is tempted to call this plot religious; it is not stated in terms of certainty or uncertainty, and does not rest on any positive theology.”50 As we have suggested, this “plot without a theme” proceeds via the witness given, by love, of the glory of the Infinite; and it is without a theme because the Infinite does not show itself or posit itself precisely due to its absolute transcendence: “The Infinite would be belied in the proof that the finite would like to give of its transcendence; entering into conjunction with the subject that would make it appear, it would lose its glory.”51 As we have seen, Levinas argues that this responsibility, this love “without eros” is the instantiation of the passing of the Infinite; moreover, it is the “concrete origin” or “original situation” where the word “God” comes to mind.52 According to Levinas, it is not (in the first instance) theological discourse which articulates this idea of God. Instead, he claims that the word “God” is “still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time involved in words”.53 What does Levinas mean by this enigmatic phrase? To answer, Levinas turns to the notion of the Good or the “One” in Platonic philosophy, with the goal of showing how the dimension of the “Other” is opened by the epiphany of the face. Or more broadly, through the analysis of the epiphany of the face, Levinas seeks to describe an “experience” of something that lies, strictly speaking, “beyond” experience and yet impinges upon it.

47 Otherwise than Being, 145, 148.


49 Ibid., 124.

50 Otherwise than Being, 147.

51 Ibid., 152.

52 Emmanuel Levinas, in the “Foreword” to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xv.

53 Otherwise than Being, 149.
In the last section of the essay “Meaning and Sense” (1964), Levinas describes the ethical relation and its significance as a “return to Platonism in a new way”.54 In this section, entitled “The Trace”, Levinas makes reference to both Platonism and Neoplatonism. The question here is whether the “beyond” in Levinas is not another philosophical ideal or principle.55 That is, Levinas rhetorically asks whether there is any transcendence at all; perhaps the Infinite, or “God”, is just another element in an idealist system. To avoid this, Levinas employs Plato and Plotinus to show that the face does not point beyond itself to a transcendent entity or absolute that it signifies. And yet for the face to carry any moral force, it must point beyond itself to its “ground”.56 To address this problem, Levinas turns to Plato and Plotinus. As we will now see, Levinas will cite the example of the “Good” or the “One” from Platonic thought as a “ground” for that which is genuinely transcendent; but as Peter Blum observes, instead of following Plato in depicting the phenomenon as that which “participates” in the realm of the ideas, Levinas argues that the face signifies only indirectly—by its absence—what grounds or lies “beyond” the face.57

In Chapter Three, we saw that the face of the human other proceeds from the “absolutely Absent”, but its relationship with this Absent “does not indicate” or “reveal” it; and yet the Absent has a “meaning” in the face.58 As Jacques Rolland observes, that the face proceeds from the “absolutely Absent” in no way signifies that the Infinite hides itself (which would then suppose that its “revelation” were an unveiling or disclosure, which in turn would place the subject in the presence of the disclosed, and this is precisely what Otherwise than Being contests in its articulation of the way in which the Infinite signifies).59 It signifies as “absent” because the relationship in which the Infinite is “produced” and thus given witness of does not contain it, and this is so already for the simple reason that this relationship does not suppose it, either.60 But if this is the case, what function does the Absent serve? What

55 Levinas, “Meaning and Sense”, 59.
56 “Ibid., 59.
58 “Meaning and Sense”, 60.
60 Rolland, “He (‘Il’), in Emmanuel Levinas and the Question of Religion, 263.
does it do? Blum suggests that one can start to answer this question with an observation from phenomenological analysis: Anything that is said to transcend consciousness will not emerge in a phenomenological investigation. And yet, such an investigation may be “interrupted” by tracing a particular noetic trajectory to an apparently absolute noetic limit. Such a limit, he argues, may be more than a mere boundary; it may turn out to be “pregnant” with meaning. Levinas offers a vivid example that explains this point more clearly. In “The Trace of the Other” (1963), Levinas considers a criminal who carefully wipes away any traces of his presence in order to commit a perfect crime. When the crime is investigated, the fingerprints will be absent, and insofar as identification thus becomes impossible, the criminal has “disturbed the order in an irreparable way. He has passed absolutely.” Yet as Blum observes, the criminal has left traces of having removed the fingerprints, at least in the sense that the fingerprints the investigation would expect to uncover are also absent. He thus suggests that the investigation is “interrupted” not by a certain piece of evidence, but precisely by the lack of evidence—or rather, by the “evidence of the removal of evidence.” For Levinas, this example clarifies, from a phenomenological point of view, that an “absence” can be just as significant as a “presence”. What is absent is not simply absent, but significantly absent. Such is the case, Levinas contends, with regard to the trace of the Infinite which is “given” in the face. Let us explain further.

After his analysis of the face in “Meaning and Sense”, Levinas turns to Plotinus in order to make clear how the “breach” or interruption that is opened by the face is that which also “leads to God”. He apparently accepts the “religious” connotations of the term “trace” in Plotinus:

A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past. Plotinus conceived of the procession of the One as compromising neither the immutability nor the absolute separation of the One. It is in this situation . . . that the absolute signifyingness of a trace delineates in the world.

---

62 Ibid., 102.
63 “The Trace of the Other” 356-357.
64 Ibid., 357.
66 Ibid., 102.
67 “Meaning and Sense”, 59.
Hence, Levinas does not hesitate to attribute the trace of *illeity* within which the face “shines” to the absolute transcendence associated with God. However, the “experience” of this trace which has always already passed does not present a “proof” that God exists (in the way that Descartes claimed with regard to the idea of the infinite, for example), but rather affords a way—articulated within what Blum calls the “Greek” philosophical tradition and Western theism—to understand how being derives its sense from “without”, a *sens unique* which is opened by a breach of immanent being itself:

To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace. The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal “order” itself. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of *illeity*. It is through this *illeity*, situated beyond the calculations and reciprocities of economy and of the world, that being has a sense.

It is for these reasons Levinas makes the claim that in order to avoid the error of a philosophy which seeks to reduce what is transcendent to the realm of immanence, one must return to Platonism but “in a new way”. That is, rather than accepting Plato’s argument that what is transcendent is knowable, Levinas argues that what is transcendent is not knowable but nonetheless provides the “ground” and meaning that inheres in what is knowable. In an important way, Levinas’s revision of the Platonic argument not only protects transcendence from being absorbed within immanence, but also avoids the tendency to undermine the transcendence of God, particularly with regard to discourse about God. As Levinas writes,

> The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, is produced in being itself [that is, in the encounter with the other person]. Philosophical [that is, Platonic] transcendence thereby differs from the transcendence of religions . . . from the transcendence that is already (or still) participation, submergence in the being toward which it goes, which holds the transcending being in its invisible meshes, as to do it violence.

