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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE MASTER AND THE MIDWIFE:
LEVINAS AND PLATO ON TEACHING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS
Works by Levinas

AE: *Autrement qu'e□tre ou au-delà de l'essence*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.

BPW: *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.

DF: *Difficult Freedom; Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990.

DL: *Difficile liberté; essais sur le judai□sme*. 3e édition. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1976.

EDHH: *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. 2e édition. Paris: Vrin, 1967.

EI: *Ethics and Infinity; Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

ENE: *Entre Nous; essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991.

EN: *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other*. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

HAH: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Saint Clement: Fata Morgana, 1987.

HS: *Hors Sujet*. Saint Clement: Fata Morgana, 1987.

NP: *Noms Propres*. Saint Clement: Fata Morgana, 1976.

OB: *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997.

OS: *Outside the Subject*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

PhI: "La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini." Collected in Peperzak, Adriaan. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993. 73-87. Originally published in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. 62 (1957): 241-53.

PN: *Proper Names*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

PI: “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite.” Trans. Adriaan Peperzak. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993. 88-119.

PS: *Parole et Silence et autres conférences inédites au Collège philosophique*. ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier. 2011.

TeI: *Totalité et Infini*. 2e édition. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965.

TaI: *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

ThI: *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. 2ed. Trans. Andre Orianne. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1995

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Levinas is now recognized as one of the most influential French philosophers of the twentieth century, but appreciation for his work took time to develop. While Levinas was greatly respected by his contemporaries in the French intellectual community of the mid-twentieth century—especially by members of the *Collège philosophique* organized by Jean Wahl—for much of his life, Levinas was not widely recognized as an important philosopher by the broader academic world. Not only did he publish his first masterpiece, *Totality and Infinity*, relatively late in life at the age of 55, but his first attempt to publish it proved unsuccessful. When, however, *Totality and Infinity* was successfully published by Martinus Nijhoff Publishers in 1961, Levinas’s status in the philosophical world quickly rose. He became a full professor at the University of Poitiers and his work spread throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

While there is now extensive scholarship on much of Levinas’s published writings, his professional life before he became a highly regarded philosopher is not often discussed in relation to his philosophical work. While scholars sometimes note that Levinas spent nearly three decades, from 1947-1973,¹ as the director of the *École Normale Israélite Orientale* (Enio) in Paris, they rarely recognize the influence that his work as a teacher had on his philosophical writings. But as the present dissertation seeks to show, a careful study of Levinas’s conception of what he calls a “primordial” teaching can help us to better understand Levinas’s work,

¹ Although Levinas became a full professor at the University of Poitiers in 1961, he remained the director of the Enio, in name at least, until 1973.

particularly *Totality and Infinity*, as well as our own understanding of what it means to teach and learn.

Levinas's account of this primordial teaching does not appear in the context of a formal philosophy of education, but the references instead appear scattered throughout his early post-war period. The earliest references appear in "The Transcendence of Words" (1948)² wherein he describes teaching [*enseignement*] as what allows speech to come to life in a dynamic and ongoing conversation. This concept of teaching is then further developed in a set of lecture notes for a paper titled "*Les Enseignements*" (1950)³ given at the *Collège philosophique*. In these notes, Levinas further develops his conception of teaching as that which also marks the advent of responsibility to the Other. In addition to these early formulations of the concept of teaching, in *Difficult Freedom*, there are three essays explicitly dedicated to Jewish education.⁴ And, finally, references to teaching are woven throughout *Totality and Infinity*, the primary focus of this dissertation.⁵

Among Levinas scholars, Claire Katz is notable as one scholar who has extensively explored the theme of teaching in Levinas's work,⁶ and my own work will build on her

² "The Transcendence of Words: On Michel Leiris's *Biffures*." *Outside the Subject*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. 144-150.

³ *Parole et Silence et autres conférences inédites au Collège philosophique*. Ed. Rodolphe Calin and Chatherine Chalier. 2011.

⁴ See "Reflections on Jewish Education," (1951) "Education and Prayer," (1963), and "Antihumanism and Education" (1973) in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

⁵ *Totalité et Infini*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961. Translated into English under the title *Totality and Infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

⁶ Katz, Claire. *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. "Turning Toward the other: Ethics, Fecundity, and the Primacy of Education." *Totality and Infinity at 50*. Ed. Scott Davidson and

scholarship. While Katz focuses primarily on Levinas's concept of teaching in the context of his Judaism, my own point of entry instead considers Levinas's work insofar as it engages the Western philosophical tradition rooted in Classical Greek thought. Pursuing this perspective is not meant to imply that Levinas's Jewish faith is not also critical to understanding his account of the Other as my teacher. Rather, my own work is intended as a supplement, not a challenge to that of Katz. Levinas's work can and should be read as in dialogue with a multiplicity of authors and traditions.

In particular, here I will explore the theme of teaching through Levinas's complex, and at times ambivalent, relationship to Plato and Platonism. In his early summary of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas famously describes the work as a "return to Platonism."⁷ This "return" in Levinas's view is needed to critique the dominant philosophy in Europe at the time, which largely rejected ontologies that embraced a transcendent source of meaning. As Levinas argues in "Meaning and Sense,"⁸ the prominent philosophers of the day (such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger), viewed meaning as arising out of immanent networks of reference ordered by the projects, needs, and desires of contingently situated subjects. Levinas, however, insists that there is a transcendent source of meaning beyond culture that is not dependent on the particular ways of signifying offered by the language of a particular community. This sense is the ethical sense of the Other, by means of which, according to Levinas, we come to understand ourselves as

Diane Perpich. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012. 209-226. See also *Levinas and Education: At the intersection of faith and reason*. Ed. Denise Egéa Kuehne. New York: Routledge, 2008

⁷ This formulation appears in the summary of *Totality and Infinity* published in the *Annales de l'Université de Paris*. It is translated in Adriaan Peperzak's *Platonic Transformations*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. 120-121.

⁸ "Meaning and Sense." *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. 33-64.

responsible.

The transcendence of the ethical beyond culture, Levinas argues, has been overlooked by what he calls the “anti-Platonism” of his time. Levinas differentiates himself from his contemporaries by arguing for a reality beyond appearances, what Plato names the Good “beyond being” [*epekeina tēs ousias*].⁹ For Levinas, the ethical sense of the Other is like the transcendence of the Good in Plato insofar as the ethical persists as the orientation towards which we must always direct ourselves regardless of changes in our social, political, and cultural landscapes. In other words, we are always responsible to the Other, according to Levinas, and this responsibility is not dependent on the particular forms of meaning provided by a specific culture. We are inevitably and unavoidably obligated to serve the Other.

But it is not only Plato’s conception of a transcendent reality “beyond being” that inspires Levinas. He also admires Socrates’s insistence on the importance of understanding the ethical relation as a conversation, a “living breathing discourse,”¹⁰ as Socrates says in the *Phaedrus*. The relation with the Other, Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*, is a relation in which the Other is *present* in his manifestation. He “attends” his speaking and, as such, offers the possibility of explaining himself, that is, of offering an “apology,” a defense of his ideas. For Levinas, to speak with another person is to be engaged in a relationship of responsivity in which the Other is available to answer my questions.

It is in this sense, as one who is present in speaking and able to respond to me, that the Other teaches me according to Levinas. The Other who addresses me is attendant to his speaking

⁹ Plato. “Republic.” *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 509B

¹⁰ Plato. “Phaedrus.” *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 276A.

in a way that opens up the possibility of a living conversation and thereby makes possible my own understanding of and speaking about the world. That is, according to Levinas, without the Other who speaks *to* me, it would not be possible for me to speak *about* the world, insofar as all speaking about is always embedded in a speaking *to*. Our being spoken to, for Levinas, thus opens us up to the possibility of engaging with the world as an object of knowledge and expression. In this way, he argues that the teaching of the Other makes possible all teaching and learning in the traditional sense, insofar as teaching and learning are practices of speaking and listening.

But while Levinas is inspired by Plato, his relationship with Plato is, as a number of scholars have noted, complicated.¹¹ Levinas is also critical of Plato who at times, according to Levinas, exemplifies the tendency of “Western” thought to describe the subject as independent and self-sufficient. In fact, Levinas often defines his own conception of teaching in opposition to Socratic education for this very reason. He argues that Socratic education, understood as *anamnēsis* (recollection) and *maieutics* (midwifery), presents the learner as free and invulnerable, already in possession of what she eventually learns. By contrast, Levinas insists that the relation with the Other who teaches me is one in which the Other offers me something more than what I could ever contain within myself.

This tension that is exhibited in Levinas’s relationship to Plato’s work is, I will argue, reflective of a broader tension in *Totality and Infinity* between “interiority” and “exteriority,” the

¹¹ In addition to Peperzak’s *Platonic Transformations*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997, see Achtenberg, Deborah. *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Levinas on Relations to the Other*. Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2014; Allen, Sarah. *The Philosophical Sense of Transcendence: Levinas and Plato on Loving Beyond Being*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2009; Gonzales, Francisco. “Levinas Questioning Plato on Eros and Maieutics,” *Levinas and the Ancients*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. 40-61; Staehler, Tanja. *Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-side of Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Same, and the Other. My investigation of the concept of teaching will, therefore, also lead me to a discussion of what some have found to be a problematic aspect of Levinas's first major work, namely the apparently strict differentiation between the Same and the Other.¹² Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, often describes the alterity of the Other as an "absolute" alterity that is wholly separate from the sphere of the Same. That is, the Other is Other precisely as one who resists being subsumed by the identificatory movement that defines the domain of the Same. How, readers have asked, can we welcome the Other into the interior economy (*oiko-nomos*) of the dwelling, which is a part of the sphere of the Same, while still maintaining the absolute separation of the Same and the Other that is necessary, in Levinas's view, to overcome a Parmenidean metaphysics?

Levinas's solution to the problem of how there can be a relation between the Same and the Other in the dwelling is the introduction of a third metaphysical possibility in addition to those of the Same and the Other. "Feminine" alterity, Levinas claims, involves the appearance of another form of alterity that is unlike the absolute demanding presence of the Other as a stranger who comes from "on high," and from a distance. Instead, feminine alterity is gentle, and hospitable. The feminine Other, whom Levinas describes as appearing within the dwelling, withdraws and allows the subject to accomplish subjectivity. In this way, the feminine Other as generous and hospitable, is necessary for ethics by being the condition of the possibility of subjectivity itself. But while Levinas offers this solution to the paradox of the Other being

¹² This critique is most famously leveled by Derrida in "Violence and Metaphysics." *Levinas, Phenomenology and His Critics*, edited by Claire Katz and Lara Trout, 88-173. Volume 1 of *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*. New York: Routledge, 2005. We will see in Chapter Four that a similar critique is also raised by Maurice Blanchot in *Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, and more recently by Francisco Gonzales in "Levinas Questioning Plato on Eros and Maieutics." *Levinas and the Ancients*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. 40-61

welcomed into the sphere of the Same, Levinas's account of the "feminine" is not only problematic in many ways from a feminist perspective, but it is also underdeveloped.

Despite these problems, I will argue in this work that the role of "feminine" alterity is essential for the coherence of *Totality and Infinity* and, in my view, a further development of this concept is helpful for fleshing out Levinas's conception of teaching. Within the teaching relation as Levinas describes it, both the absolute demanding presence of the utterly exterior Other *and* the gentle hospitality of the intimate "feminine" Other are needed. That is, if the Other as my teacher is the Other who opens up for me the possibility of a meaningful world, the Other qua teacher must appear both as a stranger and as a friend, as one who calls into question my comfortable way of being in the world and as one who hospitably welcomes me into a conversation.

Levinas, however, is inconsistent in recognizing the presence of both modes of alterity in his account of the primordial teaching relation. While Levinas sometimes recognizes the importance of what he names "feminine" alterity, at other times, he is hesitant to acknowledge that this gentle intimate alterity is, in fact, a part of my relation with the Other who teaches me. But in my view, recognizing the role that intimacy plays in the teaching relation can help us to strengthen and further develop Levinas's notion of the primordial teaching. The critique of Levinas that I will develop here is, therefore, not meant as a rejection of his conception of ethics or of the teaching relation. Rather, my aim in this work is to develop Levinas's notion of teaching by further investigating the intimate dimension of the relationship with the Other who teaches me, a dimension that Levinas, at times, seems hesitant to explore.

One way of further developing this underexplored aspect of Levinas's conception of

teaching, I will show, is by re-examining Socratic education, which Levinas himself rejects. Socratic education, however, contrary to Levinas's own claims, recognizes both dimensions of alterity that he himself describes. That is, I claim that we can interpret Socratic education, understood as *anamnēsis* and *maieutics*, as revealing the ways in which teaching and learning involve a complex navigation of intimacy and distance. Socrates, as both the gadfly and the midwife, shows how teaching can be understood as a gesture of hospitality in which the Other qua student is welcomed into a conversation without collapsing the difference between the I and the Other. In this way, Socratic education can be read, despite Levinas's claims to the contrary, as consonant with and helpful for the development of Levinas's ethics.

In particular, Socratic education can help us to see how Levinas's conception of the teaching relation can inform the concrete practice of teaching itself. While Levinas's primordial teaching relation extends well beyond the relations that make up the practice of teaching as we normally understand it, this practice is, nevertheless, an important example of what Levinas names the primordial teaching relation. That is, insofar as all speaking is a kind of teaching in the primordial sense, all teaching in the practical sense is also necessarily a teaching in the primordial sense. And while Levinas's work does not provide specific ethical principles against which we can check our actions to see if they are good or bad, his work is, nevertheless, important for guiding us in our practices, in this case, the practice of teaching. Levinas does not provide principles, but he does orient us towards the Other and demands of us that we perpetually consider how we can be ever more hospitable. Thus, I argue that Levinas's conception of the primordial teaching relation, together with Socratic education, can orient our concrete pedagogies toward the others whom we welcome into our classrooms as our students.

In these ways, the present work will draw together several themes in Levinas's work and in scholarship on Levinas that have not yet been brought together. In particular, I show how examining the underexplored concept of the primordial teaching relation helps to illuminate questions concerning the unity of *Totality and Infinity* as well as the complexity of Levinas's relationship to Plato. Furthermore, through this examination of the primordial teaching relation, this work also aims to further explore the role of intimacy in the ethical relation. By developing these concepts and tracing their interconnections, my ultimate goals are both to better illuminate Levinas's work from a scholarly perspective and also to help us consider how we might continue to work to make our pedagogies more welcoming of the Other.

The structure of the remainder of the work is as follows: Chapter Two provides the framework for my interpretation of *Totality and Infinity*, which I will make use of as I explore the nature of the teaching relation in subsequent chapters. I argue in this chapter that there are two modes of alterity of the Other--an "absolute" alterity of the exterior Other who remains at a distance, and an "intimate" alterity of the "feminine" Other. Both modes of alterity, I argue, are essential for ethics according to Levinas. In Chapter Three, I examine what Levinas means when he claims that the Other is my teacher in a "primordial" sense. And I argue that the Other of the teaching relation presents both modes of alterity described in Chapter Two, that is, both "absolute" and "intimate" alterity. In Chapter Four, I turn to an examination of the way in which Levinas's understanding of the primordial teaching relation is articulated through an engagement with Plato. I will show that Levinas's emphasis on the teacher as the Other of "absolute" distance is part of what motivates his critique of Socratic education. I will argue, however, in Chapter Four that Socratic education does not reduce the alterity of the teacher to a moment of

recognition within the Same, as Levinas worries. Instead, I argue that Socratic education recognizes the inherent tension in the teaching relation between distance and intimacy. Finally, in Chapter Five, I reflect on what we can learn about the concrete practice of teaching from the preceding analyses. I argue that concretizing Levinas's ethics into a practice of teaching requires that we come to see our students as our teachers in the sense that we must be open to learning from our students how best to welcome them into the conversations that make up philosophy.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MODES OF ALTERITY OF THE OTHER

The central theme of *Totality and Infinity* is what Levinas calls the “metaphysical relation,” the relation between the Same [*le Même*] and the Other [*l’Autre*], which is also simultaneously characterized as the ethical relation between the I or Me [*le Moi*] and the human Other [*Autrui*]. This chapter will explore this essential relation in Levinas’s work and will show that the Other of the metaphysical relation appears in *Totality and Infinity* in at least two different modes—as a challenging exterior presence and as an intimate welcoming source of generosity.

First, as I will explore in greater detail below, the Other appears as an exterior presence, as one who is “absolutely” other, insofar as she cannot be appropriated by or made commensurate with my own understanding of the world in concepts that I can master. In appearing in this mode, the Other unsettles my comfortable being in the world by calling me to be responsible to and for others. The Other reveals to me that I am not alone and must not simply enjoy and possess the world without regard for the needs of those who face me. In calling me to responsibility in this way, Levinas describes the Other as appearing from “on high,” as my Master and judge even as she also appears as vulnerable and needy, as the one for whom I am responsible.

But while the Other appears in this way as an exterior presence that is “absolutely” other, the Other also appears within the space that Levinas names interiority. In appearing there, the Other is an intimate Other, designated as “feminine” by Levinas. This Other is one who shares

the interior space of the dwelling and welcomes me into the world in gentleness and familiarity. And as we will see in the analysis of the dwelling below, this intimate, interior Other plays an essential role in Levinas's project as the one who makes possible the accomplishment of the separated subject necessary for ethics.

But while this "feminine" alterity is recognized by Levinas as essential, the importance of the feminine is sometimes overlooked by scholars and, as I will argue in greater detail in Chapter Three,¹ also by Levinas himself. In fact, Levinas's own primary emphasis in the text is revealed by his subtitle, "An essay on exteriority," which shows that his focus is on the Other as "absolutely" other. But as we will see, the ethical relation that Levinas describes necessarily involves both modes of the alterity of the Other. The intimacy of the Other's hospitality makes possible the separation of subjectivity, while the exteriority of the Other of "absolute" alterity orients me towards a transcendent reality beyond myself.

Exteriority: the Other as "absolutely" other

By titling Section I of *Totality and Infinity*, "*Le Même et L'Autre*," "The Same and the Other," Levinas immediately places his work within the history of Western philosophy's attempts to reckon with these basic metaphysical concepts. Specifically, he enters into dialogue with Plato's *Sophist* among other canonical philosophical works.² In the *Sophist*, the primary interlocutors--Theaetetus and the Stranger from Elea--attempt to find a definition of the sophist using the method of *diairesis*, the division of beings into genera and species. Their goal is to figure out what kind of a being a sophist is. As they make several attempts to define the sophist

¹ See pp 79-84.

² For instance, Levinas in discussing the categories of the Same and the Other likely also has Hegel, Husserl, Sartre, and others in mind.

as a kind of angler of men, however, they find that it is difficult (or perhaps impossible) to place the sophist into a category of being. The sophist proves difficult to define because his being always involves non-being. That is, the sophist, the interlocutors agree, is a kind of imitator, and as such, his being involves also that which is not.

The Eleatic philosopher, Parmenides, however, has claimed that non-being is irrational and unspeakable and that, therefore, we must give up on attempting to speak of it.³ Every attempt to say what is not immediately transforms what is *not* into what *is*, insofar as something that is said has being as something said. That is, if I describe non-being, my description is not non-being itself but partakes in being insofar as it is a description. But if the sophist's being inherently involves non-being, the interlocutors must figure out a way to speak of non-being if they are going to truly define the sophist. They must, therefore, overcome Parmenides's prohibition on speaking of non-being, a move that the Stranger from Elea describes as a form of parricide, insofar as it requires him to refute his philosophical "father," Parmenides.⁴

Levinas confronts a similar problem in his attempt to describe the Other. For the Other to truly be Other, the Other must have alterity, he writes, as its "formal characteristic."⁵ The formal characteristic is that which makes something what it is, its *form* or its *eidos*. But, the very notion of form entails identity or self-sameness. For the Other to have *alterity* as its "formal characteristic" is, therefore, a paradoxical notion. Although Levinas does not identify the Other with non-being, we can see that the problem of finding an "essence" of alterity is not unlike the

³ A translation of Parmenides's poem can be found in "Parmenides of Elea: Fragments." in McKirahan, Richard D. *Philosophy Before Socrates*. 2ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. 2011. 145-150.

⁴ Plato. "Sophist." *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 241d.

⁵ *TeI 5, TaI 35*

problem the interlocutors in the *Sophist* have in finding an essence of a being, namely the sophist, whose existence is defined by non-being. For something to be other, it must be other with respect to something else. Alterity does belong to a category or “kind” of being; its “essence” is to be a negation of what can be named an essence. For something to be other than X is for it to be *not* X in some respect. Levinas’s challenge, therefore, like the interlocutors of the *Sophist*, is to find a way to speak about a reality that always seems to slip away as soon as it is described. The method of *diairesis* in which beings are ordered into categories on the basis of their characteristics will not be sufficient.

Because of its paradoxical nature, the alterity of the Other, Levinas claims, must be given a different kind of account than one in which beings are located within categories of genera and species. Instead, Levinas claims that, with regard to the alterity of the Other, “[i]ts formal characteristic, to be other, makes up its content.”⁶ That is, Levinas argues that if we understand the metaphysical category of the Other [*l’Autre*] as the concrete human Other [*Autrui*], we find that the paradox can be resolved. He writes, “*L’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui.*”⁷ That is, the absolutely Other, as a metaphysical concept [*l’Autre*], is the human Other [*Autrui*]. Or, as Lingis translates, “The absolutely other is the Other.”⁸ By identifying the Other [*l’Autre*] with the human Other [*Autrui*], Levinas argues, we can truly overcome Parmenides--that is, we can discover a genuine alterity that is not defined only by its opposition to other beings. The human Other, Levinas argues, is a presence that cannot be subsumed under a category that renders its difference from other concepts or categories temporary or merely provisional once subsumed

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *TeI* 9

⁸ *TaI* 39

under the category “Being.” Instead, the Other, as one who speaks, is, by her very presence, Other.

In order to see why this is the case, it is helpful to first examine the other term of the metaphysical relation, the Same, which, in Levinas’s analysis, corresponds to what he calls “*le Moi*,” “the Me,” or as Lingis translates, “the I.” While the Other has alterity as its form, the I is fundamentally characterized by identity. The I, Levinas writes, is “primal identity” and the “primordial work of identification,”⁹ i.e. the I consumes what it encounters by converting what is other--food, ideas, experiences, thoughts, language, etc.—into itself.

This “work” of identification is ongoing. In enacting its identificatory power, the I, Levinas claims, does not remain the same by maintaining an unchanging essence. Rather, the I dynamically transforms everything that it encounters into its own sphere of mastery and possession. He writes, “The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose being consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it.”¹⁰ The I is fundamentally consumptive, according to Levinas, and converts all that it encounters into itself. To be a subject, for Levinas, is to enact this unification of the subject through self-identification with what it consumes and masters.

The Other, *Autrui*, is, however, not consumable by the identificatory movements of the I. The Other, rather, presents me with a demand that impels me to question my consumption of the world. While there are aspects of the Other’s concrete presence that I can see, know, and understand, the Other is not reducible to these qualities. The Other *faces* me, and this facing involves a demand that I not reduce him to an object of my own comprehension but to reflect on

⁹ *TeI 6, Tal 36*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the responsibility to him and to all of the other others. The absolute alterity of the Other is thus differentiated from the relative alterity of that which can be consumed and incorporated into the Same. For Levinas, the world from which I live--what I eat, see, know, remember, etc.--is “other” in a certain sense, but “[b]etween the I and *what it lives from* there does not extend the absolute distance that separates the same from the other.”¹¹ That which I live from¹² becomes a part of me, part of my sphere of possession; it belongs to what I can master by converting it into what is mine. The Other, Levinas argues, by contrast, appears at an “absolute distance,” as that which fundamentally calls into question my possession of the world. That is, the Other, in *facing* me, presents me with a non-possessable presence. The Other cannot be consumed by me because she *must* not be consumed by me. Her presence demands, rather, that I *give* what I possess to her and to others.

Levinas’s claim that the Other calls into question the identificatory movement of the I is supported, he argues, by phenomenological evidence, although he insists that the concept of intentionality in phenomenology needs to be transformed before we can give a phenomenological account of the Other. Levinas argues that the “face” of the Other shows up as something that cannot be received by the kinds of intentional structures that Husserl and Heidegger describe.

Levinas argues in his dissertation¹³ and elsewhere that, for Husserl, theoretical intentionality is given too much weight. He writes with regard to Husserl’s position, “Theory and

¹¹ *TeI* 116, *Tal* 143

¹² A fuller discussion of the concept of “living from...” [*vivre de*] can be found below, pp 25-31.

¹³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. Trans. André Orianne. 2ed. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1995.

representation play a dominant role in life, serving as a basis of the whole of conscious life; they are the forms of intentionality that give a foundation to all others.”¹⁴ Levinas argues that while, for Husserl, every *noesis* has a *noematic* correlate, theoretical intentionality plays an essential role in the constitution of objects in a way that other forms of intentionality do not. Specifically, Levinas points to Husserl’s distinction between “objectifying acts,”—perception, judgment, and acts of “pure representation”—and “non-objectifying acts,” such as willing, valuing, and so on. Levinas points out that in the *Logical Investigations* Husserl insists that all non-objectifying acts presuppose an objectifying act needed to constitute the “matter” of the object of the non-objectifying act.¹⁵

A similar argument appears in *Totality and Infinity*. The problem with Husserlian intentionality, according to Levinas, is that the exteriority of the object of intentionality is lost in its representation by and availability to consciousness. The event of an object giving itself to consciousness in Husserl’s work is parallel, Levinas claims, to the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct ideas. “In clarity an object which is first exterior *is given* that is, is delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him. In clarity the exterior being presents itself as the work of the thought that receives it.”¹⁶ According to Levinas, objectifying intentionality, which serves as the basis for the constitution of the world, operates on the presumption of adequation between consciousness and what it thinks. Consciousness, according

¹⁴ *ThI* 53

¹⁵ Although, Levinas acknowledges that Husserl’s work undergoes a development between the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas*, he argues that the primacy of objectifying acts remains central even in *Ideas*. See *ThI* 94-95.

¹⁶ *TeI* 123, *TaI* 129

to Levinas, is understood to have complete mastery over the object insofar as the object can never exceed the intentional structures that give it its meaning. Levinas writes, “This mastery is total and as though creative it is accomplished as a giving of meaning: the object of representation is reducible to noemata.”¹⁷ Levinas argues that, for Husserl, in principle, there is nothing in the object of consciousness that exceeds the intentional structures that allow it to appear. Everything that can appear is capable of being subsumed into the horizon of the world of the subject.

While according to Levinas, Husserl over-privileges representation and intelligibility, Heidegger, in his account of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*, also reduces the world to the mastery of the subject in “com-prehension.” That is, Levinas argues that to comprehend [*comprendre*] for Heidegger, is also to engage in a kind of mastery or handling [*prendre*] of the world. We find Levinas’s critique early on in Levinas’s career in “Is Ontology Fundamental?”¹⁸ Despite what he sees as the advances of Heidegger’s ontology, which help us to see that theoretical intentionality is not our first or primary mode of engaging with the world, Levinas argues in this essay that, for Heidegger, fundamental ontology presents the meaning of being as its openness to *Dasein*’s being as understanding. Levinas writes, “Our concrete existence is interpreted in terms of its entry into the ‘openness’ of being in general. We exist in a circuit of understanding with reality. Understanding is the very event that existence articulates. All incomprehension is only a deficient mode of comprehension.”¹⁹

¹⁷ *TeI* 124, *TaI* 129

¹⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel. “Is Ontology Fundamental?” *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 1-10.

¹⁹ *BPW* 5

In the above passage, Levinas refers to Heidegger's account of meaning and understanding in *Being and Time* §32. At this point in his text, Heidegger has already described how signification originates in a network of references oriented by *Dasein's* concerns in §17-18 and argued for understanding as a fundamental *existential* of *Dasein* in §31. In section §32, Heidegger goes on to offer an account of the nature of meaning in light of his previous analyses.

He writes:

Meaning is an existential of Da-sein, not a property which is attached to beings, which lies 'behind' them or floats somewhere as a 'realm between.' Only Da-sein 'has' meaning in that the disclosedness of being-in-the-world can be 'fulfilled' through the beings discoverable in it. *Thus only Da-sein can be meaningful or meaningless.*²⁰

For Heidegger, meaning is a structure of the being of *Dasein* who finds itself in the mode of already understanding the world in which it lives. For Heidegger, the meaning of being shows up only by way of *Dasein's* own being as a being who is concerned with the question of the meaning of being.

By tracing back the meaning of being to the horizon of *Dasein's* being as understanding, Heidegger, according to Levinas, situates the particular being, the existent, in a subordinate position to a more general notion of being. Levinas writes:

The understanding of a being will thus consist in going beyond that being (*l'étant*) into the *openness* and in perceiving it *upon the horizon of being*. That is to say, comprehension, in Heidegger, rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy: to comprehend the particular being is already to place oneself beyond the particular. To comprehend is to be related to the particular that only exists through knowledge, which is knowledge of the universal.²¹

The meaning of every particular existent, for Heidegger, is possible only on the background of

²⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996. 151.

²¹ *BPW* 5

the “clearing” that *Dasein*’s being accomplishes, in which the meaning of being can be illuminated. There can be no meaning for Heidegger outside of this openness to meaning that is *Dasein*’s mode of being as understanding. Levinas argues that this move of understanding the particular being in terms of its illumination by the being of *Dasein* amounts to a reduction of the particular to the universal, which has always characterized “the great tradition of Western philosophy.” This reduction of the particular prevents us from recognizing the particularity of the Other as an existent irreducible to the categories of being that we already understand if only implicitly.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas makes a similar argument concerning Heidegger’s ontology. In the section “Metaphysics Precedes Ontology,” he writes, “*Being and Time* has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity.”²² This comprehension of being is further characterized as a kind of mastery or possession. Levinas writes with regard to the practical action that grounds Heidegger’s account of signification, “The hand takes and comprehends” [*La main prend et comprend*].²³ The “understanding” that *Dasein* gains of being through pre-theoretical practical action, is, for Levinas, already mastery—a way of reducing the world to the totality of the horizon of *Dasein*’s being as understanding. Thus, it is in this sense that for Levinas, to comprehend [*comprendre*] is to handle [*prendre*] phenomena; it is, like all the structures of the Same, a form of relating that reduces what is other to that which is already my own.

²² *TeI* 15, *TaI* 45

²³ *TeI* 135, *TaI* 161

But when I am face to face with another human being,²⁴ I find that the Other insists that I not view her only in relation to my own projects or as a species of a more general kind. Rather, her appearance arrests my mastery of the world and requires that I consider not what *I* know or need, but what *she* needs. By calling me to responsibility, the Other's presence, Levinas argues, places an ethical demand on me that requires me to reconsider my possession of the world. If someone is hungry, I must offer him food. If someone is in pain, I must offer myself to comfort him. If someone needs a seat on a crowded bus, I must stand up to allow him to sit. If I see an injustice, I must engage in action to remedy it. Precisely what the Other demands of me varies, but when another person faces me, I realize that I am not free to do what I want. I am responsible to and for this person (and all the others) without having chosen this responsibility. Although I can, and far too often do, turn away from my responsibility, the Other's presence insists that I not do so. My refusal to listen to the Other's demands does not remove my responsibility.

It is in this sense, as a presence that teaches me my responsibility,²⁵ that the Other as

²⁴ For Levinas, the Other is almost always figured as a human Other. Some philosophers have questioned whether this notion of alterity could be extended to animals. See for example, John Llewelyn's essay, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? Humanism of the other animal." *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*. Vol. IV. Ed. Claire Elise Katz. New York: Routledge, 2005. 283-295. In my own view, the notion of the "face" does not correspond to a biological category but is better understood as a demand that calls me into question and requires that I recognize my responsibilities to numerous others including non-human animals. While my responsibilities to other animals are certainly different from my responsibilities to humans, an interrogation of our experience reveals that many non-human animals also "face" us insofar as their presence demands that we not kill them or reduce them to their being as 'useful.' Not every non-human animal makes the same demand on us. For example my responsibility to a chimpanzee is quite different than my responsibility to a cockroach. But it is certainly the case that many non-human animals do demand of us that we take their lives, needs, and suffering into account in our own lives and decisions. My experience of the 'face' of a dog who shows up on my doorstep, for instance, demands of me that I not leave it to freeze in the winter, to starve, or to be hit by a car. While this experience is not identical to the experience of a human who appears at my door, the dog nevertheless calls on me to be responsible.

²⁵ The sense in which we can understand the Other's presence as a *teaching* presence will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Three. See pp 65-79.

human Other [*Autruï*] provides a concrete manifestation of the category of the Other [*l'Autre*].

The Same is the I, the movement of self-identification. The Other, by ordering me to responsibility, calls into question my right to be only this self-identifying force that consumes all that I encounter. And in doing so, the Other, according to Levinas, calls to me from from on “high,” from what he names a “transcendent” dimension that exceeds the world as it is given to me in com-prehension.

This transcendence is not the transcendence of an ideal realm, separated from the world. Rather, the Other appears, Levinas claims, as “transcendent,”²⁶ a term he borrows from his friend and mentor Jean Wahl to whom, along with Wahl’s wife Marcelle, *Totality and Infinity* is dedicated.²⁷ The Other, Levinas insists, comes to me from a direction other than that presented by the world as encountered only through the intentional structures of subjectivity, a world that, according to Levinas, can be understood and consumed. The Other is, rather, *absolutely* other as one who introduces a totally different dimension of intentionality, one that challenges the structure of intentionality as one defined by mastery.

To summarize, if we understand the Other [*l'Autre*] as the human Other [*Autruï*], we find that the Other is “essentially” Other, that is, the Other has alterity as its “essence.” The human Other concretely manifests this alterity by resisting and calling into question the identificatory movement of the I, in the demand that I listen to what the Other has to teach me about how I ought to exist in the world. In this way, the Other, as the human Other, Levinas insists, presents the possibility of a genuine overcoming of Parmenides’s paradox, which says that it is

²⁶ *TeI 5, TaI 35*

²⁷ The term is taken from Wahl’s work, *Human Existence and Transcendence*. Edited and translated by William C. Hackett. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016.

impossible to speak about anything other than being. The Other, as one who faces me, however, presents me with an alterity that can never be swallowed up by being, understood as that which can enter the sphere of comprehension. The Other is not other as “not-me,” but as one who gives me something that I cannot give myself, namely responsibility.

In addition to this sense of “absolute” alterity as that which is essentially irreducible to the identificatory powers of the Same, there is also another sense in which the Other is “absolutely” Other for Levinas. As Sarah Allen notes, Levinas plays on the term “absolute” by insisting that we also hear in it an act of “absolution,” that is, a setting free of the terms of the relation from one another even as they remain in relation.²⁸ As Levinas writes, “The same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and *absolve* themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated.”²⁹ To overcome Parmenidean metaphysics, Levinas argues, we must find a relation that allows for this kind of freedom within the relation. That is, the I, for Levinas, must be able to exist on its own, even if such an existence would be unethical. The I is “absolved” of the relation insofar as the I is separate, capable of contemplating the world from the privacy of interiority. The I *must* not turn away, but at the same time, the I always has the possibility of and temptation to do so.³⁰

The relation that Levinas insists allows for this kind of absolution is the *speaking* relation between the Other and me. In this relation, those speaking to one another remain absolutely separated, *i.e.* “absolved” in the sense that they remain at a distance while also being in relation.

²⁸ Allen, Sarah. *The Philosophical Sense of Transcendence: Levinas and Plato on Loving Beyond Being*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009. 93.