The “violence” of which Levinas speaks, as Blum observes, is a “discursive” violence. That is, for Blum, Levinas is referring to a theological discourse which fails to recognize the provisional character of its language about God. Thus, Levinas

---

68 “Overcoming Relativism? Levinas’s Return to Platonism”, 103.
69 “Meaning and Sense”, 64.
70 Ibid., 60.
72 Ibid., 108.
insists that the subject’s responsibility for the other, the “love without eros”, is precisely not thematised but given witness. For Levinas, to give witness is not to talk about or refer to or represent; it is to be responsible, to obey an an-archical or transcendent summons prior to hearing the command. Levinas’s retrieval of Plotinus and Plato enable him to explain more clearly his contention that witness is the enacting of responsibility (prior to any decision) and thus of “being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am the author”.73

Our analysis thus far might lead one to conclude that the “glory” of the Infinite, instantiated in the primordial love given to the other person, escaping every theme, risks falling into the ineffable. However, as we have seen from Ricoeur’s analysis, before this can happen ethical discourse commences, or rather “speaks.”74 After all, Levinas argues that the voice in which the Infinite is “heard” can be made clear, and we can now begin to see what he means by this in light of our analysis of Levinas’s retrieval of Platonic thought above. Levinas states specifically that one can state the meaning of which one gives witness as a “said”.75 As we will now see, in the latter part of Chapter V of Otherwise than Being, Levinas argues that the witness of the Infinite is “expressed” in both responsibility (love) and the work of justice. With regard to the latter, although language functions as a necessary “betrayal” of the saying of responsibility that philosophy cannot avoid, it nevertheless does not efface the trace of the witness given prior to the giving of signs. Thus, part of what gives witness of the “breach” that leads to God, in a very specific way, is the “said” itself. As we have seen, the “said” is part of the work of justice, particularly for the way in which the said must also continually be unsaid and “resaid” in the pursuit of a better justice. But how does justice itself give witness to the dimension of the divine? It is to this question that we now turn.

2. The Said of Justice: (Betrayed) Witness of the Dimension of the Divine

When Levinas writes in Otherwise than Being that the “saying” which bears witness of the Infinite “signifies in a plot other than that which is spread out in a theme, other than . . . a cause to an effect, the memorable past to the present,” it might

73 Otherwise than Being, 148-149.
75 Otherwise than Being, 151.
appear that the “said” of language has little, if anything to do with the witness borne.\textsuperscript{76} As we have seen, for Levinas’s notion of witness, what is “said” is de-emphasised in favour of the “saying” of responsibility. Nevertheless, Jacques Derrida suggests in his essay “A Word of Welcome” (1996) that even acts which seem to deny, repress, or be allergic to responsibility still bear witness to responsibility because such language presupposes the “saying” of expression, the hospitality or welcome given to the other.

Derrida explains,

> Pre-originary hospitality, anarchic goodness . . . might still give way to allergy. This happens almost all the time and it entails forgetting, denying, or repressing what comes before the origin, according to the common experience of history. This negativity of repression would always remain, according to Levinas, secondary – even if it were an originary repression, as is said in the psychoanalytical code of which Levinas is wary. In its originary secondariness, it would still attest, as if in spite of itself, to the very thing it forgets, denies, or represses, so that inhospitality, allergy, war, etc. would still come to bear witness to the fact that everything begins with their contrary, that is, with hospitality. . . . War or allergy, the inhospitable rejection, is still derived from hospitality.\textsuperscript{77}

Derrida is correct to discern that Levinas does not exclude the “said” completely from his analysis of witness. In \textit{Otherwise than Being}, Levinas writes:

> Thematisation is then inevitable, so that signification itself show itself, but does so in the sophism with which philosophy begins, in the betrayal which philosophy is called upon to reduce. This reduction always has to be attempted, because of the trace of sincerity \textit{which the words themselves bear} and which they owe to saying as witness. . . . [my emphasis]\textsuperscript{78}

In other words, the witness of the Infinite does show itself in the “said”, but does so only after the event of saying.\textsuperscript{79} In what follows, we will see the “said” is in fact indispensable to what Derrida calls “the passage beyond language.”\textsuperscript{80} As such, insofar as it is identified with what Levinas calls the “said”, language is the primary way in which the “beyond” being is given witness within being. That is to say, for Levinas the work of justice also witnesses the Infinite or “dimension of the divine”, but does so incompletely or noncomprehensively.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 147.


\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 151-152.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 135. “[Responsibility] indeed shows itself in the said, but does so only after the event . . . .”

2.1 The Passage from Saying to Said

For Levinas, the clarification of the relation between the “saying” and the “said” is crucial to avoid the seemingly inescapable situation in which “being includes the statement of being’s other.”81 In *Otherwise than Being*, the “said” of language is what permits one to talk about the “otherwise” than being, although to do so is to betray the “saying” or portray it unfaithfully.82 One thus arrives at the methodological problem Levinas seeks to address in the work:

[W]hether the pre-original element of the saying (the anarchical, the non-original, as we designated it) can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme . . . and whether this betrayal can be reduced; whether one can at the same time know and free the known of the marks which thematisation leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology. . . . In this betrayal the indiscretion with regard to the unsayable, which is probably the very task of philosophy, becomes possible.83

What is the task of the philosopher? Claire Katz notes that the philosopher is generally understood as one who “seeks and expresses truth”.84 She says that as such, a return to being plays a vital role in this task. That is, the philosopher is concerned with truth as the manifestation of being, with “what shows itself in truth.”85 Levinas himself acknowledges that if the “what” of ontology lies at the origin of all thought, then “all research and all philosophy go back to ontology, to the understanding of being and entities, the understanding of essence.”86 Nonetheless, as is well known, whilst Levinas claims that “the movement back to the saying is the phenomenological reduction” which takes the “said” as its point of departure, it is in this reduction that the “indescribable is described”, and it is the “indescribable” saying which for Levinas lies at the origin of all discourse.87 Thus, Levinas takes as his task both to say and unsay what he seeks to describe. As Katz observes, he must extract the “otherwise than being” from language in such a way that it can be received as “otherwise than being” rather than “being otherwise.”88 In order for the “saying” to be intelligible, one must enter into the realm of being. One primary example of such an “intelligibility” can be

---

81 *Otherwise than Being*, 5.
82 Ibid., 6.
83 Ibid., 7.
86 *Otherwise than Being*, 15.
87 Ibid., 53.
88 *Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine*, 16.
found in Levinas’s analysis of scepticism, or the dialectical movement between the “saying” to the “said” in *Otherwise than Being*. As we will see, although the “saying” is an interruption of the “said” and of essence, Levinas also insists that one can only “reach” the saying through the said. Or, as Katz observes, one can only “discover” the saying through the reduction of what shows itself in the said.\textsuperscript{89}

Levinas argues that the “saying” shows itself in the “said” through an “enigma” of language, where attempts to thematize the Infinite in the “said” always lead to a dilemma or “question mark” that cannot be resolved.\textsuperscript{90} For Levinas, this inability to affirm the Infinite within a “univocal logos” is the “very pivot of revelation”.\textsuperscript{91} The reason the “said” cannot adequately represent the Infinite is not because it is unknown or obscure, for that would still refer to a present or belong to an ontological order. Instead, it misses the Infinite because of the Infinite’s origin in a diachronic time: “The transcendence of the Infinite is an irreversible divergency from the present, like that of a past that was never present.”\textsuperscript{92} Thus, whatever shows itself in the “said” lets itself be contested or “unsaid” as a difference of what cannot be assembled into presence.\textsuperscript{93} In this sense, as David Ford observes, the “unsaying” of the “said” gives witness to the “trace” of the transcendence of the Infinite.\textsuperscript{94} He adds that what results is a new “said”, which must also undergo the same process of “unsaying” in order for the witness of the Infinite to continue. Such contestation of the said functions continually to reduce the betrayal thematisation necessarily imposes upon the Infinite.\textsuperscript{95}