²⁹ *TeI* 75, *TaI* 102

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of this withdrawal into interiority see below pp 59-65.

The speaking relation, Levinas argues, is defined by this separation. We speak precisely because we cannot read each other's minds or immediately experience what another person experiences. "Language," he writes, "presupposes interlocutors, a plurality."³¹ When I am *spoken to*, I encounter the full presence of the Other who reveals to me my responsibility to listen to what he has to teach me and to give myself to others in turn. I am obligated by the Other, but I do not merge with the Other. The Other and I remain set apart from each other, absolved within our relating to one another. And as we will see in what follows, it is an intimate Other who appears within the sphere of possession who makes this separation or absolution possible.

Interiority: the "feminine" Other

While much of *Totality and Infinity* is devoted to describing the ways in which the relation with the Other is one of "absolute" difference, there is another kind of relation with human alterity described in the work that is less often emphasized both by scholars and by Levinas himself. In Sections II and IV of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes a relation with the Other that is not marked by "absolute" alterity but by what he calls "feminine"³² alterity or intimacy [*intimité*]. Levinas's account of the feminine first appears in *Totality and Infinity* in Section II, in the description of the Other who abides in the dwelling. The purpose of Section II is to describe the movements that constitute the structure of interiority or the Same. As we have

³¹ *TeI* 45, *TaI* 73

³² Levinas's use of the term "feminine," has been controversial. For an overview of the most important themes in this debate see *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. Ed. Tina Chanter. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. My own view, articulated below (see pp 46-49) is that, while problematic, Levinas's conception of what he names "feminine" is, nevertheless, essential to his philosophical project in *Totality and Infinity*. I argue that Levinas ought not, however, use gendered language to describe the phenomena that fall under what he names "feminine." I prefer, instead to use the non-gendered language of gentleness, hospitality, and intimacy.

seen, the Same is, for Levinas, associated with the identificatory movement of the I. The feminine plays an important role in this process insofar as she is an Other who makes possible the accomplishment of the separation of subjectivity necessary for ethics. The feminine also appears in Section IV in Levinas's description of the intimacy of eros. Each of these descriptions of "feminine" alterity will be explored in turn below.

Enjoyment and the dwelling

In order to understand the role of "feminine" alterity in the dwelling, it is first necessary to see how the dwelling relates to the identificatory structure of the subject. For Levinas, the most basic structure of the I is enjoyment [*jouissance*], which he describes as "living from..." [*vivre de*] the contents of our life. He writes, "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc...."³³ This notion of "living from..." is importantly different from the intentional structure that Heidegger describes as fundamental to our engagement with the world, namely as *using* the world with tools that are "at-hand."³⁴ We "live from" [*vivre de*] the contents of our lives, Levinas insists, in a manner that is not how we engage with tools, which function as means to an end. Rather, the contents of life--the "good soup," air, light, etc.--are primordially "objects" of enjoyment, even when they also serve as tools or implements.

Phenomenologically, he argues, there is always in the experience of using a tool, a surplus beyond the use of the tool to accomplish its task, namely its presence as something to be enjoyed. He writes, "The enjoyment of a thing, be it a tool, does not consist simply in bringing this thing to the usage for which it is fabricated—the pen to the writing, the hammer to the nail to

³³ *TeI* 82, *Tal* 110

³⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996. §§16-17.

be driven in—but also in suffering or rejoicing over this operation.”³⁵ The experience of living our lives, Levinas argues, is not exhausted entirely by the meaning offered by our projects, but involves a relation to the content of life that exceeds any system of finality.

In this way, enjoyment is, according to Levinas, independent to a certain extent, from any kind of *telos*. At the same time, however, enjoyment is also, in a different sense, a relation of dependence. That is, Levinas claims that enjoyment involves a dependence on its contents—life must be *full* of “good soup,” air, light, spectacles, etc. This dependence, however, is not, Levinas argues, a dependence that can be understood in terms of a lack in the subject. Rather, according to Levinas, enjoyment constitutes the earliest emergence of the subject. The subject does not pre-exist enjoyment as one who has needs, but is already, on the deepest level, one who enjoys himself. He writes:

To live from bread is therefore neither to represent bread to oneself nor to act on it nor to act by means of it. To be sure, it is necessary to earn one’s bread, and it is necessary to nourish oneself in order to earn one’s bread; thus the bread I eat is also that with which I earn my bread and my life. But if I eat my bread in order to labor and to live, I live *from* my labor and *from* my bread.³⁶

It is not the case that the subject first exists and then enjoys life. Rather, to be a subject is to enjoy living the contents of one’s life. Actions of a subject are only possible because of a primordial enjoyment of the contents of one’s life, of what one lives *from*.

Living from the contents of our lives involves a kind of dependence on that from which we live, but this dependence is not an enslavement. Levinas writes, “The human being thrives on

³⁵ *TeI* 106, *TaI* 133

³⁶ *TeI* 83, *TaI* 111

his needs; he is happy for his needs.”³⁷ In having needs and satisfying them, the subject is not a slave but, in fact, becomes a master. Sovereignty, our mastery of the world, arises through the satisfaction of our needs. Drawing on Diotima’s account in the *Symposium* of Eros as the child of Poros and Penia, wealth and poverty,³⁸ as well as Pausanias’s distinction between a heavenly and a commonly Aphrodite,³⁹ Levinas writes, “Need—the vulgar Venus—is also, in a certain sense, the child of πόρος and of πενία; it is πενία as source of πόρος, in contrast with desire, which is the πενία of πόρος” (*TeI* 87, *TaI* 114-115). Need, according to Levinas, corresponds to commonly love. Although it begins in *penia*, in lack, it brings about a kind of richness. The poverty of what we do not have is the source of our wealth; the satisfaction of our needs is what allows for the sovereignty of the subject. In the metaphysical relation with the Other, however, here understood as the heavenly Aphrodite, or Desire, the poverty of our richness is itself revealed as never satisfied, insofar as my responsibility to the Other can never be fully met.⁴⁰

This accomplishment of subjectivity in enjoyment, Levinas claims, following Merleau-Ponty, is primordially found in the capable body,⁴¹ the body that, though vulnerable and dependent, also provides mastery over the world through the development of skills, the handling

³⁷ *TeI* 87, *TaI* 114

³⁸ Plato. “Symposium.” *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 203b-d.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 180d-181d

⁴⁰ A fuller discussion of Desire can be found below, pp 91-104.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty writes, “Consciousness is originarily not an ‘I think that,’ but rather an ‘I can,’ ... Vision and movement are specific ways of relating to objects and, if a single function is expressed throughout all of these experiences, then it is the movement of existence, which does not suppress the radical diversity of contents, for it does not unite them by placing them all under the domination of an ‘I think,’ but rather by orienting them toward the inter-sensory unity of a ‘world.’” Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012. 138.

of possessions, laboring, and so on. Levinas writes, “My body is not only a way for the subject to be reduced to slavery, to depend on what is not itself, but is also a way of possessing and of working, of having time, of overcoming the very alterity of what I have to live from.”⁴² The body as “I can” is a temporal body that *enjoys* its experience of being capable of working and doing.

What we enjoy in our experience as capable bodies, however, is not reducible to a system of references organized by the practical concerns of a subject, as Heidegger seems to indicate in his discussion of signification in §18 of *Being and Time*.⁴³ Rather, according to Levinas, what is enjoyed remains always situated in a *milieu*. He writes, “They [the contents of enjoyment] are found in space, in the air, on the earth, in the street, along the road. The medium [*milieu*] remains essential to things, even when they refer to *property*...which constitutes the things *qua* things.”⁴⁴ Things *qua* things are what can be lifted from a *milieu* and become possessable, but the *milieu* itself, that from which things emerge, is, Levinas argues, non-possessable as the necessary

⁴² *TeI* 89, *TaI* 116-117

⁴³ For Heidegger, one of our primordial modes of engagement with beings in the world is that of use. In our everyday mode of being-in-the-world, we encounter beings as tools. Although tools are primarily encountered in absorption, beings emerge out of absorption, when they become un-handy--broken or absent. When a tool becomes un-handy, we recognize that tools never exist in isolation but always refer to other tools in a network of use. When tools are broken, we see their purpose, their 'what-for' in my dealings with the world. If we follow the chain of purposes of a tool, the ultimate horizon is the being of Dasein. Heidegger writes, "The primary 'what-for' is a for-the-sake-of-which. But the for-the-sake-of-which always concerns the being of Da-sein which is essentially concerned about this being itself in its being" (84). Dasein must be understood, therefore, as the kind of being that lets beings be relevant. Dasein is the ultimate horizon, the 'for-the-sake-of-which' that frees beings to be relevant. "The for-the-sake-of-which signifies an in-order-to, the in-order-to signifies a what-for, the what-for signifies a what-in of letting something be relevant, and the latter a what-with of relevance" (87). Because significance is dependent on Dasein as the for-the-sake-of-which that orients signification, the meaning of the worldliness of the world is dependent on the being of Dasein as engaged in its projects. For Levinas, as will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three (see pp 52-66) that which orders meaning is not Dasein, but the Other.

⁴⁴ *TeI* 104, *TaI* 130-131

background against which a thing can become a thing.

This non-possessable background from which things emerge, Levinas names the “elemental.” And the elemental, though non-possessable, can, to a certain extent, be known. We can learn the patterns of the weather, for instance. But Levinas insists that the elemental remains unmeasurable. Unlike an object, which we can move around and see from all sides, the elemental background in which we are steeped has no borders that define it. He writes, “To tell the truth the element has no side at all. One does not approach it. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element.”⁴⁵ In labor, we work with the elemental and, thereby overcome it to a certain extent, but our possession of the world always occurs on the background of the elemental *milieu* that is never fully mastered. In this sense, the elemental reality that underlies enjoyment is similar to the Other insofar as both resist possession by the self-identificatory movements of the Same. The important difference to note here, however, is that the resistance to possession by the human Other is, for Levinas, an ethical resistance, whereas the resistance of the elemental is one that is mysterious and at times threatening, even as we enjoy it.

Before possession and representation, therefore, is enjoyment, and enjoyment is accomplished in an elemental milieu. I do not first represent the world to myself. Rather, elemental enjoyment is what allows me to, subsequently, represent the world. Levinas writes,

The earth which upholds me does so without my troubling myself about knowing what upholds the earth. I am content with the aspect this corner of the world, universe of my daily behavior, this city or this neighborhood, or this street in which I move, this horizon within which I live, turn to me; I do not ground them in a more vast system. It is they that ground me.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *TeI* 104, *TaI* 131

⁴⁶ *TeI* 111, *TaI* 137

In being supported by the horizons I find myself in, I am able to live from a world that supports me. The truth of this world is not one that I immediately question or represent. Rather, the world is what *allows* me to represent and question it.

While the elemental supports my enjoyment and the satisfaction of my needs, this support is not however, predictable. This unpredictability arises precisely because the elemental is what underlies my ability to represent and, therefore, predict the world. Enjoyment, thus, involves a kind of dependence that is always uncertain. I cannot be sure that the food present today will be present tomorrow. The political situation which today allows me to do philosophy and support myself and to be supported by others, could crumble tomorrow. The contents that I depend on in enjoyment to satisfy my needs only satisfy me precariously.

As a result, Levinas claims, we try to postpone this uncertainty, and we do so by retreating into the dwelling, a place that provides protection, stability, and a degree of certainty in the face of an unpredictable reality. The stability of the dwelling is, according to Levinas, necessary for our ability to represent the world to ourselves. He writes, “Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling.”⁴⁷ The dwelling is a necessary condition for my representing the world; it gives me a site from which I can take a stance, work, know, and live. This structure of being at-home is necessary for the subject to be able to enter into a relation with the Other for whom I am responsible. I need stability and a position from which I can move and to which I can retreat, in order to be able to offer what I have to others.

One of the characteristic features of the dwelling, according to Levinas, is that it provides

⁴⁷ *TeI* 126, *TaI* 153

a transition between interiority and exteriority. The dwelling is able to offer up this transitional moment because it has an inside and an outside. As Levinas writes, “It has a ‘street front,’ but also its secrecy...Circulating between visibility and invisibility, one is always bound for the interior of which one’s home, one’s corner, one’s tent, or one’s cave is the vestibule.”⁴⁸ In this way, as that which is both exterior and interior, the dwelling provides the subject with a home from which it can emerge into the world. Levinas writes, “Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire...Simultaneously without and within, he goes forth outside from an inwardness [*intimité*].”⁴⁹ Fundamental to subjectivity, Levinas argues, is the need for a home, a place of intimacy that is a comforting and protected space to which one can retreat. In this sense, the dwelling is an interior sphere that is also open to the outside, and as we will see in the following, the dwelling includes alterity, but not the absolute alterity of absolute exteriority but an intimate, “feminine” alterity.

Alterity in the dwelling

The dwelling provides the condition of subjectivity by being a space of recollection according to Levinas. That is, the dwelling allows me to re-collect myself as a subject, which, in the phenomenological tradition is often identified as among the most fundamental structures of intentionality.⁵⁰ Too often, Levinas insists, the subject is posited as if it comes out of nowhere

⁴⁸ *TeI* 129-130, *TaI* 156

⁴⁹ *TeI* 125-126, *TaI* 152

⁵⁰ The idea that recollection or collection of oneself in temporality is fundamental to subjectivity can be found in Husserl’s *Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893 - 1917)*. Trans. John Barnett Brough. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991. Heidegger builds on

and we forget that dwelling is necessary for this accomplishment of subjectivity. He writes

But, the dwelling cannot be forgotten among the conditions for representation...[T]he subject contemplating a world presupposes the event of dwelling, the withdrawal from the elements...recollection in the intimacy of a home.⁵¹

Again using the language of intimacy, Levinas insists that it is the intimacy of the home that conditions the subject's ability to represent the world to itself. For Levinas, intimacy and familiarity, are preconditions for knowledge about the world. We must view the world from a particular position, and it is the dwelling, and the intimate comfort we find therein, that gives us this ability to take up a perspective in the first place.

The notion of intimacy necessarily involves intimacy *with someone*. It already indicates a relation with the Other, and as Levinas claims, the dwelling as the locus of recollection, is not a place of solitude. Rather, dwelling involves a relationship with the Other, and it is this relationship with an intimate Other that allows me to become myself through a re-collection of myself. This recollection [*recueillement*] of the self, Levinas argues, is made possible by another person who also lives in the home and welcomes [*accueille*] me. He writes:

The familiarity of the world does not only result from habits acquired in this world, which take from it its roughnesses and measure the adaptation of the living being to a world it enjoys and from which it nourishes itself; familiarity and intimacy are produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things. This gentleness is not only a conformity of nature with the needs of the separated being, which from the first enjoys them and constitutes itself as separate, as I, in that enjoyment, but is a gentleness coming from an affection [*amitié*] for that I. The intimacy which familiarity already presupposes is an *intimacy with someone*. The interiority of recollection is a solitude in a world already human. Recollection [*recueillement*] refers to a welcome [*acueil*]. [emphasis in original]⁵²

Husserl's account in *History of the Concept of Time*. Trans. Theodore Kissel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992 and later in *Being and Time*.

⁵¹ *TeI* 126-127, *TaI* 153

⁵² *TeI* 128, *TaI* 154-155

The subject in enjoyment, according to Levinas, thrives on being nourished by a world that precariously satisfies its needs. This satisfaction of needs by the world and the subsequent development of habits and capabilities that allow the subject to enjoy the world which it lives from, cannot, however, produce the full gentleness and comfort characteristic of the dwelling. In order for the subject to have a dwelling as a space of respite, and thereby to have a place in which it can recollect itself and from which it can emerge into the world, he must first be welcomed in hospitality, familiarity, and affectionate intimacy.

In concrete terms, to become a subject capable of understanding and functioning in the world, it is clear that we need the hospitality of others. In a literal sense, we are born from the body of another person whose corporeal hospitality makes possible our very being alive. Furthermore, as infants, we could not survive without others who parent us. And throughout our lives, we find ways of being at home in the world by living in community with others who welcome us into sharing a world with them.

But, as Levinas himself recognizes, the presence of another person with whom I am familiar and intimate, poses challenges for Levinas's account of the metaphysical relation as it is presented in Section I of *Totality and Infinity*. The Other in Section I of the work is the absolute Other who, as we have seen, is characterized by his unsettling of the identificatory movement of the I. Levinas describes the Other as one "who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]."⁵³ The Other as absolute exteriority is precisely one who resists subsumption into the economy [*oiko-nomia*] of the Same. How, then, can an Other also be a condition of the possibility of the home [*oikos*]? Or, as Levinas puts it, "How can the separation of solitude, how

⁵³ *Tel* 9, *Tal* 39

can intimacy be produced in the face of the Other?”⁵⁴ The Other who speaks to me comes from the exterior; he is precisely the one who calls into question my right to the comfort characteristic of interiority.

Levinas’s solution to this problem of an intimate other who dwells alongside me in interiority, is to describe a new mode of alterity, which he here names the alterity of the “Woman,” or femininity. While the relation with the feminine Other is different from the relation with the Other as described earlier in the work, Levinas goes on to insist that he is not claiming that this presence is akin to the alterity of things over which the subject can exercise its mastery.

He continues:

This alterity is situated on another plane than language and nowise represents a truncated, stammering, still elementary language. On the contrary, the discretion of this presence includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other. It is comprehensible and exercises personality, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority. And this is a new and irreducible possibility, a delightful lapse in being, and the source of gentleness in itself.⁵⁵

The feminine presents neither the relative alterity of the elemental that can be possessed, mastered, and controlled, but neither is it fully identified with the absolute Other who appears in the speaking relation. She is, instead, “on another plane than language.” In this way, the feminine presence offers a third possibility in addition to the categories of the Same and the Other. Neither subsumable to the I nor marked by the absolute alterity of the exterior Other, the feminine is neither a moment of pure interiority nor of pure exteriority. She is transcendent insofar as, like everyone, she escapes the grasp of a subject who knows and com-prehends the world. And yet, she appears within the sphere of interiority, where the subject feels at home in familiarity.

⁵⁴ *TeI* 128, *TaI* 155

⁵⁵ *TeI* 129, *TaI* 155

In describing the alterity of the Other who welcomes me in the dwelling, Levinas characterizes the relation with this feminine Other as akin to Martin Buber's I-Thou relation⁵⁶ and in doing so, reveals his ambivalence about the role of feminine alterity in ethics. Buber, according to Levinas, fails to take into account the asymmetry of the metaphysical relation but instead presents the I-Thou relation as a reciprocal relation in which we are equal and similar.⁵⁷ In the section on the dwelling, Levinas equates the I-Thou relation with the relation with feminine alterity. He writes:

The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the *you* [*vous*] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* [*tu*] of familiarity: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret. The I-Thou in which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity.⁵⁸

We see that intimacy is here identified with the I-Thou relation which in turn is understood in terms of the relation with feminine alterity. Regardless of whether or not this characterization of Buber is accurate, Levinas's point is that intimacy involves us in a relation that is different from the ethical relation. The feminine Other, Levinas claims, is not the "interlocutor" of the metaphysical relation as described elsewhere in the work.

While intimacy necessarily presupposes the ethical relation with the absolute Other, the intimate Other, Levinas claims, plays a different role than that of the absolute Other in the life of the subject. The intimate Other approaches me not immediately from "on high" but from within

⁵⁶ Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Touchstone, 1970.

⁵⁷ For Levinas's critique of Buber, see his 1958 essay, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge." *Proper Names*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, 17-35. For more on the relationship between Levinas and Buber see *Levinas and Buber: Dialogue and Difference*. Ed. Peter Atterton, Matthew Calaroo, and Maurice Friedman. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004.

⁵⁸ *TeI* 128-129, *Tal* 155

the intimate space of the dwelling. And as one who appears in interiority, the intimate Other also offers a mode of discourse that is different from the unsettling discourse that marks the relation with absolute alterity. The language of feminine alterity is, according to Levinas, “a language without teaching,” a claim that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.⁵⁹ The discourse of the intimate Other, unlike the speech of the Other of absolute distance, offers familiarity and affection by extending a silent expression that allows me to rest and recover myself. In intimacy, the Other (whom Levinas still calls *Autrui*) does not first call me into question and demand that I justify myself or offer an “apology,” but provides me instead with hospitality and acceptance.

While the introduction of intimacy in *Totality and Infinity* complicates the distinction that Levinas draws early on in the work between the Same and the Other, intimate alterity is, nevertheless necessary for Levinas’s philosophical project. And there are moments when Levinas even seems to give the relation with “feminine” alterity priority, as the peaceful relation that necessarily precedes a war of all against all. In his account of her presence in the dwelling, he writes:

The welcoming of the face is peaceable from the first, for it answers to the unquenchable Desire for Infinity. War itself is but a possibility and nowise a condition for it. This peaceable welcome is produced primordially in the gentleness of the feminine face, in which the separated being can recollect itself, because of which it *inhabits*, and in it dwelling accomplishes separation. Inhabitation and the intimacy of the dwelling which make the separation of the human being possible thus imply a first revelation of the Other.⁶⁰

In this passage, we see that the “first revelation” of the Other is the welcoming extended by the Other who makes possible our very inhabitation of the world in the dwelling. That is, the

⁵⁹ See below pp 79-84.

⁶⁰ *TeI* 124, *TaI* 150-151

hospitable intimate Other is the first Other because it is this hospitality that allows us to become subjects in the first place. It is this peaceful and generous hospitality that “make[s] the separation of the human being possible.” Separation, the accomplishment of subjectivity, is supported and made possible by my being peacefully welcomed by an intimate Other. In this way, insofar as separation is necessary for the ethical relation, insofar as the terms of the relation must “absolve” themselves from the relation, hospitality is a condition for the possibility of the concrete ethical relation.

And yet, Levinas insists that the relation with an intimate feminine alterity is not enough to establish ethics. The relation with intimate alterity is necessary for me to accomplish separation, but the ethical relation requires a further relation with absolute alterity. Levinas writes:

This withdrawal [of the feminine in the dwelling] implies a new event; I must have been in relation with something I do not live from. this event is the relation with the Other who welcomes me in the Home, the discreet presence of the Feminine. But in order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how *to give* what I possess. Only thus could I situate myself absolutely above my engagement in the non-I. But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question. The Other--absolutely other--paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face. He can contest my possession only because he approaches me not from the outside but from above.⁶¹

The relation with the intimate other who provides the space of dwelling is neither the elemental reality that I live from nor the absolute alterity of the Other who comes to me from a dimension of “height.” Her “discreet presence” creates the space of recollection necessary for me to become a subject. But, Levinas claims, the relation with intimate alterity is insufficient for ethics. I must also encounter an *indiscreet* other who calls me into question and “paralyzes my possession.”

⁶¹ *TeI* 145, *TaI* 170-171

Only then, according to Levinas, can I not only *receive* hospitality from the Other but offer up my own dwelling in generosity and hospitality to others.

Alterity in Eros

In addition to describing the intimate alterity of the dwelling in Section II of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas also discusses another form of feminine alterity in his account of the erotic relation with the Beloved in Section IV of the work titled “Beyond the Face.” Just as the presence of the Other in the dwelling presents an ambiguous alterity that is neither wholly exterior nor wholly interior, the erotic relation also reveals the ambiguity of intimate alterity. In fact, Levinas characterizes the erotic relation as fundamentally ambiguous, beginning the section on eros with a chapter called “The Ambiguity of Eros.” The erotic relation, like the relation with the intimate presence in the dwelling, complicates the distinctions Levinas makes earlier in the work between interiority and exteriority, the Same and the Other, by presenting an Other who is the object of both need and Desire. The Beloved is another intimate Other, Levinas claims, but an Other whom I enjoy.

Like the relation with the intimate Other in the dwelling, the relation with the Beloved is a relation that occurs in interiority as a relation in privacy. As Levinas describes it, the erotic involves a turning away from the public sphere where justice as an appeal from the third party is primary. Levinas describes the difference between the intimate relation of love and the relation of justice as follows:

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient ‘I-Thou’ forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice.⁶²

⁶² *TeI* 187-188, *Tal* 213

Although this passage comes from an earlier section of the work, Levinas's references to the "clandestinity of love" and "laughter or cooing" are parallel to phrases that he uses later in his descriptions of the relation with the Beloved. Thus, although Levinas does not mention eros here, it is clear that the erotic relation is already at issue.

And we see that the intimacy of eros is presented as different from the ethical face-to-face relation. The ethical relation is described as one that "refuses the clandestinity of love." That is, in love, lovers close themselves off from the rest of the world. Ethics, however, does not allow us to forget other others in this way. Ethics puts us in a relation of responsibility to everyone, not just to the person we love. Furthermore, in love, the relation with the Beloved is marked by a laughter and cooing in which "frankness" is lost in the clandestinity of the dyadic relation. That is, once again, as in the relation with the intimate presence in the dwelling, the intimacy of eros presents a mode of discourse that is different from that which characterizes the ethical relation, marked by straightforwardness.

To better understand what Levinas means when he claims that the erotic relation closes us off from the "third party," it is helpful to turn to the chapter titled "The Other and the Others." Here Levinas writes that "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity."⁶³ That is, the demand placed on me in the ethical relation extends beyond the other person who is immediately in front of me to include all the others for whom I am also responsible. The intimate erotic relation, however, closes itself off from other others, according to Levinas. With regard to the erotic relation, he writes, "[I]t remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public. The feminine is the other refractory to society, member of a dual society, an intimate

⁶³ *TeI* 188, *Tal* 213

society, a society without language.”⁶⁴ The relation with the intimate Beloved is one which occurs in private and foregoes the publicity of rational speech understandable by all. In an intimate mutual enclosure, Levinas argues, we close ourselves off from the world in a silent embrace.

Although in the intimate relation the couple or the intimate community, closes itself off from the public realm, it is important to note that the justice demanded by the third party who looks at me in the eyes of the Other, is never completely absent from intimate relations, according to Levinas. He writes:

Everything that takes place here ‘between us’ concerns everyone [*regarde tout le monde*], the face that looks at it [*le regarde*] places itself in the full light of the public order, even if I draw back from it to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation and a clandestinity.⁶⁵

While intimacy closes us to the third, this closure is never total. The demand of ethics is absolute and includes our relationships with intimate others. Nevertheless, the intimacy of eros presents a relation in which the third party is rendered less dominant.

The intimate Other in the erotic relation, like the feminine Other who appears in the dwelling, also retreats from the kind of discourse that is characteristic of the ethical relation with absolute alterity. While the face of the absolute Other as Levinas describes it, is marked by the straightforward “frankness” of its expressing which renders illusory the independence of the ego, the expression or “saying” of the Beloved is, Levinas claims, equivocal. The Beloved does not speak but remains silent.

[E]rotic nudity is as it were an inverted signification, a signification that signifies falsely, a clarity converted into ardor and night, an expression that ceases to express itself, that

⁶⁴ *TeI* 242, *TaI* 265

⁶⁵ *TeI* 187, *TaI* 212

expresses its renunciation of expression and speech, that sinks into the equivocation of silence, a word that bespeaks not a meaning but exhibition.⁶⁶

Levinas insists that in the erotic relation, discourse is not defined by the attendance of the interlocutor to her expression but by her withdrawal. The Beloved renounces speech and sinks into silence. She inverts signification by not offering a direct, frank signifying but a playful equivocation. That is, the expression of the Beloved in the erotic encounter is not the same kind of expression involved in apologetic discourse in which the interlocutor is present to answer questions and offer an account of what she means. In eros, communication takes another form--one that remains equivocal.

It is interesting to note that this description of the expression of the Beloved as a silent inversion of signification, parallels Levinas's descriptions of another "inversion" of signification—that of Descartes's evil genius who, as we will see in Chapter Three,⁶⁷ is dispelled finally by the Other who teaches me. Both the evil genius and the Beloved appear in laughter, mockery and equivocation. In the case of the evil genius, Levinas writes, "Its equivocation is insinuated in a mockery [*raillerie*]."⁶⁸ And also, "The evil genius' lie is beyond every lie...like a laughter that seeks to destroy language."⁶⁹ With regard to the Beloved, Levinas writes, "Expression is inverted into indecency, already close on [*toute proche*] to the equivocal which says less than nothing, already laughter and raillery."⁷⁰ Thus, both in the relation with the

⁶⁶ *TeI* 241, *TaI* 263

⁶⁷ See below pp 59-65.

⁶⁸ *TeI* 64, *TaI* 91

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *TeI* 238, *TaI* 260

Beloved and in the relation with the evil genius, signification appears threatened by a mocking refusal to attend one's expression and engage in apologetic discourse.

As a kind of silent non-sense, the Beloved also parallels the *il y a*, the anonymous pulse of being that is closely tied to the an-archic world rendered evident in Descartes by the evil genius. Levinas writes, "Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the *there is* extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnia the night of the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of the virgin...."⁷¹ The Beloved, according to Levinas, is a "raw density, an exorbitant ultramateriality."⁷² But the inversion of signification of the flesh is not that of the *il y a*. While the *il y a* "precedes" and threatens the establishment of subjectivity, Levinas claims that the feminine Beloved presents a "not yet" that is not an unfulfilled possible within the horizon of a projected future but a future that is utterly ungraspable. "Being not yet' is not a this or a that; clandestinity exhausts the essence of this non-essence."⁷³

In this way, the erotically encountered Other presents us with an inverted signification that is not an anonymity "before" being but a future that is otherwise than essence. As Levinas writes, "in love transcendence goes both further and less far than language."⁷⁴ The silence and laughter of the intimate Other, though similar in some ways to the silence and laughter of the evil genius, is, as we discover in Levinas's account of fecundity, the guarantor of meaning as the condition of the possibility of future temporality. For Levinas, it is the birth of the child that

⁷¹ *TeI* 236, *TaI* 258-259

⁷² *TeI* 233, *TaI* 256

⁷³ *TeI* 234, *TaI* 257

⁷⁴ *TeI* 232, *TaI* 254

provides a future that is both mine and yet not mine. The birth of the child, is a creation *ex nihilo* that opens up the possibility of hope for a future after death. In this way, the Beloved erotically encountered, opens up a horizon of future temporality.⁷⁵

As in the case with the intimate presence in the dwelling, we find that although the Beloved occupies a necessary role in Levinas's account of the subject's relation with the future, the intimate relation with the Beloved is quite different from the relation with the absolute Other. The Beloved appears in a private sphere, one that is turned away from or forgetful of the third party, and the discourse of the Beloved is marked by silence and laughter as opposed to the straightforward expression characterized by the relation with the absolute Other.

Feminist scholarship on Levinas

Given the account of the feminine presented above, there are many reasons to be concerned about Levinas's conception of femininity, and some feminist readers of Levinas have provided a number of important criticisms.⁷⁶ Many of the qualities of the Other that Levinas names "feminine" perpetuate harmful stereotypes about women. In locating the "feminine" Other in the home, for example, Levinas furthers the association between women and the private

⁷⁵ For Levinas's account of the child see parts C, D, and E of Section IV, of *Totality and Infinity*, "Fecundity," "The Subjectivity in Eros," and "Transcendence and Fecundity." *Tel* 244-254, *Tal* 267 - 277.

⁷⁶ One of the earliest critiques of Levinas from a feminist perspective comes from Simone de Beauvoir in a footnote in *The Second Sex*. See Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. 6. Luce Irigaray has also been a prominent critic. See Irigaray, Luce. "A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* Section IV B, The Phenomenology of Eros." *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*. Vol. II. Ed. Claire Elise Katz. New York: Routledge, 2005. And also "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas." *Re-reading Levinas*. Ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 111-112. For a more recent critique, see Sikka, Sonia. "The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Levinas." *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. Ed. Tina Chanter. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. 96-118.

sphere of domesticity. Historically, the idea that a woman's "place is in the home" has been used to limit the public pursuits of many women. Furthermore, by describing discourse with the "feminine" Other as a silent or even silly, Levinas implicitly affirms the idea that women's voices are less valuable. This construct of the demure and/or irrational woman has and continues to silence the voices of many women.

But while most, if not all, scholars who have written about the concept of the feminine in Levinas's work acknowledge that there are problems with Levinas's account, some have also found promising resources in his descriptions of "feminine" alterity. For example, Katz has argued that the feminine serves an important role in Levinas's work, arguing that if we supplement Levinas's account of the feminine with his references to women from the Jewish tradition, we find an account of ethics that demands a "feminization" of the masculine virile powerful subject who desires mastery and control.⁷⁷ Katz considers a number of references Levinas makes to women in the Bible, including the figure of Ruth who, after being widowed, leaves her homeland in order to stay with her mother in law, Naomi. Katz argues that we must see Ruth as a paradigmatic ethical figure whose loyalty and generosity show that ethics culminates finally in a feminine hospitality that interrupts the self-absorbed movement of the I, which is characterized by domination and possession according to Levinas.

Like Katz, Lisa Guenther also argues for a way of reading Levinas's account of the feminine as a paradigm of the ethical. Guenther argues that, while Levinas seems to relegate the feminine to a pre-ethical status, the "silent voice" of the feminine welcome is in fact essential to the ethical relation. She argues that the demand to be ethical is a demand that I become *like* the

⁷⁷ Katz, Claire. *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The silent footsteps of Rebecca*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

feminine Other who welcomed me. In this way, Guenther argues that the feminine Other “far from disappearing on the horizon of ethics...provides both its condition and its privileged example.”⁷⁸ In this way, Guenther argues, like Katz, that the feminine, while not sufficiently treated by Levinas, can be seen as providing the paradigmatic example of an ethics of hospitality.

While I sympathize with critics of Levinas, I, like Katz and Guenther, find that the role that the feminine plays in Levinas’s account of subjectivity is important and cannot be entirely rejected. The feminine, understood as a relation with intimate alterity, is necessary, for the accomplishment of subjectivity, as Levinas acknowledges. That is, the intimate space of the dwelling, wherein we are welcomed by a gentle and hospitable other, is necessary to provide us with the space of recollection, the space needed to accomplish subjectivity and to find a place in a meaningful world in which we are in community with others.

In order to embrace this notion of an intimate alterity, however, it is not necessary, in my view, to use gendered language, and the term “feminine,” does more to obscure the phenomenon that Levinas wants to describe than it does to illuminate it. For example, when Levinas describes our dependency on the “feminine” Other, it is important to recognize that we are fundamentally dependent not only on a mother who gives birth to us, but also on many others who support us in our accomplishment of the separation required for subjectivity. These others may or may not be our biological parents and may or may not be women. The others who parent us can be of any gender, and it would be strange to describe our intimate relations with friends, family, and colleagues as a relation with “femininity” when the gender of our intimate others varies.

In short, while many people may experience their intimate relations as gendered in the

⁷⁸ Guenther, Lisa. *The gift of the other: Levinas and politics of reproduction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. 61.

way Levinas describes, many of us do not. And yet intimacy, as I have proposed to characterize this phenomenon, does seem to be essential to subjectivity. We do not all have to be raised by a woman, but we all need others to give us the world and to support us in our development and accomplishment of becoming who we are. In my view, therefore, the best way to preserve the important functions of what Levinas calls the “feminine” is to use different language such as intimacy, generosity, affection, and hospitality instead.⁷⁹ Doing so allows us to continue to value the aspects of life that Levinas names “feminine” without limiting the possibilities of empirical women or excluding from the discussion the diverse experiences of intimacy that people may have.

Summary

We have seen that in *Totality and Infinity*, there are at least two modes of alterity of the Other--absolute alterity and intimate alterity. Absolute alterity is the alterity of one who comes to me from a “transcendent” dimension of height and calls me into question by revealing to me my responsibility to others. The exterior Other unsettles me as I go about dissolving the relative alterity of the world in enjoyment and comprehension. The Other of exteriority halts my consumption and demands that I *listen* to her and respond to her needs. The Other of exteriority demands that I question my right to possess the world and thereby reveals me to be a sojourner in a foreign land, a guest in the land that is not mine.