As we saw in Chapter Four, this contestation of the “said” is what Levinas refers to as scepticism.\textsuperscript{96} Such scepticism, as Levinas employs the term, always refers back to the “saying” insofar as scepticism is ethically related to the Infinite, which we see with this example he provides: “The revelation of the beyond being is perhaps indeed but a word, but this ‘perhaps’ belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of

\textsuperscript{89} Levinas, *Judaism and the Feminine*, 16.
\textsuperscript{90} *Otherwise than Being*, 153-154. Levinas is asking about the dilemma of whether the responsibility prior to any commitment confers upon the subject a new identity—that of an “elected” or “unique chosen one”—or merely an articulation of the designs of the Infinite.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 155.
\textsuperscript{95} Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 52.
\textsuperscript{96} *Otherwise than Being*, 167. “Scepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronise the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said.”
the Infinite resists the univocity of an originary or principle.”\textsuperscript{97} According to Ford, scepticism—particularly as it is employed by Levinas—preserves the enigma of all discourse about God or the Infinite by not letting such terms become an ossified theme and thus negate their very “significance” as ethical.\textsuperscript{98}

However, in addition to scepticism there is yet another aspect of this dialectical movement in which the “saying” shows itself in the “said” The saying is also made “intelligible” positively through what Levinas calls the “confession” of the subject. Levinas writes in \textit{Otherwise than Being} that the Infinite “does not enter into a theme . . . does not come to pass save through the subject that confesses . . . it.”\textsuperscript{99} Such confession is announced through specific acts of justice, evidenced by two examples Levinas provides: the salutation, and care for the other’s material needs. As we will see, both of these examples are concrete instances which “confess” the Infinite insofar as they are enactments of the “breach” of self-interested being.

2.2 “As Simple as Hello”: The Positive Witness of Justice

As we have seen, the work of justice requires representation; moreover, Levinas argues that it is through justice that the responsibility for the neighbour becomes visible; the “saying” of love is “fixed” in a “said” of justice.\textsuperscript{100} While justice (as Levinas describes it) assembles everything into being, it is nonetheless a thematisation on the basis of infinite responsibility for the other.\textsuperscript{101}

But what does justice, even as a “betrayal” of the “saying” of responsibility, look like? Or said differently, if, as Roger Burggraeve argues, the “here I am” of responsibility must literally become flesh, what form(s) does it take on?\textsuperscript{102} We recall that in \textit{Otherwise than Being}, Levinas reorients sensibility as more than mere enjoyment; it is also an “exposedness” to the other person, epitomised by the metaphor of maternity.\textsuperscript{103} In its immediacy, sensibility is the “for-the other of one’s own

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 156.
\textsuperscript{98} See e.g., \textit{Self and Salvation}, 50. “This anti-idolatrous role of philosophy is developed into one of preserving the ambivalence of all talk of God in the interests of its ethical significance.”
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 156.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 75. Recall from Chapter Five (p. 144-146) the discussion about maternity as “bearing par excellence”, which serves as a visceral, corporeal metaphor for the subject’s devotion and responsibility to the other person.
materiality”. As an example of this added dimension of enjoyment, he argues that the “for-the-other” of responsibility takes on the bodily expressions of literally giving the “bread from one’s mouth” or literally giving out of one’s pocketbook. As Levinas says elsewhere, to approach the human other with empty hands “is not to approach at all”.

Levinas does not give many examples of concrete instances of justice out of a stated desire not to have his notion of ethics confused with what one should or should not do, but he nonetheless provides a couple of instances where justice witnesses “positively” to the subject’s primordial assignation to love or responsibility for the human other. One such example is the care for the material needs of the other. In an interview with François Poirié, Levinas responds to the question of how responsibility for the other is translated concretely with a reference to Matthew 25:

> The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him. It is exactly the biblical assertion: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the shelterless. The material side of man, the material life of the other, concerns me and, in the other, takes on for me an elevated signification. . . . Recall in Matthew 25, Jesus’ ‘You have hunted me, you have pursued me.’ ‘When have we hunted you, when have we pursued you?’ the virtuous ask Jesus. Reply: when you ‘refused to feed the poor,’ when you hunted down the poor, when you were indifferent to him! As if, with regard to the other, I had responsibility starting from eating and drinking. And as if the other whom I hunted were equivalent to a hunted God. . . . All the problems of eating and drinking, insofar as they concern the other, became sacred.

By looking after the material needs of the other out of concern for the other, Levinas says that justice is awakened by an initial charity (responsibility). Equally however, the charity which awakens justice is also present in the act of justice itself when responsibility is expressed concretely as a concern for the other’s material needs.

As such, when love and justice coincide like this, the subject gives a “prophecy” of the Infinite, which Levinas defines as “this reverting in which the perception of an order coincides with the signification of this order given to him that obeys it”. In other words, when a sign is given to the other person, the “I” presents

---

104 Otherwise than Being, 74.
105 Ibid., 74.
108 Otherwise than Being, 149.
itself as the “Here I am”, in the “accusative” from the first [me voici], and in so doing gives witness of the Infinite, without the Infinite given as a theme for conscious reflection. The Infinite is witnessed precisely because the self’s concern for the other moves from the “saying” into the “said”, from primordial love to the work of justice. Levinas argues that this movement constitutes the “goodness” of the “Good”, or the “glory” of the Infinite. Or as Jacques Rolland explains, the “goodness” of the Good would mean that the passing of the Infinite is “produced” in such a way that it effectively becomes thinkable, even if that thought cannot contain it.

Another simple but no less significant way in which the subject confesses the “passing” of the Infinite through justice is the salutation. In Otherwise than Being, Levinas writes that the very first word that already speaks my responsibility for the other is “as simple as hello.” To say hello is already to give a sign signifying responsibility or the “recognition of a debt.” In the same interview with Poirié referenced above, Levinas says that the “first miracle” is the fact that the subject says bonjour to the other. He describes it as a miracle because it functions as that which interrupts the self-interested being and gives a sign of his or her subjectivity as responsibility. In Otherwise than Being, the salutation demonstrates the subject’s implausible concern for the other, which Levinas describes as the “religiosity” of the self:

Why does the other concern me? . . . Am I my brother’s keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself. In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the ‘prehistory’ of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility, . . . What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self.

Thus for Levinas, the salutation is a “religious moment” insofar as it attests to the “order of God” or the dimension of the divine. It signifies a devotion that is diverted

---

109 Otherwise than Being, 122, 147.
110 “He (Il)”, 266.
111 Otherwise than Being, 143.
112 Ibid., 142-143.
113 Ibid., 117.
114 Interview with François Poirié in Is it Righteous to Be? 59.
by “God” toward the other, where God ordains the human subject to respond not to himself but to the human other: “for-the-other-man and thereby unto God!”115

Thus, Levinas considers the disruption of the conatus essendi in the ethical modes of love and justice as the “religious moment” par excellence; it is the witness given to the “dimension” of the divine and what constitutes the “breach” or “cutting across” of immanence that leads to God. Nevertheless, we have yet to determine how Levinas can speak of the dimension opened by the relation between responsibility or love and justice as the site in which one is given “access” to this absent, absolutely transcendent God. What authorises him to use the name God to signify the Infinite? These questions point to a larger problem which we must now address: Whether Levinas’s use of the word “God” can refer to the God of the biblical tradition or if it only can describe what is at best an anonymous identity.