The relation with an intimate hospitable alterity, which Levinas names “feminine,” is, by contrast, a relation in which I am not immediately unsettled and called to account for my

⁷⁹ At times in this work, I will continue to use the term “feminine” when offering interpretations of Levinas’s work as his use of the term makes it difficult to avoid. When providing my own phenomenological descriptions, however, I will avoid as much as possible gendered language.

possession of the world. Instead, the intimate Other welcomes me from within the interior sphere of possession where we share a dwelling. The intimate Other is not a Stranger but someone I know well and trust. While I remain responsible to this Other just as I am to the exterior Other, the intimate Other is one with whom I can relax, laugh, and communicate by means of a shared understanding of the world. The intimate Other is generous and hospitable, and this intimacy is necessary for me to become myself.

The relationship between these two forms of alterity is, however, complex. And it is not the case that each particular other that I encounter is *either* an exterior or an intimate Other. Rather, these modes of alterity intertwine and evolve in our relationships with specific others. Every intimate Other is always also an exterior Other insofar as the Other always calls me to account. But some others are also intimate Others and this intimacy is essential for the ethical relation as Levinas understands it. Intimacy is necessary for the accomplishment of separation which is, in turn, necessary for the ethical relation to be one of “absolute” difference. At the same time, intimacy alone is not enough for the ethical relation and, as such, intimacy must also be oriented by the ethical relation with the absolute Other who calls me into question. In the next chapter, I will examine more closely how these two forms of alterity appear in what Levinas calls the teaching relation.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OTHER AS MY TEACHER

In Chapter Two, it was established that the relation with the Other involves two central moments. The Other who appears in the intimacy of the dwelling welcomes me in hospitality, creating the space that allows me to become a subject in community with others. And the absolute Other who comes from “on high” calls into question the consumptive powers of my subjectivity by revealing to me my responsibility. In this chapter, I turn to an analysis of Levinas’s understanding of what he calls a “primordial teaching”¹ and examine the alterity of the Other who is encountered as one who teaches me. As will be explored in greater detail below,² this teaching is “primordial” in the sense that it underlies and makes possible all teaching in the traditional sense. We will see that the Other is my teacher, according to Levinas, insofar as the very meaningfulness of the world is made possible by the Other who offers the world to me in speech.

In offering me a meaningful world, the Other who teaches me, I will argue, appears in both modes of alterity explored in Chapter Two. The Other qua teacher appears as an absolute Other who comes from “on high” and offers a “*sens unique*” that serves as an orientation of signification. At the same time, the Other who teaches me also appears in the mode that Levinas names intimate and “feminine.” In welcoming me into the world of signification the Other who

¹ *TeI* 64, *TaI* 92

² See pp 73-79.

comes from “on high” and offers a “*sens unique*” that serves as an orientation of signification. At the same time, the Other who teaches me also appears in the mode that Levinas names intimate and “feminine.” In welcoming me into the world of signification the Other teaches me by inviting me to take part in an ongoing conversation. But in order for me to take part in listening and speaking, I must be offered a space in the conversation by the Other who withdraws to make room for me and my questioning. Without the generosity and hospitality of the Other, I could not become an ethical subject capable of participating in the practice of making sense of the world. In this way, the Other who teaches me further highlights the way in which the Other appears both as one who unsettles my mastery of the world and one who makes possible my being in the world.

In describing the Other qua teacher, however, Levinas often identifies the teaching relation exclusively with the absolute alterity of the Other who unsettles me and calls me into question. He even writes that the relation with feminine alterity offers “a language without teaching.”³ I will argue here, however, that the teaching relation that Levinas describes, can be more fully developed if we recognize the way in which *both* modes of alterity are revealed in my relation with the Other qua teacher. The critical element of the present analysis is, thus, not a rejection of Levinas’s account of the Other as my teacher, but rather an attempt to more fully develop his notion of teaching by recognizing the importance of the intimacy that it necessarily presupposes.

I will begin in the first section, with an exploration of the “sense” of the Other in Levinas’s 1964 essay, “Meaning and Sense” and in *Totality and Infinity*. In the second section, I will continue this line of investigation into Levinas’s conception of signification through a close

³ *TeI* 129, *TaI* 155

reading of his phenomenological interpretation of Descartes' *Meditations*. In the third section, I trace the development of Levinas's references to teaching as they appear both before and within *Totality and Infinity*. We will also see in this section how the reception of meaning by the subject is informed, in part, by Levinas's understanding of Jewish education. And finally, in the last section, I challenge Levinas's claims that the teaching relation is not a relation with "feminine" alterity. It is here that I will argue for the need to further develop the intimate dimension of Levinas's conception of teaching.

The "sense" of the Other

When we examine Levinas's work surrounding the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, we find that, like many French intellectuals of his time, he was concerned with questions of language and meaning. His most extended and developed meditation on these questions appears in the 1964 essay, "*La Signification et le Sens*," translated as "Meaning and Sense" in *Basic Philosophical Writings* and "Signification and Sense" in *Humanism of the Other Man*.⁴ But we can find the early seeds of the ideas found in this work as far back as "The Transcendence of Words" (1948).⁵ And, as we will see, *Totality and Infinity* also prepares the way for the 1964 essay.

In "Meaning and Sense," Levinas is in explicit dialogue with Merleau-Ponty,⁶ but the

⁴ I use the translation from *Basic Philosophical Writings* here and so will use the term "meaning" to translate "*signification*."

⁵ "The Transcendence of Words: On Michel Leiris's *Biffures*" *Outside the Subject*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. 144-150.

⁶ The editors of *Basic Philosophical Writings* indicate (see n.17) that Levinas wrote this work after reading Merleau-Ponty's *Signs*. Trans. Richard McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. Levinas himself also acknowledges the influence of Merleau-Ponty on the essay. See *BPW* 39.

essay also aims to critique a general trend of “anti-Platonism”⁷ that Levinas finds in the work of his contemporaries. He insists that the approach to language that his fellow philosophers articulate has forgotten or has denied a transcendent orientation of meaning, and that they have instead attempted to understand and explain meaning in terms of pure immanence. That is, Levinas challenges what he sees as a form of cultural relativism among his contemporaries. He argues that the ethical is not contingent on a particular cultural and historical perspective. Rather, the sense of the ethical demand is absolute and independent of any particular context. To explain this dimension of language, which he names transcendent, Levinas draws a distinction between the two terms that give the essay its title. His thesis is that meaning [*signification*] arises from a particular cultural historical context while the relation with the Other provides a transcendent sense [*sens*] that cannot be derived from such a context.

But while Levinas criticizes Merleau-Ponty and others for failing to recognize the transcendence of the ethical, in “Meaning and Sense” Levinas also often acknowledges the advances that phenomenology has made with regard to the question of meaning. Merleau-Ponty is correct, Levinas believes, to insist that meaning must be understood as fundamentally corporeal.⁸ That is, the meaning of an expression does not exist in a realm abstracted from its incarnation in a concrete reality. Levinas writes:

⁷ *BPW* 42.

⁸ For Merleau-Ponty’s account of the incarnation of expression that inspires Levinas, see “On the Phenomenology of Language,” *Signs*. 84-97. In this essay, Merleau-Ponty argues that when we speak, we do so in a manner akin to the way that we move corporeally in the world, i.e. pre-theoretically. He writes, “Organized signs have their immanent meaning, which does not arise from the ‘I think’ but from the ‘I am able to’” (88). Just as I have a non-thematized understanding of my body in space, I also have a non-thematized feel for language. And, the meaning of language is itself corporeal. We cannot extract from language the idea that is expressed without losing some of the meaning.

It is then clear that the language through which meaning [*signification*] is produced in being is a language spoken by incarnate minds. The incarnation of thought is not an accident that has occurred to it and has complicated its task by diverting the straightforward movement with which it aims at an object. The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently expresses this world while it thinks it.⁹

When I speak to another person, Levinas argues, following Merleau-Ponty, there is no ideal meaning of what I say that is obscured by the fact that I speak with this voice, in this time, and in this cultural context. Rather, the incarnation of expression is essential to its meaning. One may be able to abstract a meaning from what I say when, for example, I express that $2 + 2 = 4$. But this abstraction itself arises from a particular historical context that presents the possibility of and desire for such abstractions. We only say that $2 + 2 = 4$ because this expression plays a role in the way that we, who share a culture, understand our world. The meaning of the abstraction, which we may say is true at all times, insofar as $2 + 2$ will always equal 4, nevertheless is expressed in an incarnate, temporal, historical context. And the meaning of my specific expression of this claim depends on the context in which I say it. For example, here I am using $2 + 2 = 4$ as an expression that you, my reader, will recognize as an example of what many consider to be an ahistorical truth. I might also utter $2 + 2 = 4$ in order to teach a child how to add. In each case, what my expression signifies, comes, in part, from the context in which I am expressing it. Even when I talk about what $2 + 2 = 4$ means abstracted from every context, this abstract meaning itself exists in a context. I cannot stand in a position outside of every context.

Accepting this idea that the meaning of an expression cannot be completely abstracted from the specificity of a concrete context has consequences for our understanding of the relationship between words and the world or between signifiers and the signified. When we think

⁹ *HAH* 28, *BPW* 40

about expressions of what “is,” we find that the meaning of these expressions arise out of the particularity of the situations in which they are expressed. When we learn another language or learn about an era of the past, we find that the multiplicity of contexts across cultures and history offer reality to us in different and seemingly inexhaustible ways. In this way, expression has a power to not only describe the way things are but to creatively give us the world in new ways.

Levinas writes in “Meaning and Sense” that we sometimes think of words, or signifiers, as containing less content than that which is signified by them. That is, we may think of words as as abstract representations of a reality that is richer than its representation in words. Levinas, however, argues that the creative power of language to call forth reality makes possible our experience of the world as meaningful. In this way, signification, Levinas claims, exceeds the given.

To understand what he means, take, for example, *The Great Gatsby*. This novel offers a way of seeing life in the 1920s that, in one sense, contains less richness than the experience of actually living in Long Island in the 1920s. That is, there is much of daily life that is not described in the book. We are not given an account of every minute, every meal, and every conversation experienced by the characters. But, in another sense, the novel gives us life in the 1920s in a way that living it would not. The book does not merely present us with an account of a period of time but continues to shape our understanding of this era of the United States. In this case, the signified, i.e. *The Great Gatsby*, exceeds the given, i.e. life in Long Island in the 1920s, because it offers us a way of understanding the meaning of our culture and history in a way that living it could not. Levinas writes, “The signified would surpass the given not because it would

surpass our ways to capture it...but because the signified is of another order than the given....”¹⁰

This other “order” than the given is the creative act of arranging and assembling the meaningfulness of the world that creates new possibilities *within* the given.

In this way, Levinas argues that these kinds of creative articulations of the meaning of the world underlie ontology. That is, it is not as if the given just *is* and then we describe it in different ways. Rather, the creative assembling of meaning gives us the world in the only way that it can be given, that is, within the horizon of a historical, temporal, cultural context. Levinas writes, “Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are ontological *par excellence*, they make the understanding of being possible.”¹¹ When Levinas claims that culture makes understanding possible, he is insisting on the primordially of culture in any articulation that we can make about the meaning of the world. A meaningful world, Levinas argues, does not preexist our expression of that world. Rather, expression gives rise to meaning itself.

While Levinas agrees with Merleau-Ponty that meaning cannot be disentangled from its cultural and historical context and that the signifying expression surpasses the given, he also argues that Merleau-Ponty, and other philosophers of his time, fail to see that the Other as the *one who signifies* surpasses the given in another way--as that which orients meaning. According to Levinas, Merleau-Ponty’s account of meaning, by acknowledging the role that culture plays in

¹⁰ *HAH* 29, *BPW* 41-42

¹¹ *HAH* 28, *BPW* 41. See also “On the Phenomenology of Language” in *Signs* wherein Merleau-Ponty claims that we must “admit as a fundamental fact of expression *a surpassing of the signifying by the signified which it is the very virtue of the signifying to make possible*” (90). That is, the signifying intention never reaches the signification that it attempts to express and yet there is no signified that precedes the signifying. It is the signifying intention itself that makes possible signification.

the ontological order, gives us a diversity of meanings, each of which has its own kind of coherence. But there is nothing, Levinas argues, to orient these diverse meanings. It is in this way that the philosophy of his time is “anti-Platonic,” Levinas claims. He writes,

Whether it be of Hegelian, Bergsonian, or phenomenological origin, the contemporary philosophy of meaning is thus opposed to Plato at an essential point: the intelligible is not conceivable outside of the becoming which suggests it. There exists no *meaning in itself*, which a thought would have been able to reach by jumping over the deformating or faithful but sensory reflections that lead to it.¹²

In Plato’s dialogues, true reality is found outside the realm of change and becoming and must be sought by the philosopher who ascends beyond the realm of becoming to catch a glimpse of what truly is. Contemporary philosophy is anti-Platonic insofar as it does not seek a source of meaning “behind” appearances, which can be misleading. Although Levinas believes that Merleau-Ponty is correct to insist on the cultural basis of meaning, he does not think we should reject entirely the notion that there is something beyond or outside of culturally constituted ontologies. Levinas argues that there is a sense [*sens*] that provides us with an orientation of meaning [*signification*] that is independent of the meanings produced by cultures.

Developments in the study of the diversity of cultures,¹³ Levinas argues, has justifiably insisted on the value of a plurality of cultures. But what has not been recognized is that this move of “decolonization,” as Levinas describes it,¹⁴ is itself inspired by an orientation. Levinas writes, “[W]hat has not been taken into consideration in this case is that an *orientation* is needed to have

¹² HAH 30-31, BPW 42

¹³ Levinas may have Levy-Bruhl in mind here. See “Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy.” *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 39-52.

¹⁴ HAH 39, BPW 46

the Frenchman take up learning Chinese instead of declaring it to be barbarian (that is, bereft of the real virtues of language) and to prefer speech to war.”¹⁵ The very possibility of a plurality of cultures and languages that do not seek only to destroy each other but speak to one another, *i.e.* the very possibility of ethics, requires, according to Levinas, that there be an orientation outside of a particular historical and cultural arrangement.

We find such a sense, Levinas argues, when we are addressed by the Other. In the speaking relation, Levinas insists, we are in relation “with that which signifies *of itself*.”¹⁶ In speaking to me, the Other presents me not with a meaning [*signification*] that can be understood relative to the horizon of meaning offered to me by my culture, but with a *sens unique*¹⁷ that exceeds the meaning bestowed by the context in which the Other appears and orients my response. That is, in being present in speaking to me, the Other does not show up in experience only as a signified, but as one who signifies, as one who speaks *to* me and as one to whom I am responsible.

As we saw in Chapter Two, the Other resists being subsumed under a concept or a set of categories that that I can comprehend.¹⁸ I cannot (because I *must* not) reduce the Other to only what I understand her to be. The Other, according to Levinas, rather, presents me with an excess over the categories and concepts given to me by my culture. For example, when I encounter

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *HAH 39, BPW 47*

¹⁷ The term, “*sens unique*,” which Levinas uses to describe the presence of the Other in speaking, is also used in French to indicate a one-way street. As such, in speaking to me, the Other gives me a decisive orientation.

¹⁸ See above pp 14-23.

another person, there are a number of things that I can know about her--her appearance, interests, family relationships, and so on. But no matter how much I know about a particular person, there is always more to her than what I know. When she faces me and asks me a question, her presence requires me to leave room in my comprehension of her, to not assume that I already know what she will say or what she means. As Levinas says in his interview with Philippe Nemo, “The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other.”¹⁹ In order to respond in the way that the Other’s presence demands, I cannot rely exclusively on the categories that my culture has offered me. Rather, I must remain open to receiving from the Other more than what I already know.

This distinction that Levinas draws between the meaning [*signification*] offered by my cultural context and the ethical sense [*sens*] offered by the Other, can also be found in an earlier form in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas does not yet use the language of the “*sens unique*” but instead names the Other the “principle” that orients meaning. He writes, “The world is offered in the language of the Other; it is borne by propositions. The Other is the principle of phenomena.”²⁰ Just as the *sens unique* provides a “one-way” direction in “Meaning and Sense,” the Other in *Totality and Infinity* serves as the principle that orients the world, phenomenologically understood.

That is, for the world to be “given,” *i.e.* to appear as meaningful, Levinas insists, I must be given the world *by someone* who can speak to me. I must be offered the world as something about which one can think and speak, which requires a relation with one who speaks to me about

¹⁹ *EI* 85

²⁰ *TeI* 65, *TaI* 92

the world. He writes, “This relationship [with the Other] is already necessary for a given to appear as a sign, a sign signaling a speaker, whatever be signified by the sign.”²¹ In other words, whatever the signification of the given sign, the given must be given by someone who signals for it to show up *as* a sign, as something that signals. “And,” he continues, “it is necessary that the given function as a sign for it to be even given.”²² That is, the given, Levinas insists, is always given as meaningful; it is given through the context of signification. This is the argument made by Merleau-Ponty that is rehearsed by Levinas in “Meaning and Sense.”²³ There is no meaningful world prior to the cultural and historical arrangement of the world in signification. But in order for me to experience the given as a sign offered in a network of signification, the given must be given by one who signifies. In this sense, the Other is the one who makes possible my having a meaningful world, according to Levinas.

In this way, Levinas goes beyond Merleau-Ponty in insisting that the significance of the Other’s presence in giving me the given, is a significance that is fundamentally different from and higher than the significance of the given signs. In speaking to me, the Other does not only signal what he says. The Other signals himself. He writes, “He who signals himself by a sign qua signifying that sign is not the signified of the sign—but delivers the sign and gives it.”²⁴ As in “Meaning and Sense,” Levinas draws a distinction in *Totality and Infinity* between the sense of the Other and the kind of meaning given as a network of signifiers. The Other, in speaking to me,

²¹ *Tel* 65, *Tal* 92

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See above, pp 50-54.

²⁴ *Tel* 65, *Tal* 92

does not just offer one sign among many, but offers *himself* in his signifying as the one who signifies.

Furthermore, this unique sense of the Other is the principle that serves to found and orient meaning. Levinas argues that the entire system of signification that allows for the world to appear to us as meaningful depends on the presence of one who speaks. He writes:

The objectivity of the object and its signification comes from language. This way the object is posited as a theme offered envelops the instance of signifying--not the referring of the thinker who fixes it to what is signified (and is part of the same system), but the manifesting of the signifier, the issuer of the sign, an absolute alterity which nonetheless speaks to him and thereby thematizes, that is proposes the world.²⁵

If we are in search of truth about the world--the "objectivity of the object," we find that we are involved in a thematization of the world in language. That is, expressions of objectivity involve us in proposing to one another that the world *is* in a particular way. But when we propose the world to one another, Levinas argues, what we propose is always "enveloped" by the instance of our speaking. All speaking is necessarily a speaking *to* someone else. The one who signifies, however, cannot be reduced to the meaning of another sign in the play of signification. Rather, as the one who speaks, the Other is an "absolute alterity" who nevertheless appears in a concrete situation of speaking. In this way, the absolute alterity of the Other is concretized in the act of proposing the world in speech.

Meaning in solitude

To further make his case that signifying (in the sense of addressing) is presupposed by signification or meaning, Levinas offers an account of what happens when we attempt to give an account of meaning *without* the presence of one who speaks. Through a phenomenological reading of Descartes's *Meditations*, which is simultaneously a critique of Husserlian and

²⁵ *TeI 69, TaI 96*

Heideggerian phenomenology, Levinas argues that without the presence of the Other, the world would remain hopelessly an-archic, *i.e.* without a principle or *arche*. Only the presence of one who speaks to me can give me the orientation needed for the given to be meaningful.

According to Levinas, the attempt to ground meaning in the subject in solitude can be found in several moments in the history of philosophy, not only in Descartes's *Meditations* but also in Gyges's position of seeing without being seen in the *Republic*, and also, as we will see in Chapter Four,²⁶ in Socratic education. These presentations of the subject share the fact that they involve an isolating withdrawal from the world, which Levinas claims is characteristic of the search for truth in much of the history of philosophy. If I want the certainty of truth, it seems I need to separate myself from that about which true claims can be made. I need to establish an private sphere of interiority into which I can retreat and from which I can view the world. This movement of separation from the world, according to Levinas, is an accomplishment of the subject that creates an interior space into which it is both possible and tempting to withdraw. Subjectivity is structured such that I can, like Gyges in the *Republic*, take up a position wherein I view the world as if I am invisible, as if I am not already ensnared by my responsibility to the Other.

We have already seen, however, that Levinas insists that our ability to accomplish this separation is made possible by our dependence on the intimate Other in the dwelling.²⁷ That is, for Levinas, my ability to "re-collect" myself through a withdraw into interiority presupposes that I am already in relation to the Other of the dwelling who makes it possible for me to become

²⁶ See below pp 110-122.

²⁷ See above pp 31-38.

a subject by extending to me a welcome.

Nevertheless, Levinas acknowledges that subjectivity gives us this possibility of taking up a stance in which truth *seems* to be independent of our responsibility. We can take up the position of Gyges who sees without being seen, and from this perspective, ethics appears to be something that I can forego. I can, Levinas argues, withdraw from the world and from others and seek knowledge as though I am only a viewer of a spectacle of appearances. Ultimately, however, while this move of separation is necessary for ethics, the temptation to see and understand the world from a position of solitude proves to be based on an illusion.

When I, like Descartes or Gyges, withdraw into myself, the world appears strange. What appears becomes, as Levinas describes it, a “pure spectacle.”²⁸ That is, I, as an observer, am detached from what I see. Others show up to me, from this perspective, like characters that I observe at a distance. The Other does not speak to me any more than the actors in a movie speak directly to me. When I am alone in interiority, I am not addressed in the way that I am addressed in the immediacy of discourse. In this way, the world is silent, according to Levinas. That is, when I move into the space of my own interiority, what appears no longer involves hearing or listening to others.

When I view the world in this way, from the position of the withdrawal into interiority, Levinas insists that I inevitably find myself mistrusting that which appears. When I see the world as a “pure spectacle,” the world is no longer that which I implicitly trust as I go about my day to day life, but is able to be doubted. When I treat the world as what *appears* to me, I transform the world into something which, qua appearance, is dubitable. It is this doubt which gives rise, in Descartes, to the threat of the evil genius. Levinas writes:

²⁸ *TeI* 62, *TaI* 90

On first contact the *phenomenon* would degrade into *appearance* and in this sense would remain in equivocation, under suspicion of an evil genius... The possibility of their fall to the state of images or veils codetermines their apparition as a pure spectacle, and betrays the recess that harbors the evil genius; whence the possibility of universal doubt, which is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes.²⁹

When I withdraw into myself, I do not discover a new fact that was already true of appearances, *viz.* that they are dubitable. Rather, it is by withdrawing into myself that phenomena “degrade” into appearances, that is, become something to be doubted. The movement by which I isolate myself is simultaneously the movement that makes the world untrustworthy.

The fact of the appearance of this kind of doubt, Levinas argues, is not particular to Descartes but is a structure of subjectivity as such. The possibility or temptation to withdraw into myself is possible because the identificatory movement of the subject creates this interior space. In becoming a subject, the I creates a site of possession thereby distinguishing what is “mine” from what is “not mine.”

The universal doubt that arises from this withdrawal into the space of interiority, Levinas argues, is not the kind of uncertainty that arises because one has not yet acquired enough information or because one may be mistaken about a world that is coherent once mistakes are cleared up. Rather, this doubt, according to Levinas, is renewed in every attempt to overcome it that does not involve the introduction of something exterior to the subject. In Descartes’s *Meditations*, the discovery of the *cogito* appears to halt my doubt, but Levinas argues that a careful reading reveals that the *cogito* alone is incapable of putting the threat of the evil deceiver to rest. We might also think here of Heidegger’s account of *Angst*. For Heidegger, *Angst* is

²⁹ *TeI* 63, *TaI* 90

overcome when *Dasein* assumes its own foundation and gives itself a meaning.³⁰ Levinas insists, however, that the idea that meaning can be guaranteed by an independent subject is a great misconception of philosophy. The *cogito*, Levinas argues, is insufficient on its own to free us from universal doubt and it is not until the introduction of something outside the subject that radical doubt can be halted.

In Levinas's reading of Descartes, that which halts doubt is the idea of the Infinite. The *cogito*, Levinas argues, does not end skepticism. He writes:

In the *cogito* the thinking subject which denies its evidences ends up at the evidence of this work of negation, although in fact at a different level from that at which it had denied. But it ends up at the affirmation of an evidence that is not a final or initial affirmation, for it can be cast into doubt in its turn. The truth of the second negation, then, is affirmed at a still deeper level—but, once again, one not impervious to negation.³¹

It seems that the *cogito* gives us a piece of indubitable evidence, *viz.* that I am a thinking thing, but we find that the threat of the evil genius remains. In the *Meditations*, the ability to trust the senses and gain knowledge about the world is impossible until after the discovery of the idea of the Infinite, i.e. the discovery of the necessity of God's existence. It is only after Descartes has established the existence of a beneficent God that he can rebuild the world shattered by his doubt.³² In this way, the *cogito* does not, on its own, provide a sufficient basis for knowledge.

For Levinas, Descartes's formulation of the idea of the Infinite as that which subtends

³⁰ See Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. §53.

³¹ *Tel* 65, *Tal* 93

³² See in particular Descartes's Fourth Meditation wherein he transitions from the establishment of the existence of God to the establishment of knowledge about the world. He finds deception to be incompatible with a perfect God and, therefore, determines that he can trust his god-given faculties now that he has proven God's existence in Meditation Three. Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. 4ed. Trans. Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. 1998. 81-82.

and makes possible the *cogito* is one of the few moments in the history of Western philosophy that genuine transcendence receives expression. In Levinas's work, the Other parallels the role of the idea of the Infinite in Descartes. For Levinas, it is the Other who speaks to me that ultimately reveals the illusory nature of every attempt to ground truth in solipsistic withdrawal. Just as the idea of the Infinite halts doubt in the *Meditations*, the Other who speaks to me presents me with my responsibility, which is indubitable. Levinas writes, "The I in the negativity manifested by doubt breaks with participation, but does not find in the *cogito* itself a stopping place. It is not I, it is the other [*l'Autre*]³³ that can say *yes*."³⁴ It is the Other, Levinas argues, who gives me the possibility of truth, because he *speaks* to me. The Other, unlike the silent world that appears when I withdraw into myself, addresses me. Once I am addressed, my skepticism is halted because the Other places a demand on me that I am not free to ignore. Of course, I could pretend as if the Other does not really exist and question whether or not she is real or a mere apparition, but such a reaction would be unjust; it would violate the demand that the Other's presence makes on me. I can withdraw into solitude and question the meaning of everything only until I am spoken to.

In this way, Levinas argues, the Other, like the idea of the Infinite for Descartes, gives me the principle or *arche* that is needed to orient the meaningfulness of the world. He writes, "The ambivalence of apparition is surmounted by expression, the presentation of the Other to me, the primordial event of signification."³⁵ I may not be sure of anything, but when you speak to me, I

³³ It is unclear why Levinas uses the term "*l'Autre*" here instead of "*Autrui*." One possibility is that this passage comes from an earlier essay before Levinas consistently used "*Autrui*" to refer to the Other.

³⁴ *TeI* 66, *TaI* 93

³⁵ *TeI* 64, *TaI* 92

can no longer be like Gyges for whom everything is permitted, because I am responsible. It is in this way that the Other says “yes” to me, by breaking through the spiral of negation in which everything is called into doubt. It is as if, while watching a film, one of the actors miraculously turned towards me and began addressing me directly. I am no longer alone in the world, no longer an invisible voyeur, but am spoken to. A radically new dimension is introduced into experience.

The development of Levinas’s conception of “teaching”

Early references to “teaching”

In describing the relationship between the Other and the meaning of the world, Levinas names my relation with the Other in this context a “teaching” relation as early as 1949 in his essay, “The Transcendence of Words,” which is a reflection on Michel Leiris’s autobiography, *Biffures*.³⁶ In this essay, Levinas explores what he calls the transcendence of language and makes a distinction between vision and sound that is not unlike the distinction between meaning and sense he later formulates in the 1964 essay. Just as he will claim that the sense of the Other exceeds what is given as signification by a culture, in this early essay, Levinas claims that sound exceeds vision. He writes:

There is in fact in sound--and in the consciousness understood as hearing--a shattering of the always complete world of vision and art. Sound is all repercussion, outburst, scandal. While in vision a form espouses a content and soothes it, sound is like the sensible quality overflowing its limits, the incapacity of form to hold its content--a true rent in the fabric of the world--that by which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension inconvertible into vision.³⁷

³⁶ For more context on Levinas’s reading of *Biffures*, see Sean Hand’s introduction to “The Transcendence of Words” in *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989. 144-145.

³⁷ OS 147-8

Phenomenologically, Levinas claims that while vision is “complete,” sound overflows its own form. Vision allows an object to be laid out before us. It presents us with boundaries, but sound has no distinct borders. Sound cannot be reduced to a form that can be displayed before us. And as that which exceeds any definition, sound, Levinas goes on to write, is paradigmatically symbolic. He writes, “It is thus that the sound is symbol *par excellence*--a reaching beyond the given.”³⁸ Sound is, at root, he claims, transcendent, as something that points beyond its own manifestation. The reason that sound is transcendent, Levinas goes on to argue, is that fundamentally, sound refers to speech. He writes:

If, however, sound can appear as a phenomenon, as *here*, it is because its function of transcendence only asserts itself in the verbal sound. The sounds and noises of nature are words that disappoint us. To really hear a sound is to hear a word. Pure sound is the word.³⁹

In other words, for Levinas, hearing originates in listening to those who speak to us, that is, in receiving speech. All other meaningful sounds, he insists, are based on this original listening.

He goes on to explain, in a way that prefigures the arguments of “Meaning and Sense,” the importance of verbal sound by claiming that it is the social relation that grounds all other meaning. He describes how Robinson Crusoe who “has maintained his ties with civilization through his use of utensils, his morality and his calendar...experiences in meeting Man Friday the greatest event of his insular life--in which a man who speaks replaces the ineffable sadness of echoes.”⁴⁰ Civilization is here equated with tools, the calendar, and even morality. But these

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 147

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147-8

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 148

trappings of civilization mean nothing without the concrete presence of another person. The event of being spoken to by someone disrupts solitude and provides the possibility of a meaningful existence.

Shortly after this account, Levinas goes on to name this encounter with another person who disrupts solitude and gives life meaning “teaching.” He writes:

The presence of the Other is a presence that teaches us something; that is why the word, as teaching is more than the experience of the real, and why the master more than a midwife of minds. He wrenches experience away from its aesthetic self-sufficiency, from its *here*, where it rests in peace. And by invoking it he transforms it into a creature. In this sense, as we have said elsewhere,⁴¹ critique, the spoken word of a living being speaking to a living being, leads the image, with which art was content, back to fully real being.⁴²

Levinas claims that the Other’s presence transforms our experience of reality from something complete and unquestioned into something that *lives*, a “creature.” The words spoken are brought to life by being spoken by someone to someone else. In this early text of Levinas’s, we find that the Other’s presence in speaking animates what would otherwise be a sterile and lifeless world. Teaching is the dimension of speech that brings conversation to life.

Levinas goes on to explain the connection between this transcendence of speaking and critique. He continues:

The language of critique takes us out of our dreams, of which artistic language is an integral part. Clearly, in its written form, critique always attracts further critique. Books call for more books, but that proliferation of writing stops or culminates the moment the living word enters in, the moment critique flowers into teaching.⁴³

⁴¹ See Levinas’s essay, “Reality and its Shadow.” This essay was originally published in *Les Temps Modernes* 38 (1948). 771-89 under the title “*La réalité et son ombre.*” An English translation appears in *The Levinas Reader*. ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989. 129-143.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 148-9

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 149

It is the fecundity of critique, Levinas claims, that allows language to come alive as a teaching. In this way, we find that in his earliest formulation of “teaching” as a key philosophical concept identifies teaching as the dimension of language that, by means of critique, brings conversation to life.

The notion of critique as that which animates conversation is also explored in “Reality and its Shadow” (1948). Art, Levinas claims in this essay, involves a kind of closure of the finished work that is opened up in the proliferation of criticism that allows art to enter an ongoing conversation. It is this “blossoming” of language into a living reality that Levinas again names teaching. The Other who teaches me is the Other who, by speaking to me, exceeds reality as it is given and transforms it into something that can be taken up again and again in conversation.

In the years that followed the publication of “The Transcendence of Words” and “Reality and its Shadow,” Levinas continued to develop a philosophical conception of teaching as is shown by his participation in 1950 at a meeting at Jean Wahl’s *Collège philosophique* at which he gave a paper titled “*Les Enseignements*.”⁴⁴ In this previously unpublished work, Levinas defines teaching as the relation with the Other that breaks with what he calls the world of nourishment and tools. In these notes, he claims that the teaching of the Other reveals to me my status as what he calls a “created” and “elected” being.

The world of nourishment described in “*Les Enseignements*” is similar in many ways to what Levinas later calls “*signification*” in “Meaning and Sense.” The world of nourishment is identified with the world given to us by our culture’s history, the world of civilization described

⁴⁴ Levinas’s notes for this meeting have been collected in the second volume of Levinas’s unpublished writings in *Parole et Silence et autres conférences inédites au Collège philosophique*. ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier. 2011. Translations of this text are my own.

in “The Transcendence of Words.” Levinas claims that the Other appears to me in this context only as one with whom I do business. Our interactions are transactional, what we exchange can be measured and made commensurate.

This transactional exchange, he argues, offers a neutral mediation that does not require me to encounter the Other in his uniqueness. My coming together with the Other in economic exchange is, rather, founded on participation, sharing [*partage*]. And sharing consists “in a balance of freedoms--dominating one another, associating with one another other, exterminating one another.”⁴⁵ The world of nourishment, he claims, is one in which other people are encountered in terms of what we share and how we can be of use to each other. This way of relating, however, fails to allow for the uniqueness of the individual that is necessary for ethics. We encounter other people in the world of nourishment as collaborators alongside us not as speaking beings who call into question our right to possession.

And yet even in the world of nourishment, we find traces of the ethical in the experience of shame. The fact that I can experience shame, Levinas claims, reveals something that conditions subjectivity, something underneath its power to engage with the Other as one with whom I share a world. The presence of shame he argues, reveals that I have what he terms an “absolute past,” a past given to me by one who teaches me. He writes, “I call the manner in which this absolute past of my election and of my creation may be given to me -- teaching.”⁴⁶ In describing my relation with the Other who teaches me as a relation with an “absolute past,” Levinas indicates the primordially of the teaching of the Other. My relationship with the Other

⁴⁵ *PS* 180

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 185

qua teacher is a relation that precedes and orients the world of nourishment in which I can engage in an economic exchange with others. Just as Levinas later describes the *sens unique* of the Other as that which renders possible signification, the Other who teaches me in “*Les Enseignements*” teaches me “before” I enter a world in which I can relate to others as economic partners.