3. The “Who?” of Witness: An Underlying Theo-Logic or Anonymous Identity?

As we have seen, Levinas states that one of the central aims of Otherwise than Being is to describe the possibility of hearing a God not “contaminated” by being, a hearing whose “voice” and “accent” must be made clear.116 In other works, such as in the introduction of Of God Who Comes to Mind, Levinas states that rather than examining the problem of the existence or nonexistence of God, he seeks to describe the “phenomenological circumstances” in which the word “God” takes on meaning.117 The goal of this phenomenological investigation, Levinas argues, is to explore what could be the meaning of the word “God” so that those who are concerned to affirm or contest that the revealed God spoken of in the “positive religions” is indeed “God” who spoke and not some “evil genius” or a “politics hidden beneath a false name.”118 What is of interest for our purposes, which Levinas states as a secondary but no less important concern, is whether such a phenomenological investigation can in fact demonstrate the circumstances or “concrete staging” in which the word “God” comes to be uttered, and if it can, whether such an investigation already rests upon a forgotten or unacknowledged theology. The answer to this question is not only vital to Levinas’s

115 “Foreword” to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xv.
116 Otherwise than Being, xlvi, 140.
117 “Foreword” to Of God Who Comes to Mind, xi.
118 Ibid., xi.
philosophical project but also crucial for the intelligibility of our hypothesis that the relation of love and justice, as Levinas employs these terms, is the way in which the “breach” that leads to God is “produced”, or the enactment of which is indispensable for divine “revelation”.

3.1 Is Levinas’s Ethical Metaphysics Theologically Underpinned?

As we have seen, Levinas clearly states that what he seeks to describe is prior to any theological discourse; indeed, he claims that the ethical relation is what gives theological concepts their meaning. Nevertheless, as Jeffrey Kosky observes, it may be possible to read Levinas’s work otherwise. He argues that although Levinas claims to be describing the “foundation of all thought,” including theological thought, it may be possible to read Levinas’s work as already determined by a certain theo-logic or theological conceptuality. This possibility forms one of the central arguments of Derrida’s critique of Levinas (and Totality and Infinity in particular) in “Violence and Metaphysics”. As is well known, Derrida argues not only that Totality and Infinity uses the language of the totalising tradition in order to step beyond the totality, but that the very intelligibility of the “ethical” in Levinas’s ethics of responsibility presupposes a particular understanding of God. If this is the case, Totality and Infinity is written using references to the tradition it seeks to go beyond.

Although Levinas seeks to begin philosophically by setting certain ethical conditions for which “God” can appear for thinking in general and theology in particular, Derrida argues that Levinasian ethics (as presented primarily in the context of Totality and Infinity) is not the possibility of theology but is already guided by a certain theo-logic. The crux of Derrida’s argument is that this theological conceptuality at work in Totality and Infinity takes form primarily as that which what was once said of God in traditional metaphysics is now said of the human other or Autrui. Kosky observes that Derrida’s argument has at least two significant consequences: First, the absolutely other would, in Derrida’s critique, be a determined form of otherness which owes its concept to the Judeo-Christian tradition; and second, ethical metaphysics would not be first philosophy but rather would depend upon this theological conceptuality.

---

119 Totality and Infinity, 79. “It is our relations with men . . . that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of.” And again in the next paragraph: “Metaphysics is enacted in ethical relations. Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks.”


121 Kosky, Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion, 25.
conceptuality. Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to argue that without this “theological context” Levinas’s entire discourse is in danger of collapse. Let us briefly explore some of Derrida’s reasons for making this claim.

One of the examples Derrida provides of the “theological context” in *Totality and Infinity* is Levinas’s claim that the asymmetrical relation with the other person is nonviolent. As we saw in Chapter Three, Derrida argues such a claim requires God in order for an asymmetrical relation to be in any way “ethical”:

Asymmetry, non-light, and commandment then would be violence and injustice themselves—and, indeed, so they are commonly understood—if they established relations between finite beings, or if the other was but a negative determination of the (finite or infinite) same. . . . This is why God alone keeps Levinas’s world from being the pure and worst violence, a world of immorality itself.

Although Levinas nowhere says in *Totality and Infinity* that the infinitely other is God, instead arguing it is the human other (*Autrui*), Derrida counters that it must be God because no ethics without God would think asymmetry and nonviolence together. God is required in order for the asymmetrical relation with the human other to be nonviolent.

Derrida also observes that there is a striking resemblance between Levinas’s description of the human other and the God of the Hebrew Bible. While Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that *Autrui* resembles God in his signification prior to any initiative, Derrida suggests that ethical metaphysics (or in the language of *Totality and Infinity*, the face of the human other) is determined on the basis of his or her resemblance to God:

[I]t is this analogy between the face and God’s visage that, in the most classical fashion, distinguishes man from animal, and determines man’s substantiality: “The Other resembles God”. Man’s substantiality, which permits him to be face, is thus founded in his resemblance to God, who is therefore both The Face and absolute substantiality.

Derrida’s point is that the self-interested being is called into question not by the relation with the face of any being but with human being, which on his reading can be

---

122 *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 29.
125 Ibid., 142.
specifically traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition in which the human being alone resembles God.

Although Derrida acknowledges that in *Totality and Infinity* the relation with Infinity is not presented as a theological relation, he nevertheless argues that even the absence of any discourse on the face of God bears witness to a complicity of theology and metaphysics in the work.\(^{126}\) He argues that the biblical narratives testify that the God who is absent from representation is present to Israel in the form of commandment. In other words, God is not articulated in spatial terms as but in terms of commandment and obedience. Furthermore, citing the same passage from Exodus 33 that Levinas comments upon, Derrida argues there is a parallel between the biblical account of God and Levinas’s account in *Totality and Infinity*:

> The face of Yahweh is the total person and the total presence of ‘the Eternal speaking face to face with Moses’ [Exodus 33.11] but saying to him also: ‘Thou canst not see my face: for there shall be no man see me and live…thou shalt stand upon a rock: and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen’ (Exodus 33.20-23).\(^{127}\)

Derrida concludes that despite Levinas’s precautions and insistence to the contrary, just as Moses spoke with God without the face of God being seen, so too Levinas’s ethical subject enters into “relation” with God while his face withdraws, so the subject sees instead the face of the human other.

The main point of Derrida’s critique is that the “beyond being”—God—must in some way appear within being if it is to enter discourse. Without such an appearance, the “beyond being” could not be articulated in Levinas’s work. Since, however, Levinas utters the word “God” throughout *Totality and Infinity*, the infinitely other must have already appeared within the “same” but is left as an unacknowledged presupposition.