Levinas describes this primordial teaching as one in which I learn that I am “created” and “elected.” To understand what Levinas means he makes this claim that about the the teaching of the Other, it is helpful to look to Levinas’s later discussion of creation in *Totality and Infinity*. In a consideration of the need for a separation between the I and the Other, he names separation “creation *ex nihilo*.” He writes:

But the idea of creation *ex nihilo* expresses a multiplicity not united into a totality; the creature is an existence which indeed does depend on an other, but not as a part that is separate from it. Creation *ex nihilo* breaks with system, posits a being outside of every system, that is, there where its freedom is possible.⁴⁷

To be a created being is to be a being who is separate, free. This separated being is dependent on the Other, but this dependence does not define the subject. Rather, the separated being accomplishes a truly independent existence through the accomplishment of subjectivity. When Levinas claims in “*Les Enseignements*” that my experience of shame is received as a teaching that reveals my being to be a created being,⁴⁸ he means, therefore, that the relation with the Other, experienced as shame, reveals to me my separation, my utter uniqueness, the inescapability of being myself.

But at the same time, this experience of my concrete separation in shame is also an

⁴⁷ *TeI* 78, *TaI* 104

⁴⁸ *PS* 185.

experience of “election.” When the Other calls me to responsibility, the uniqueness of my existence as a subject means that no one can take my place. I am called to responsibility and I cannot relegate this responsibility to someone else. The use of the term “elected” invokes Levinas’s Jewish faith. For, to be Jewish for Levinas, is to be chosen for responsibility. This election, he argues, reveals both the universality and the particularity of the teachings of Judaism. In “A Religion for Adults” (1957), for example, he writes,

This election is made up not of privileges but of responsibilities. It is a nobility based not on royalties [*droit d’auteur*] or a birthright [*droit d’aînesse*] conferred by a divine caprice, but on the position of each human I [*moi*]. Each one as an ‘I’, is separate from all the others to whom the moral duty is due.⁴⁹

To be Jewish, to be “chosen” by God, according to Levinas, is to be chosen for responsibility and my responsibility is uniquely mine. I cannot escape it by transferring it to someone else.

Responsibility cannot be located in an economic system whereby equal goods are traded. It is in this sense that we can understand Levinas’s claim that the Other teaches me my status as “created” and “elected” in “*Les Enseignements*.” What the Other teaches me, according to Levinas, is the very fact of my unique and non-transferable responsibility.

As in “The Transcendence of Words,” we thus see that “teaching” in these notes is described as a reception of that which transforms and makes possible the significance of the world. In “The Transcendence of Words,” teaching breaks open the complete, self-sufficient world of vision through the blossoming of language into critique. And in “*Les Enseignements*,” Levinas identifies teaching as the introduction into the world of nourishment, a recognition that I am chosen for responsibility. While these ideas are not identical to Levinas’s later formulations

⁴⁹ DF 21

in *Totality and Infinity*,⁵⁰ we can see the early development of Levinas's notion of the Other as my teacher beginning to emerge.

Jewish education

In addition to these early writings that reference teaching, there are also three essays explicitly devoted to teaching in *Difficult Freedom*. As I noted in the introduction,⁵¹ Levinas worked as the director of the Enio for nearly three decades, and he was working at the school when he wrote *Totality and Infinity* and many of the essays in *Difficult Freedom*. In these essays, Levinas argues that Jewish education is especially important for continuing the sacred traditions of Jewish life.

In "How is Judaism Possible?" (1959), for example, Levinas outlines with some specificity what he believes the curriculum of Jewish education should be. Essential to Jewish education, he argues, is a rigorous study of the Talmud. And we can see in Levinas's understanding of the role of Talmud study in Jewish education, resonances with his account of the presence of the Other as the one who assures the blossoming of criticism into teaching in "The Transcendence of Words" as explored above.⁵² For Levinas, what is essential in the rabbinic commentary of the Talmud is its plurality of voices, what he calls "talmudic pluralism,"⁵³ which opens up an ongoing series of questions without giving a definitive or dogmatic answer. This mode of perpetual commentary, he argues, allows for the spiritual truth of

⁵⁰ See below pp 75-79.

⁵¹ See above pg. 1.

⁵² See above pp 65-68.

⁵³ *DF* 116

Judaism to be renewed in different cultural and historical eras. In Talmudic commentary, a plurality of voices provide different and at times opposing views, which are arrived at through the careful and rigorous study of the most minute details of the text. It is this intellectual rigor applied ceaselessly that makes Judaism continually relevant in vastly different cultural and historical time periods. To be Jewish is to be a part of this tradition of reading and responding to the sacred texts in one's own time.

It is only through a Talmud-centered Jewish education that Judaism can survive, according to Levinas. In "Reflections on Jewish Education," he writes, "The existence of Jews who wish to remain Jews - even apart from belonging to the State of Israel - depends on Jewish education. Only this can justify and nurture such existence."⁵⁴ This education must include the study of the Talmud because, he writes, "[i]n a world in which nothing is Jewish, only the text reverberates and echoes a teaching that no cathedral, no plastic form, no specific social structure can free from its abstract nature."⁵⁵ Jewish education cannot be reduced to a formalized abstraction of its teachings because a culture and a tradition cannot survive in the abstract but must be renewed continuously in a living manifestation of its teachings. Christianity, unlike Judaism, he argues, is concretely manifested everywhere in the West. Judaism, however, has its concrete manifestation only in its texts. For this reason, "If we detach them [modern Jews] from the deep and real life that animates these square letters with its precise rhythms, we reduce them to the poverty of a theoretical catechism."⁵⁶ The task of the Jewish educator is, thus, to bring the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 265

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

texts to life in a contemporary setting. The texts have to be, as he writes, “turn[ed] back into teaching texts.”⁵⁷

To turn the texts back into teaching texts, Levinas argues that the study of Jewish texts must be intellectually rigorous. “In order for the permanent values of Judaism, contained in the great texts of the Bible, the Talmud and their commentators, to be able to nurture souls,” he writes, “they must once again be able to nurture brains.”⁵⁸ Judaism, he argues, must be “raise[d]..to the level of a science.”⁵⁹ Doing so, Levinas insists, does not involve a philological tracing of the history of texts and their influences. To approach a text as capable of *teaching*, Levinas argues, is to allow the texts to continue a perpetual conversation that raises relevant questions about the meaning of being human. We must read texts in such a way that their meanings can live in a contemporary context and dialogue and are not treated as relics of history.

In his own Talmudic interpretations, Levinas himself struggles to bring the text of the Talmud into a contemporary context. In describing his method Levinas writes,

Many of you are undoubtedly thinking, with good reason, that at this very moment, I am in the process of rubbing the text to make it spurt blood—I rise to the challenge! Has anyone ever seen a reading that was something besides this effort carried out on a text? To the degree that it rests on the trust granted the author, it can only consist in this violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history. One must, by rubbing, remove this layer which corrodes them.⁶⁰

The work of reading and interpreting the Talmud consists in reading the text in order to find

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 268

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 267

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *NTR* 46-7

what it can offer to us in our experiences living in a place and time different from that of the text's original expression. Reading the Talmud, according to Levinas, demands of us that we struggle to bring the letter of the text to life, allowing it to "spurt blood" in our own time, to be a "creature" capable of teaching us.

In contrasting his approach with a historical/philological approach, Levinas once more uses the language of teaching. He writes, "We take the Talmudic text and the Judaism which manifests itself in it as teachings and not as a mythic web of survivals."⁶¹ What distinguishes a "web of survivals" from "teachings" is the ability of a text to enter into a "living breathing discourse."

Thus, throughout these references to teachings in Levinas's Jewish writings, we see that Levinas's understanding of Jewish education influences the development of his conception of teaching. A fundamental teaching lies at the origin of conversation; it brings words to life and allows what is said to enter into an ongoing, living, breathing, even bleeding, speech. In this way, we see that Levinas identifies the teaching relation as a relation that transforms the given into a meaningful world about which I can speak and in which I am responsible.

The primordial teaching relation in *Totality and Infinity*

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas continues to name the relation with the Other a teaching relation. And in this text, we find that Levinas emphasizes not only that the Other breaks with the world offered by our culture, but also that the Other is what makes possible my very ability to understand and represent the world to myself in language, a theme that we saw developed in

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5

“Meaning and Sense.”⁶² Teaching, he argues in *Totality and Infinity*, makes possible

thematization. He writes,

To comprehend a signification is not to go from one term of relationship to another, apperceiving relations within the given. To receive the given is already to receive it as taught—as an expression of the Other...the world becomes our theme, and hence our object as proposed to us; it comes from a primordial teaching, in which scientific work itself is established and which it requires.⁶³

The meaning of the world as it is given, as we have seen above, cannot be established by examining a network of references making up a totality of significations offered by a particular cultural and historical arrangement. Rather, Levinas insists that the Other speaking *to* me is a necessary condition for my own speaking *about* the world.

Levinas then goes on to claim that what makes it possible for me to receive the world in this way from the Other is that the Other is present in expression. He writes, “Language is exceptional in that it attends its own manifestation. Speech consists in explaining oneself with respect to speech; it is a teaching.”⁶⁴ This “attendance” of the Other to her manifestation is here described as a kind of promise that the Other’s presence makes to me, a promise that she will continue our conversation. He writes,

Thematization manifests the Other because the proposition that posits and offers the world does not float in the air, but promises a response to him who receives this proposition, who directs himself toward the Other because in his proposition he receives the possibility of questioning.⁶⁵

⁶² See above pp 54-59.

⁶³ *Tel* 64, *Tal* 92

⁶⁴ *Tel* 71, *Tal* 98. Levinas’s reference to an “attendance” of language to its expression is, as we will see in Chapter Four (see below pp 104-110), a reference to Plato’s account of speaking in the *Phaedrus*.

⁶⁵ *Tel* 69, *Tal* 96

The Other qua teacher is an Other who does not abandon me but enters into a conversation with me insofar as I receive her speaking. This promise of a response is what makes questioning, and thereby learning, possible.

In opening up the possibility of questioning, by proposing the world and promising to answer my questions, Levinas claims that the Other offers the key to interpreting what he says. In this way, he claims, there is an element of teaching in *all* speaking. He writes, “The presence of the interpretative key in the sign to be interpreted is precisely the presence of the other in the proposition, the presence of him who can come to the assistance of his discourse, the teaching quality of all speech.”⁶⁶ In speaking to me and offering to respond to my questions, the Other’s presence gives me the possibility of understanding his speaking.

In this way, the element of speech that Levinas describes as its “teaching quality” is one in which discourse is opened up to an ongoing discussion and clarification of what is said. The Other does not simply propose the world to me and abandon me to my interpretation (like the “fatherless” texts that Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus*). Rather, her presence guarantees the “plenitude of discourse”⁶⁷ and the “inexhaustible surplus of attention which speech, ever teaching, brings me.”⁶⁸ Thus, “[t]o have meaning is to teach or to be taught, to speak or to be able to be stated.”⁶⁹ In other words, for Levinas, the very fact that the given is given as meaningful presupposes the presence of the Other who signifies, the signifier. In being present in

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *TeI 70, TaI 97*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

signifying, the Other opens up the plane of discourse in which we can continue to question and answer one another. The Other, just as we saw in “The Transcendence of Words,”⁷⁰ by being present in speaking, allows for speech to “blossom” into teaching, to come to life through the living, breathing presence of the interlocutors.

In being received by me, what the Other teaches me, Levinas insists in *Totality and Infinity*, is the ethical relation itself or my being “elected.” Levinas claims that the first teaching is that I am responsible, that I am in a community with others. This teaching is not something that I learn as I learn objective knowledge. Rather, it is the very presence of the teacher himself that teaches me this very presence. Levinas writes:

The presence of the Master who by his word gives meaning to phenomena and permits them to be thematized is not open to an objective knowing; this presence is in society with me. The presence of being in the phenomenon, which breaks the charm of the bewitched world, which utters the *yes* of which the I is incapable, which brings the preeminent positivity of the Other, is ipso facto as-sociation.⁷¹

For Levinas, in order to have a meaningful world, I must be *given* the world by one who speaks to me. In speaking to me, the Other opens up the possibility of a continued dialogue through his presence. At the same time, this presence reveals to me the fact of my responsibility.

In this way, the Other, as my teacher, is higher than me, is my Master. The Other “judges” me, that is, calls my freedom into question by revealing to me that I am not free to do whatever I please but am responsible to and for the other.

The *moral* relation with the Master who judges me subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true. Thus language commences. He who speaks to me and across the words proposes himself to me retains the fundamental foreignness of the Other who judges me; our relations are never reversible. This supremacy posits him in himself outside of my knowing, and it is by relation to this absolute that the *given* takes on

⁷⁰ See above pp 65-68.

⁷¹ *TeI* 73, *TaI* 100

meaning.⁷²

While in speaking to me the Other offers me the promise of an ongoing discussion, it is not the case, Levinas insists, that the Other and I are in interchangeable positions. The Other is “higher” than me, in that I am inescapably responsible for the Other.

Here, we see that there is a kind of exchange that occurs in the speaking relation, but it is an exchange that does not involve the counting up of debts or the economic exchange that Levinas describes in “*Les Enseignements*” as participation or sharing. The exchange between the Other who teaches me and me is not a reciprocal exchange. Rather, the exchange is an exchange of hospitality. The Other welcomes me into the world of discourse by offering me a promise of a response and I, in turn, welcome the teaching of the Other, which reveals to me that I am responsible for her. But my responsibility is not that of a debt owed. Rather, in giving me the world as meaningful, the Other gives me the gift of being responsible. I am “elected,” chosen for responsibility. As Guenther writes, “In calling my possession into question and teaching me the idea of infinity, the Other also teaches me how to give to the Other, how to be responsible for a stranger whom I cannot grasp or comprehend. The Other *gives to me* the capacity to *give to him*.”⁷³ The teaching which gives me the world is thus a gift that in turn makes it possible for me to give and to know how and what I ought to give.

Exteriority and intimacy in the teaching relation

In the descriptions of the Other as teacher explored above, we can already see elements of both modes of the alterity of the Other--the absolute alterity of the Other who unsettles me and

⁷² *TeI* 74, *TaI* 101

⁷³ Guenther, Lisa. *The gift of the other*. 65.

the hospitality of the intimate Other who welcomes me into conversations about the world. As we will see, however, Levinas expresses some ambivalence about the possibility that the Other who teaches me presents me with the hospitable intimate presence that Levinas names feminine. The alterity of the Other who teaches me is most often described as the absolute alterity of the Other as an utterly exterior and foreign presence. In describing the teaching relation, Levinas writes, for example, “The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us,”⁷⁴ implying that teaching is not accomplished through intimacy, but requires the distance of the foreign Other, the Other who comes from outside the sphere of interiority.

Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter Two,⁷⁵ in describing the difference between feminine alterity in the dwelling and the absolute alterity of the Other who calls me to responsibility,

Levinas writes:

But in order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how *to give* what I possess. Only thus could I situate myself absolutely above my engagement in the non-I. But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question. The Other--the absolutely other--paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face.⁷⁶

The absolute Other, unlike the “discreet” presence of the intimate Other, is “indiscreet.” And it is this indiscretion of absolute alterity that is necessary for me to be able to not only receive the world from the intimate Other but to give away what is mine. That is, in order for there to be ethics, I must be called into question by the absolute Other, not only supported and welcomed by an intimate Other.

⁷⁴ *TeI* 46, *TaI* 73

⁷⁵ See above pg 37.

⁷⁶ *TeI* 145, *TaI* 171

In drawing this distinction between the intimate other who welcomes me in generosity and the absolute Other who calls into question my possession of the world, Levinas goes on to identify the height of absolute alterity with teaching. In the next paragraph, he writes, “The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language. The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching.”⁷⁷ It is the *height* of the absolute Other that marks him as my ethical teacher. And this height is, as we have seen, not characteristic of the intimate Other who welcomes me. As we saw in the previous chapter, according to Levinas, “The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the *you* [*vous*] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* [*tu*] of familiarity: *a language without teaching*, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret [my emphasis].”⁷⁸ We see that, for Levinas, the Other qua teacher is here identified with the absolute Other, the Other who “paralyzes possession” and not with the Other who welcomes me within the space of interiority.

Levinas makes a similar move of distinguishing the teaching relation from intimacy in a discussion of teaching in *Difficult Liberty*. In a Talmudic commentary on messianism from 1961, the same year that *Totality and Infinity* was published, Levinas comes to a text which discusses the names of the Messiah. Three names are given--Shiloh, Yinnon, and Haninah--which correspond to three schools of Jewish thought. Levinas writes:

The experience in which the messianic personality is revealed therefore comes back to the relationship between pupil and teacher. The pupil-teacher relationship, which seemingly remains rigorously intellectual, contains all the riches of a meeting with the Messiah. This is the truly remarkable thing: the fact that the relationship between pupil and teacher can confirm the promises made by the prophetic texts in all their grandeur

⁷⁷ *TeI* 146, *TaI* 171

⁷⁸ *TeI* 128-129, *TaI* 155

and and tenderness is perhaps the most surprising novelty in this passage.⁷⁹

We see here that Levinas grants an immense reverence to the teacher-student relationship, comparing it to an encounter with the Messiah. Levinas continues, however, with a fourth name of the Messiah, Menahem, “the comforter.” He writes:

The comforter does not appear in the teacher’s face, he is announced outside the teaching. The comforter goes further than the man of peace, justice and favour. Peace, justice, favour concern a collectivity, but the comforter has an individual relationship with the person he consoles. One can favour a species, but one consoles only one person.⁸⁰

The similarities between Levinas’s description of the comforter or consoler, who is here described as one who is not a teacher, and the intimate other are apparent. The comforter, Levinas writes, goes “further” than peace, justice, and favor, just as the feminine goes “both further and less far than language.”⁸¹ Similarly, the comforter, Levinas claims, has an individual relationship with another person, which is what we have seen defines intimate relations in which the third party is not necessarily recognized.⁸² This relation with the comforter is precisely *not*, according to Levinas, characteristic of the teaching relation, which is identified with the justice of a public discourse for all, rather than a private relation of caring for a single individual. In intimacy, as we have seen, there is an exclusivity to the relationship. Teaching, for Levinas, it seems, is marked not by the exclusivity of love but by the public nature of justice.