Part of Levinas’s insistence that his work is not a theology is that as a theoretical or thematising discourse, theology would in fact only name a false god, a merely quasi-transcendent “Other” that is in reality constituted by the conscious intentions of the subject. In contrast to the positive God of theology, Levinas’s notion

\(^{126}\) “*Violence and Metaphysics*”, 108-109. “The face of God which commands while hiding itself is at once more and less a face than all faces. Whence, perhaps…the equivocal complicity of theology and metaphysics in *Totality and Infinity*.”

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 108.
of religion does not start with the revelation of God or the authority of a particular
tradition but rather the idea of infinity and the absolute separation of the Infinite and
the “I”. Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity* that both theological transcendence and
mystical immanence ignore this separation and, as Derrida suggests, both are precisely
what Levinas wishes to critique: “The complicity of the theoretical objectivity [of
which theology is a form] and mystical communion will be Levinas’s true target. The
premetaphysical unity of one and the same violence.”

Perhaps aware of the implications of Derrida’s critique, Levinas writes in his
preface to the German Edition of *Totality and Infinity* (1987) that his work following
*Totality and Infinity* henceforth avoids ontological language, and in so doing the word
“God” no longer signifies as bearing the traces of a predetermined theological
conceptuality from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead, Levinas designates the
manner in which the Infinite, or “God”, orients the subject towards the other person,
by the term *illeity*. He adds, rather provocatively, that God as *illeity* is absent “to the
point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the there is [il y a].” Thus,
Levinas acknowledges in *Otherwise than Being* that the word “God” is a word that
borders on being and skirts nothingness. The ambiguity of the word raises
significant questions about the meaning of the word “God” in Levinas’s thought. Can
love and justice be said to witness God (as the absolutely transcendent “He” of *illeity*)
or can one just as easily argue that love and justice witness something as indeterminate
as the *il y a*? The answer to this question will be decisive for the problem stated above
with regard to Levinas’s relation to theology.

### 3.2 Witness of God or Anonymous Identity?

As we have seen, the responsible subject, in the ethical modalities of love and
justice, gives witness of what Levinas calls the “marvel of the I [moi] claimed by God
in the face of the neighbour.” This means that in the witness given by love and
justice, the subject that is unable to conceive its Creator is, according to Kosky,
paradoxically an “atheist” for “theological reasons” without, as Levinas argues, these

---

129 Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy” (1975), in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by Bettina Bergo
130 *Otherwise than Being*, 151.
131 “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable”, 177.
reasons “leading to any theological thesis.”\textsuperscript{132} What are these theological reasons? For Levinas, the term “theological” is used in this context because the subject’s assignation to responsibility opens or invokes a naming of God. Broadly speaking, Levinas uses the term “theology” in at least two senses: First, as that of a set of dogmatic propositions about God; and second, to describe the intellectual or discursive dimension of religion. Levinas’s discourse seeks simultaneously to disrupt the former while opening the possibility of the latter. Thus, he acknowledges the necessity of the recovery of theological discourse but only after one glimpses the ethical breach or suspension of the perseverance of being in its being, and only insofar as one also acknowledges that such discourse can never thematise God as its “object”. Moreover, as we have seen, Levinas claims that to give witness of God is precisely not to state this word; the transcendence of God is not “revealed” by being put before the witness. Rather, the “He” of \textit{illeity} first comes to mind in the witness given by the ethical “language” expressed in the enactment of love and justice, where the “dis-inter-estedness” of the human being is produced.\textsuperscript{133}

For Levinas, then, “revelation” and witnessing are conjoined insofar as witnessing is a “revelation” which precedes the conscious subject’s testimony of a lived experience and subsequently asks others to believe in the truth of such experience. The “here I am” of responsibility is itself the “revelation” of God and not the after-effect or result of a revelatory event. In this sense, for Levinas revelation does not refer to disclosure, but as Levinas puts it, “significance”.\textsuperscript{134} As is well known, disclosure is a prominent term in Heidegger’s work, and Levinas clearly wishes to distinguish revelation from disclosure, insofar as the latter is understood as the givenness or uncovering of something previously hidden to the lucidity of intentional consciousness or vision. Revelation, for Levinas, is the approach of the hidden \textit{qua} hidden. In Levinas’s own words from the essay “God and Philosophy”:

\begin{quote}
The subject as hostage has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but the witnessing of the Infinite, a modality of this glory, a witnessing that no disclosure has preceded.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 196, note 19. See also e.g., Kosky, Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion, 188.

\textsuperscript{133} Emmanuel Levinas, in the “Preface to the Second Edition” of \textit{Of God Who Comes to Mind}, ix.

\textsuperscript{134} “God and Philosophy”, 76.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 73.
Revealed in the responsible self, in the ethical modalities of love and justice, God is “revealed before appearing, before presentation before a subject”. As responsibility, the subjectivity of the subject is this revelation: “I am the witnessing, or the trace, or the glory of the Infinite . . . . The Infinite is not ‘in front of’ me; it is I who express it.” Thus, the subject “reveals” God but not in awareness; that is, without affirming a concept of God, without uttering the word “God”, and without any “encounter” with God in present experience.

According to Kosky, the significance of Levinas’s reorientation of revelation and witness is that transcendence is revealed “without being subject to, conditioned by, or limited by what I can hear, by what I can find as a possibility and for consciousness, or by what can be gathered into the unity of the I think”\textsuperscript{138} In this sense, Levinas speaks of the self as “prophetic” or “inspired”:

One must give the name ‘\textit{inspiration}’ to this intrigue of infinity in which I make myself the author of what I hear. Inspiration constitutes, on the hither side of the unity of apperception, the very psyche of the soul. It is inspiration or prophetism in which I am the medium channeling what I announce. . . . Prophetism as pure witness; pure, for prior to all disclosure.\textsuperscript{139}

Kosky observes that like a prophet, the responsible self does not recount sayings of God or speak about God to a listening audience. In the “thus sayeth the Lord” which precedes such oracles, the prophet becomes, in Levinasian terminology, the “medium channeling what I announce.”\textsuperscript{140} That is, the “word of God” is not a statement about God, but is rather the prophesying itself. Even in the thematising efforts of justice, what is shown is not an experience of God but rather what Levinas calls “signification itself”: the anarchical summons to responsibility, the dedication or love for one’s neighbour which constitutes the very subjectivity of the subject.

For Levinas, the question of the existence or non-existence of God is only the ultimate question insofar as God is conceived under the metaphysical primacy of causality, with God as the first cause or ground of beings. The assumption that God must exist in order to be witnessed assumes God is a being like other beings in the totality of the world. Such an assumption assumes the primacy and ultimacy of the

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 147.
\textsuperscript{137} “God and Philosophy”, 75.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion}, 189.
\textsuperscript{139} “God and Philosophy”, 76. Original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion}, 189-190.
world which admits of no “beyond”; as such, Levinas argues that one forgets or ignores the transcendence of God. In the effort to “ensure the efficacity of God in the world”, such assumptions “sacrifice transcendence.”

What, then, is the meaning of “God” in Levinas’s thought? After such pronouncements as the “end of metaphysics” and the “death” of God, to which he is writing and responding, it is clear for Levinas that no nouns designating beings are antecedent to the anonymous “He” of illeity. Yet if this is the case, how, then, can that which survives the “death” of God be identified with or determined as “God”, as Levinas often does? In one sense, according to Kosky, illeity can also be called “God” only on condition that the word no longer identifies or determines the God that it names. Levinas seems to agree:

The word God is an overwhelming semantic event that subdues the subversion worked by illeity. The glory of the Infinite shuts itself up in a word and becomes a being. But it already undoes its dwelling and unsays itself without vanishing into nothingness. . . . A said unique of its kind, it does not narrowly espouse grammatical categories like a noun (neither proper nor common noun), and does not incline exactly to logical rules, like a meaning (being an excluded middle between being and nothingness).

From this passage, it appears that the word “God” signifies like illeity in that its meaning can never be fully determined but always escapes the word which states it. The word “God” is thus always contested, called into question, or always undone by illeity such that God is never named determinately with the word “God”. As Kosky observes, it rather “designates” an anonymity which undoes and renders inadequate every name ascribed to it, including “God”.

Therefore, despite the many compelling aspects of Levinas’s argument, it nevertheless leads to some difficult problems that are not easily solved. One could argue that there is an element of indeterminacy and ambiguity surrounding the trace of illeity or “God” in responsibility, witnessed in love and justice. Levinas himself acknowledges in “God and Philosophy” that there is a degree of undecidability or indiscernibility with regard to the distinction between the trace of God and the

---

141 *Otherwise than Being*, 95.
142 *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 192.
143 *Otherwise than Being*, 151.
144 *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 193.
145 “God and Philosophy”, 69.
anonymous “being in general” of the il y a.\textsuperscript{146} It is possible that the very definition of the responsible self implies that the self cannot make such a distinction, at least not in any authoritative manner. The self witnesses transcendence, but as we have seen in Rolland earlier, the self cannot tell of whom or what s/he is witnessing, nor does the witness know that s/he is responding to a command until after it has already taken place. Thus, it would appear in Levinas’s thought that the self may be a witness, but one cannot say whether it witnesses “God” or the il y a. Or more exactly, perhaps it is God as illeity that has awakened the subject to responsibility in and through the face of the other person, or perhaps there is [il y a] only incessant awakening. It is difficult to see how one has any authoritative basis for how illeity can be called “God” and not something, or anything, else. To this, Kosky poses a legitimate, yet troubling question:

After the death of God, Levinas’s thought of God thus saves the name only, ‘God’. But why save this name? From everything I have said, it appears we might just as well abandon the name; all the evidence for God could as easily be for ‘no-God’ or some other name. Again, why not say only ‘obligation happens’, ‘il y a/es gibt obligation’?\textsuperscript{147}

Kosky can only conclude that Levinas’s thought on witness only presents God in confusion or ambiguity. The self finds itself in a permanent situation of undecidability.

\textbf{3.3 Can the God who “Comes to Mind” in Levinas’s Phenomenological Investigations be Linked with the God of the Bible?}

Following Kosky’s analysis, it could be argued that revelation, in a phenomenological sense, does not yet yield—\textit{prima facie}—the God of the biblical tradition, but simply the God who “comes to mind” in the interrelation of love and justice. It is here that we come to the dual pressing problem of whether or not the God who “comes to mind” in the Levinas’s phenomenological investigations can be linked with the God of the Bible, which then impinges on the broader issue of whether Levinas’s phenomenological project excludes theology or opens itself up to theological engagement, and further, if it is hospitable to theology, how it can remain true to itself as a rigorous phenomenological enterprise.

Levinas clearly does not wish to stop where Kosky does. Indeed, Levinas insists that although he has been “reproached” for having ignored theology, he nonetheless does not contest the “necessity of choosing the opportunity” for the

\textsuperscript{146} “God and Philosophy”, 69.

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion}, 196. Original emphasis.
recovery of theological discourse, so long as it is understood as an expression of ethical responsibility. Moreover, there are instances in Levinas’s philosophical works in which he clearly states that his phenomenological investigation into the original circumstance in which God first “comes to mind” is indeed also concerned with articulating appropriate orientations with respect to the God of the Bible. In “God and Philosophy”, Levinas writes:

Philosophical discourse must therefore be able to embrace God—of whom the Bible speaks—if, that is, this God has a meaning. . . . If the intellection of the biblical God—theology—does not reach the level of philosophical thought, it is not because theology thinks God as a being without making clear to begin with the “being” [être] of this being, but because in thematising God, theology has brought him into the course of being, while the God of the Bible signifies in an unlikely manner the beyond of being, or transcendence. That is, the God of the Bible signifies without analogy to an idea subject to criteria, without analogy to an idea exposed to the summons to show itself true or false.

As Annette Aronowicz observes, one might think that the God “of whom the Bible speaks” does not require a translation into what she calls a “Greek” mode of discourse—philosophy—because it is a word that is perfectly understandable to everyone. But for reasons which we have already presented in this thesis (the necessity that the “saying” of love be translated into the “said” of justice, for example), Levinas insists on “translating” it, interpreting it as he does with other religious terms. However, in “God and Philosophy” he is quick to insist that there is a distinction to be made between his choice to translate the God of the Bible into a “Greek” mode of discourse and the thematising discourse about God (which in this context he calls “Rational theology”). Such discourse, for Levinas, still depends on ontology by attempting to accommodate transcendence within the domain of being. Or more exactly, he argues that “Rational theology” seeks to express transcendence by using “adverbs of height”—fundamentally ontological—applied to the verb “to be” (être).

Likewise, we see that Levinas applies the same formula in one of his Talmudic commentaries when the subject of inquiry is the biblical God as he does in his phenomenological analysis of the God who “comes to mind”. In a commentary

148 “Preface” to Of God Who Comes to Mind, ix.
149 “God and Philosophy”, 56.
150 Ibid., 56. Original emphasis.
152 “God and Philosophy”, 56.
153 Ibid., 56.
entitled “Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry” (1985), Levinas explores a passage from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 99a-b), which addresses questions about what constitutes idolatry. Levinas interprets this discussion as challenging the notion that idolatry would be caused by a certain way of reading the text, arguing instead that the real protection against idolatry is found in the address to and from the text. He writes:

To claim to be a Jew thus, from the teaching of a book, is before all to recognise oneself as a reader, which is to say, a student of Torah; it is to exclude oneself from idolatry by true reading or study. Reading or study of a text that is protected from the eventual idolatry of that text itself, in renewing by an exegesis that cannot stop—and exegesis of that exegesis—the fixed letters and hearing there the breath of the living God. Of a God certainly not incarnate, but somehow inscribed, living His life—or a part of His life—in the letters, in the lines and between the lines, and in the exchange of ideas between readers who comment on them, where these letters are animated and are renewed by the prescription of the book—commandment without enslaving, like truth—to respond to the neighbour in justice, which is to say, to love the other person.154

Although there are many significant insights which can be drawn from this passage, for our purposes we would like to draw upon the latter part of Levinas’s comments. As we saw in the discussion of scepticism and the work of justice in Chapter Four, the language of the “said” always contains more than a sign and its signifier; the “said” seeks to thematise the infinite “saying” of responsibility, which it can only do at the price of a “betrayal” of that saying. Here, in a similar way, Levinas argues that the premise of reading or study of the text—exegesis—is that it does not unearth a fixed meaning but that reading and study will continue. Indeed, as Gibbs observes, to stop the exegesis would be to idolise a fixed interpretation of the text.155 Hence, he argues that there must be not only an interpretation of the text which avoids its idolisation, but also an “exegesis of the exegesis”, preventing any exegetical “said” from becoming authoritatively fixed and thus idolatrous.156

What does Levinas mean by “hearing the breath of the living God?” This is a crucial restatement of his discourse about the generative character of divine revelation, but this time it takes on the language of the biblical God: the renewal of the text allows one to hear not God’s word, but God’s “breath” in order to receive what he elsewhere

---


156 Gibbs, “The Disincarnation of the Word”, 42.
calls the “inspiration” of God. God is not incarnated in the written word, yet the “breath” of God or the “life” of God is inscribed in the text and “between the lines” of the text. As such, as Gibbs argues, the breath of God works to prevent its reverting into a fixed “said”, or allow for any notion of God “becoming present and determined in the text” or in a previous exegesis. He suggests that this tension between a material text and the spirit that reveals the command to respond to the other person, to engage in the “unsaying” and “resaying” of the “said”, is perhaps what Levinas means by the “disincarnation” of God. Or, in this context, the “unsaying” and “resaying” of a “said” acknowledges its origin in the infinite responsibility or “saying”, and as such is the way in which one hears the “breath of the living God”. And here we have a specific linking of the part of God’s “life” that occurs in the study and renewed interpretation of the text with a familiar theme that we have seen throughout our study of Levinas. The text renews by commanding without enslaving; truth is an assignation, a commanding that enables the self to respond—respond to the other person. Thus, the concern for the other person (love) and work of justice (as the inexhaustible interpretation of infinite responsibility) is associated with the “life” of God.

But can we accept the way in which Levinas seeks to establish the link between the God who “comes to mind” in the phenomenological investigations and the God “of whom the Bible speaks”? To answer this question, let us turn to some summary reflections on how this thesis has attempted to articulate a “model of intelligibility” for divine revelation on the basis of which this link can be maintained.

4. On the Relation of Love and Justice in Levinas as a “Model of Intelligibility” for Divine Revelation

We recall Levinas’s claim in Otherwise than Being that the word “God” borders on being and skirts nothingness. In other words, the word must somehow be lodged in an “excluded middle” between the two. With regard to nothingness, Rolland and Kosky have observed that the source of the obligation to responsibility comes

---

157 See e.g., “God and Philosophy”, 76: “One might give the name ‘inspiration’ to this intrigue of infinity in which I make myself the author of what I hear”. Original emphasis.

158 “The Disincarnation of the Word”, 43.

159 See e.g., “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition”, 146, where Levinas uses this term to describe whether one can conceive of an “intelligibility” for revelation in which reason (understood as the “correlative of the possibility of the world”) is breached by something that overflows its capacity.
from what Levinas himself calls the “who knows where.” The subject, in the position of witness, cannot decide this. However, Rolland suggests that in the subject’s incapacity to give a univocal answer, one can certainly “take as nothing” the Infinite that commits him or her to the neighbour. This, as we have suggested, is the effect of the “atheism” of the creature, which of course could lead to an atheist (or at least agnostic) reading of Levinas.

However, the word “God” also borders on being, and although this appears to tread more dangerous territory for Levinas than nothingness, it is precisely Levinas’s willingness to accommodate this risk in what he sees as the necessity of a return to the language of being, that can also demarcate the kinds of openness that his phenomenological project can have to theology—it is a necessary “risk” for theology to state this word, just as the “said” of justice is a necessary risk for expressing the “saying” of love. As he states in Otherwise than Being, the risk entails that the word gets translated into the logos to the point of being betrayed in it, whilst avoiding becoming an object of what Heidegger calls “onto-theology”. In other words, it is possible for one to “take God for a being” and ground the subject’s responsibility for the other person by starting with the supreme efficacy of God. Levinas acknowledges that with the utterance of the word “God”, the “glory” of the Infinite “shuts itself up” and “becomes a being.” However, as soon as this word is uttered, the Infinite already “undoes its dwelling” and “unsays itself” without being reduced to nothingness. Thus, in the “excluded middle” which Levinas seeks to articulate between being and nothingness, there is a retreat of God in manifestation itself, an “effacement of the Name” in its attestation. The “saying” of infinite responsibility (love) and the “said” of justice together give witness of the “otherwise than being”, but such witness to transcendence by definition requires the transcendent to remain ambiguous, a “blinking” of meaning that “perhaps” is the trace of God or “perhaps” only the anonymous movement of the il y a.

---

160 Otherwise than Being, 13.
161 “He’ (‘Il’), 269.
162 Otherwise than Being, 151.
163 Ibid., 151.
164 Ibid., 151.
As we have seen, Levinas seeks to show how God might have a meaning whose priority, when translated into the language of being, can be seen as prior to being, without falling back, as he puts it, into either “ontology” or “faith”. Or more exactly, he seeks to articulate an “intelligibility” which does not fall into either term of the alternative, or indeed which contests the idea that together they constitute a genuine alternative. He writes,

To ask oneself, as we are attempting to do here, whether God cannot be uttered in a reasonable discourse that would be neither ontology nor faith, is implicitly to doubt the formal opposition, established by Yehuda Halevy and taken up by Pascal, between, on the one hand, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, invoked without philosophy in faith, and on the other hand the god of the philosophers. It is to doubt that this opposition constitutes an alternative.

As Tamra Wright observes, in order to arrive at an intelligibility that allows for the transcendence of revelation, in a Levinasian formulation, one must refuse the equation of rationality with possibility, and consider instead what Levinas calls the structure of “practical reason”:

Can a model of intelligibility be sought in some traumatic experience in which intelligence is broken, affected by something that overflows its capacity? Certainly not. Unless, however, it were a question of a “Thou shalt” which takes no account of what “Thou canst”. The act of overflowing here is not insane. In other words, is not the rationality of this rupture practical reason? Is not the model of revelation an ethical one?

Wright suggests that although the use of the phrase “practical reason” might evoke an association with Kantian ethics (notably with regard to the above, the Kantian dictum that “ought implies can”), Levinas will distinguish his notion from that of the categorical imperative in which the will is directed by a “universalisable maxim” (the “Thou shalt” which takes no account of what “Thou canst” also clearly implying a rejection of the “ought implies can”). Rather, as this thesis has attempted to show, the “breach” of the totality occurs through the obedience of a command before it is understood, an obedience which is expressed in the love “without eros” for the neighbour and the concern for justice for the third party. As Wright agrees, for Levinas

166 “God and Philosophy”, 57.
167 “God and Philosophy”, 57.
169 “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition”, 142-143.
the breach of immanent reality occurs through “practical reason”—obeying before hearing—and this constitutes the model of revelation of the God of the Bible.\footnote{The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy, 116.}

In this regard, Levinas claims that this model of revelation is a reflection of a certain kind of “Jewish rationality” which formulates the possibility of an opening on to an “irreducible transcendence” which introduces a breach of the “thought which thinks in correlation with the world’s positivity . . . and always thinks to its measure.”\footnote{“Revelation in the Jewish Tradition”, 144.} For Levinas, such a rationality appears not as that of a deficient reason but rather in the witness given by the ethical relation: in the primordial concern for one’s neighbour that is obeyed and not chosen.

What does this mean for theology, insofar as it is defined by Levinas as the “intellection of the Biblical God”,\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy” (1975), in Of God Who Comes to Mind, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 56.} as a discipline that is concerned with bringing an element of content to bear on the question of revelation? It means that the interrelation of love and justice, as Levinas conceives it, provides an orientation or grounding for engaging with the biblical God. Instead of conceiving theology primarily in terms of discourse about God, it can be regarded as a discourse which is guided by, and grounded in, a specific orientation of welcoming the other, of ethical humility. As Michael Purcell observes, such an ethical grounding enables theology to direct its enterprise towards a practical engagement in human life and its concerns, thereby resisting the temptation to situate itself in the purely theoretical.\footnote{Michael Purcell, Levinas and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.} Additionally, with respect to its content, theology is properly oriented only as it sees its expressions, statements and descriptions as exemplifications of the “said” of justice. Like any attempt at justice, Levinas argues that risks abound when discourse about God is attempted, but they are risks which are necessary in order to give witness of the primordial “saying” of love for the other person; in this sense, theology, too, when it is properly oriented can—like philosophy—be exercised as the “wisdom of love in the service of love.”\footnote{Otherwise than Being, 162.} And as this thesis has attempted to show, Levinas’s conception of love and justice provides the framework for understanding his claim that to turn towards the other person is to find oneself in the trace of God.

\footnote{The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy, 116.}{The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy, 116.}
\footnote{“Revelation in the Jewish Tradition”, 144.}{“Revelation in the Jewish Tradition”, 144.}
\footnote{Michael Purcell, Levinas and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.}{Michael Purcell, Levinas and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.}
\footnote{Otherwise than Being, 162.}{Otherwise than Being, 162.}
Moreover, we would suggest that Levinas’s insistence upon the way in which in the trace of God who has “passed” in love and the work of justice provides an orientation for theological discourse to rethink problems about how one can and cannot speak about God. As we saw above with regard to the “excluded middle” between being and nothingness, his philosophy is novel insofar as it avoids the tendency to “positivise” God’s “presence” without going to the other extreme of a purely negative theology, precisely because the self’s very subjectivity gives a “positive” witness of the order to responsibility without this responsibility having begun in the self:

The illeity in the beyond-being is the fact that its coming toward me is a departure which lets me accomplish a movement toward the neighbour. The positivity of this departure, that which makes this departure, this diachrony, before more than a term of negative theology, is my responsibility for the others.176

In this sense, the relation with God (for Levinas) is established as what John Caputo calls a “how” and not a “what”.177 In the movement towards the neighbour, God has a revelatory significance even if the name is not uttered.

5. Conclusion

We began this thesis with two basic questions: first, the problem of what the interrelation of love and justice in Levinas can retrieve, for the contemporary mindset, an orientation for divine revelation (with genuinely religious import, not only revelation in the ethical sense of the epiphany in the face of the other); and second, the related problem of how Levinas, as a thoroughly phenomenological thinker, can inform, speak to, and guide the theology of the positive religions. Levinas, of course, claims that the God who “comes to mind” does have an affinity with the God of the Bible. After our examination of witness in this chapter, we have been suggesting that the interrelation of love and justice can be utilised as a basis for addressing this problem. Our suggestion is this: the interrelation of love and justice in Levinas’s thought allows for the tension of their juxtaposition to stand without ontologising the return to being that their interrelation demands. In other words, love and justice in Levinas’s thought do not present a dichotomy in which one must be chosen over the


other; their interrelation rather produces a “gap”, an “excluded middle” in which their interdependence can be maintained.

Moreover, we can see that other familiar juxtapositions in Levinas’s thought are not only illuminated but can also be given concrete purchase in new ways through the revelatory relation of love and justice: whether the “saying” breaching the “said”, nothingness breaching being (or God as the anonymous movement of the *il y a* breaching the “positive” God of the biblical tradition), the Infinite breaching the finite, and so on. This thesis has shown, therefore, that with the breach that is produced in all of these juxtapositions, the “excluded middle” of which Levinas speaks with regard to divine revelation is not an inert space which serves merely theoretically for logical or phenomenological purposes but is rather in all cases a locus of dynamic social relation. In the enactment of love and justice, what is transcendent can be assembled into being but not as an ontology (*qua* “science” of being)—the transcendent retains its “otherness”. In this regard, these juxtapositions provide a genuine example of transcendence that takes place in the here and now.

Thus, as we saw above with Levinas’s retrieval of Plato, what is transcendent remains unknowable but nonetheless provides the “ground” and meaning that inheres in what is knowable. Justice is necessary, albeit at a betrayal, in order for the primordial, an-archical summons to love the other person in responsibility to be shown. In a similar way, although the word “God” unsays itself without being reduced to nothingness, theology is a necessary “risk” to be taken insofar as it is now understood as a “said” in relation to the “saying” of responsibility, through which it is prohibited from becoming an ontologizing discipline yet which, in the absence of ontology, can all the more claim a grounding in the “concrete” reality of social relations. We have thus arrived once again at Levinas’s argument from Chapter One: Ethics is not only first philosophy, but it is also first theology. On this basis, the analyses undertaken in this thesis have also enabled us to come to a new understanding with regard to the matter of how Levinas’s strictly (while expanded) phenomenological enterprise can inform theological enterprise.

The goal of this chapter—and indeed this thesis—has been to show that Levinas seeks to recover the primacy of the ethical and to “ground” its primacy as the indispensable site of the irruption of God into being. We have seen that he finds support for this claim in a specifically “Jewish rationality” which emphasises doing
before understanding, which for Levinas is articulated by way of a phenomenological description of the enactment of one’s infinite responsibility prior to any knowledge of having done so. Although Levinas the philosopher seeks to articulate the “concrete staging” of how the word “God” first comes to mind, he does not reject theological discourse about God nor does he contest the necessity for a recovery of these themes. As Michael Purcell observes, theology cannot conclusively decide what religion will be, for theology cannot contain the “revelation” of God.178 Theology also cannot capture the ways in which infinite responsibility expresses itself in love and justice. But even with its limitations, there remains for Levinas a valid place for the recuperation of theological discourse. Theological recuperation comes after the glimpse of “holiness”, which is primary. And as we have seen, this holiness is the interruption of the conatus essendi, the ordering of the subject to responsibility for the other person. Thus, as Richard Cohen observes, it is by serving the imperatives of the “wisdom of love” that the propositions of the “love of wisdom” or justice—philosophy, theology—emerge and find their true significance.179

In the translatability of the revelation of God, it is the human subject who is to be “translated” or transformed, or as Caputo says, “carried over into action”, and more specifically carried off by the movements of love and justice.180 The translation of the revelation of God, in a Levinasian formulation, is transcendence: it is the movement that revelation names, the deed(s) that it commands. In such a formulation, revelation is not explicated in a proposition but witnessed, enacted, performed. So understood, divine revelation becomes the subject’s making real the “life” of God, to the extent that our very hands, in caring for the material needs of the other person, give witness of this life or “glory” of God.

Bibliography