But, in Levinas’s descriptions of the Other as my teacher, there are also nevertheless resonances of the Other who welcomes me in intimacy and hospitality. The Other who teaches

⁷⁹ *DF* 85

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 86-87

⁸¹ *TeI* 232, *TaI* 254

⁸² See above pp 39-41.

me, in doing so, promises that she will respond to my questions. The Other's presence in speaking opens up the ongoing plane of discourse. In this way, the Other invites me to converse, which implies that the Other will not only speak to me, but will also *listen* to me. If I am to converse with the Other, the Other must not only speak but also, at times, remain silent so that I can speak as well. Only in this way can the Other invite me into the ongoing project of trying to make sense of the world. If the teaching dimension of all speaking is the promise of a response, this promise also entails the *withdrawal* of the Other so that I might ask questions. And it is the withdrawal of the Other in silence that characterizes the relation with the intimate alterity of the Other who welcomes me in hospitality.

Furthermore, phenomenologically, when we consider our initiation into a meaningful world, we find that those who first teach us, that is, those who first give us the world as meaningful, appear in intimacy and familiarity. It is the intimate others who support me in the accomplishment of subjectivity that first offer me the possibility of a meaningful world that is familiar. It is my parents and friends who first address me and teach me what things are, what is allowed and disallowed, what I might hope for, and so on. My inauguration into the world of speaking is made possible in large part by the intimate others who support my development as a subject capable of speaking and being spoken to.

If the teaching relation is the relation that gives me the world as meaningful, Levinas cannot, therefore, claim without contradiction that the relation with the intimate Other is a relation "without teaching." The Other who teaches me does not only challenge me and call me into question, but also supports me in my development and offers me a space where I am welcome. I can only come to understand, propose, and give the world to others if I have been

provided the possibility of developing into the adult subject called to responsibility by the Other who appears as an absolutely exterior Other.

In this way, the teaching relation points to a tension in Levinas's work and to his ambivalence about the role of intimate alterity. While he recognizes the need for what he names "feminine" alterity, he seems unsure at times exactly how to reconcile our intimate relationships with concrete others with the absolute distance that he feels it is necessary to maintain between the spheres of the Same and the Other. The Other who teaches me further reveals this tension. As one who welcomes me into a world that makes sense and as one who promises to stay with me to answer my questions, the Other shows up as an intimate, gentle, and sometimes silent presence. And at the same time, to be taught is to have one's world transformed by the presence of one who complicates my comfortable being at home and demands that I recognize my unique and unchosen responsibility. A fuller conception of the teaching relation, however, must acknowledge and celebrate both the absolute height of the Other as the one who calls me into question and the intimacy that is inherently involved in teaching. And as I will argue in the following chapter, we can develop the underemphasized intimacy of the teaching relation by reconsidering the relationship between Levinas's conception of teaching and Socratic education.

Summary

In this chapter we have seen that for Levinas, the Other teaches me by giving me the possibility of meaning, which Levinas understands phenomenologically as a network of significations that arises out of particular embodied cultural historical situations. Levinas argues that every act of signifying presupposes at some level, one who signifies. In this way, I only come to have a meaningful world by being spoken to by the Other. Meaning is a gift that I am

given by the Other who teaches me in attending his speaking by promising to remain and answer my questions. Furthermore, the teaching relation also presents the possibility of critiquing or re-orienting meaning. Because meaning is given to me by the Other, meaning already presupposes ethics. The first teaching of the Other is the ethical relation itself. The Other who teaches me calls me into question and reveals to me my responsibility. In this way, the Other offers me a *sens unique* that orients signification from outside of a historical/cultural context, offering a space for me to critique my own ways of being in the world.

Thus, we also see that both modes of alterity--intimate hospitality and absolute demand--are involved in the primordial teaching relation as Levinas understands it. For Levinas, the Other is my teacher because the Other, in attending her presence in expressing, gives me the possibility of a meaningful world. This attention to expressing must occur both in my being hospitably welcomed into the world of discourse and in my being called into question such that I can become hospitable to others.

In the following chapter, we will see that the tension described here between intimate “feminine” alterity and absolute exterior alterity appears also in Levinas’s relationship to Plato, specifically with regard to the question of teaching. We will see that Levinas’s hesitancy to fully acknowledge the role of intimate alterity in the teaching relation plays a role in his rejection of Socratic education. I will argue, however, that such a rejection is unjustified and that Levinas’s own conception of teaching could be strengthened and deepened through a recognition of the role of intimacy in teaching.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TEACHING RELATION AND LEVINAS'S PLATONISM

As we saw in Chapter Three, Levinas's claim that the Other is the *sens unique* orienting meaning involves a rejection of what he saw as the widespread anti-Platonism pervasive in European philosophy at the time.¹ In fact, especially in the period surrounding the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas saw his philosophical project as a retrieval of a kind of Platonism. When Levinas completed *Totality and Infinity*, which was his thesis for his *Doctorat ès Lettres*, he was required to write a short summary of the work for the *Annales de l'Université de Paris*. In the final lines of this brief overview, he writes the following concerning his primary thesis:

To show that the first signification emerges in morality--in the quasi-abstract epiphany of the destitute visage bared of all qualities--an absolute that absolves itself from all cultures--is to restrict the understanding of the reality on the basis of history; it is a return to Platonism.²

Levinas claims that his work is Platonic insofar as it describes a signification--the signifying of the face of the Other who speaks to me--that does not receive its meaning from a particular culture and history. Rather, the Other offers a transcendent sense that orients ontology. Like Plato, who seeks an original and orienting reality beyond that of appearances, Levinas argues that the significations offered to us by a particular culture are meaningful only if understood in light of an ethical sense that cannot be reduced to a particular cultural expression.

But while Levinas's conception of the primordial teaching as an orienting *sens unique* is

¹ See above pp 50-56.

² Peperzak, Adriaan. *Platonic Transformations: with and after Hegel, Heidegger, and Levinas*. Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1997. 121.

part of his “return to Platonism,” he is also often critical of “Western” thought, which, for him, is fundamentally rooted in Greek philosophy. For Levinas, one of the central problems with “Western” philosophy lies in the primacy it gives to the individual subject understood as independent and self-sufficient. The subject in “Western” thought is believed to be fundamentally free, not obligated by the ethical demand that precedes our ability to make choices. Levinas sees “Western” thought as problematic insofar as it often denies the transcendent relationship to the Other that precedes individual freedom.

While, as we will see below,³ *Totality and Infinity* is inspired by Plato’s descriptions of transcendence, the self-sufficient subject is nevertheless also expressed, in his view, in Greek mythology through the fantasy of a nostalgic return to an origin. Levinas criticizes the figure of Odysseus by presenting the alternative figure of the Jew in exile. While Odysseus seeks to return home to a place that is rightfully his, the subject, for Levinas, is perpetually a sojourner in a foreign land, always on someone else’s terrain. For him, to be an ethical subject is to long for “a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves.”⁴ That is, to be a subject is to always have one’s site of possession called into question by the Other. To be, is not to be autochthonous,⁵ sprung from the soil of a place of one’s own, but to be forever both hosted by and called upon to be a host to the Other.

This concern that “Western” thought in general and “Greek” thought in particular is often

³ See below pp 91-98.

⁴ *TeI 3, Tal 34*

⁵ Athenians of the fourth and fifth centuries insisted that their people had always lived in Attica, claiming to be literally born of the earth [*autokthones*].

predicated upon a self-sufficient conception of the subject, is reflected in Levinas's critique of Socratic education understood as *anamnēsis* (recollection) and *maieutics* (midwifery).

Anamnēsis, which appears explicitly in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, is the idea that learning is a process of "remembering" what we somehow already "know" from a time before birth.

Maieutics, which appears in the *Theaetetus*, is the idea that the role of the teacher is to be a "midwife" to the student who needs help giving birth to her own ideas. As we will see in the second section below, Levinas often defines his own understanding of the teaching relation by placing it in opposition to that outlined by Socrates who, according to Levinas, teaches that we receive nothing from the Other but already possess all that we learn.

In what follows, I will explore the complexity of Levinas's relationship to Plato insofar as he both retrieves central Platonic themes and also rejects Socratic education. And I will show that the complexity of this relationship is reflective of tensions within Levinas's own thought. I argued in Chapter Three that the relation with the Other who teaches me involves both absolute and intimate alterity even though Levinas is at times hesitant to acknowledge that the teaching relation involves intimacy.⁶ I will argue, however, that if we acknowledge and embrace the dual nature of teaching as a relation that is at once intimate and distant, hospitable and unsettling, we will find that understanding teaching and learning as *maieutics* and *anamnēsis* does not necessarily conflict with Levinas's account of the teaching relation. Instead, Socratic education offers us a way of understanding the teaching relation as one that involves both moments of the relationship with the Other qua teacher.

Before examining the details of Levinas's critical engagement with Plato, however, it is first necessary to say something about the nature of the claims being made about Plato in this

⁶ See above pp 79-84.

chapter. In talking about Levinas's "return to Platonism," we must recognize the multiplicity of possible meanings of "Platonism" and ways to read Plato's texts. The profound influence of Plato's dialogues on the development of philosophy in Europe and the United States has left us with many versions of Plato and many Platonisms. For example, there is the Plato who emerges through the rigorous historical study of Greek language and culture. There is a neo-Platonic Plato who is interpreted as pre-figuring Christian revelation. There is a neo-Kantian Plato in whom scholars find accounts of *a priori* knowledge. There is a Heideggerian Plato in whom we can purportedly find an account of truth understood phenomenologically, and so on. Throughout the history of philosophy, Plato's texts are read in ways that support a variety of different and, at times contradictory, philosophical positions. As we will see, Levinas, like scholars before him, reads Plato's texts for what they offer his own philosophical project. My goal here is, therefore, not to make definitive claims about Plato himself; rather my goal is to think through the way that Levinas's Plato figures in Levinas's own philosophical project by examining both Levinas's own texts and the Platonic dialogues that are most influential to him.

The chapter will be organized as follows. In the first section, I offer an overview of two major Platonic themes that appear in *Totality and Infinity*--the transcendence of Desire and the privileging of speech over writing--and consider some recent work by scholars to understand the nature of the relationship between Levinas and Plato with regard to these themes. Next, I examine Levinas's critique of Socratic education as it appears in *Totality and Infinity* showing how this critique also reflects the tension in Levinas's work between the absolute exteriority and the intimate presence of the Other who teaches me. This analysis will set the stage for the third section, in which I will offer a response to Levinas's critique of Plato, arguing that Socratic

education, understood as *anamnēsis* and *maieutics*, can, in fact provide guidance for developing a practice of teaching oriented by Levinas's ethics.

Levinas's Platonism

Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, there are nearly fifty explicit references to Platonic dialogues and/or clear Platonic themes. These references include allusions to the "Good beyond Being," the myth of Gyges, the priority of speech over writing, the nature of Eros in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, among other themes.⁷ In addition to these explicit references, there are numerous other passages that may be read as alluding indirectly to Plato's texts. Here, I will focus on two central themes in these references insofar as they are important for understanding the teaching relation. First, I will explore how Levinas is inspired by Plato's conception of philosophy as a Desire for a reality that transcends culture and history. And second, I will show how Levinas draws on Socrates's privileging of the dynamic possibilities of apologetic speech over the fixed nature of writing. Both of these themes are found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which Levinas refers to more than any other Platonic dialogue in *Totality and Infinity* and which he claims is one of the greatest philosophical works of all time.⁸

One of the biggest challenges when interpreting the *Phaedrus* is understanding how the various themes of the dialogue relate to one another. The work is simultaneously about love, speech, writing, rhetoric, mythology, pedagogy, divinity, philosophy, and more. The question of the unity of the dialogue is, therefore, one that has been often raised in scholarship on the

⁷ See *TI* 38, 43, 44, 48, 49, 50, 59-60, 61, 63, 64, 64-65, 66, 70, 71-72, 73, 80, 86, 88, 90, 92, 95, 102-103, 114, 114-115, 116, 124-125, 126, 136, 170, 173, 181, 189, 191, 201, 218, 219, 222, 225, 254, 272, 292, 293, 294, 297.

⁸ *EI* 37

Phaedrus.⁹ In fact, according to Derrida, for a long time, the dialogue was thought to be badly constructed.¹⁰ And today, scholars of Plato still struggle to locate the work in the context of Plato's development. As Graeme Nicholson points out, many scholars see the *Phaedrus* as a transitional dialogue including both elements of the so-called "Socratic dialogues" and elements of Plato's sophisticated dialectic method as it appears in later dialogues like the *Sophist*.¹¹ I will show here that it is precisely through a surprising unity of the themes of the *Phaedrus* that Levinas discovers his own philosophical project reflected in the text. That is, it is by combining the Desire for a transcendent reality with the primacy of the speaking relation that Levinas finds the central ideas of his own ethics expressed in Plato's dialogue.

The transcendence of Desire

While Levinas names the *Phaedrus* among the greatest philosophical works of all time, Levinas's Platonism is most often discussed in relation to Plato's conception of the Good that lies "beyond being," [*epekeina tēs ousias*]¹² in Book VI of the *Republic*. In fact Levinas names the concept of the Good beyond being "the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology but of philosophy."¹³ The phrase appears in the central passage of the *Republic* just before the account of the divided line and the famous allegory of the cave. Socrates's

⁹ See Heath, Malcolm. "The unity of Plato's *Phaedrus*." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7:151-73 (1989); Rowe, C.J. "The Unity of the *Phaedrus*: A Reply to Heath." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7:175-88 (1989) Werner, Daniel. "Plato's *Phaedrus* and the Problem of Unity." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 32:91-137 (2007)

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques. "Plato's Pharmacy." *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981. 61-172.

¹¹ Nicholson, Graeme. *Plato's Phaedrus: The Philosophy of Love*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999.

¹² Plato, *Republic*. 509B

¹³ *TeI* 76, *TaI* 103

interlocutors implore him to give an account of the nature of the Good, but Socrates is reluctant to do so claiming that such a task is beyond his abilities. He agrees, however, to give an account of the “offspring” of the Good.¹⁴

This offspring of the Good is the sun which, as the origin of light, makes seeing possible. The light of the sun is neither sight itself nor the object of sight but is the third term that illuminates the objects of vision, making them visible. In a similar way, Socrates claims, the Good makes knowing possible in the intelligible realm. That is, just as the light of the sun is what allows us to see the true reality of visible objects, the “light” of the Good is what allows us to know what a being really is, i.e. its form or essence.

Furthermore, Socrates claims, the sun is the source of growth and change in the visible world insofar as without the sun, all life would wither and die. But while the sun is the source of generative growth, the sun itself, according to Socrates, does not undergo a similar kind of growth and change. Rather, the sun is the cause of generation without itself being generated. Similarly, Socrates insists, the Good is the source of the ideas, as that which makes beings what they are, but the Good itself is not an idea. Instead it lies beyond essence.

This notion that there is an ethical reality that lies beyond essence, is, for Levinas, the preeminent example of a moment in the history of philosophy in which genuine transcendence is expressed.¹⁵ For Levinas, the transcendence of the ethical lies at the heart of his entire philosophical project and this is one of the major ways that we can understand *Totality and Infinity* as a “return to Platonism.” As we saw in Chapter Three, for Levinas, our ability to think,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 506E

¹⁵ In fact, this expression even inspires the title of Levinas’s later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006.

question, and make sense of the world--in other words, our ability to do philosophy itself--is made possible and oriented by the Other whose teaching opens up the possibility of conversation, and thereby of meaning itself.¹⁶

When we turn to Levinas's references to the *Phaedrus* in *Totality and Infinity*, we see that Levinas also finds the expression of this kind of transcendence in a reading of Plato's famous chariot myth. In "Transcendence as the Idea of Infinity," the final chapter of part A of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers an interpretation of the myth from Socrates's second speech in the *Phaedrus*, sometimes called Socrates's "Great Speech." In this speech Socrates does not argue against the madness of love, as he had done in his first speech,¹⁷ but explains that there is a kind of divine madness that we ought not reject but embrace as the origin of philosophy.

To explain the nature of divine madness, Socrates compares the soul to a charioteer with two horses. One of the horses is good and noble while the other is wicked, impulsive, and lacks self-control.¹⁸ The soul has wings which allow it to fly above the earth to the heavens like the immortal gods. Each soul, depending on its nature, follows one of the twelve Olympian gods. The wings of the soul are nourished by beauty, goodness, and virtue, and are destroyed by

¹⁶ See above pp 50-59, 75-79.

¹⁷ Socrates's first speech is a response to a speech by Lysias that Phaedrus reads, in which Lysias praises the non-lover as more beneficial to a young boy than a lover. Socrates is clearly unimpressed with the speech but ironically claims that its beauty has mystified him. He tells Phaedrus that, while the speech is rhetorically elaborate, its content is poor. Phaedrus bids Socrates to make a better speech and Socrates reluctantly agrees, making his own speech in praise of the non-lover. Socrates, however, distances himself from his own speech by covering his face as he speaks and cutting the speech off early. After abandoning the speech, Socrates begins to leave. Phaedrus, however, tries to convince him to stay and Socrates's daemon forbids him from leaving before making amends for his blasphemous speech. Socrates agrees and stays to give another speech.

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*. 246 A-B.

wickedness. Only immortal souls can fly above the vault of heaven and see what lies beyond it.¹⁹

The best mortal souls, while unable to reach the vault of heaven themselves, can nevertheless catch a glimpse of what lies beyond as they fly by but only if their wings have been well nourished.²⁰ Socrates claims that it is the beloved that nourishes the wings of the lover and helps his wings to grow. Beauty, he claims, flows from the beloved into the lover. Because of this, the openings in the soul from which the feathers grow are loosened and opened up. The lover, undergoing this process of growing wings seems mad as his soul is being pricked all over by the growing wings like a child whose teeth are coming in.²¹ But, Socrates claims, this madness is divinely inspired, as it is nourished by beauty.²² He claims that the madness inspired by divine love is not to be rejected like the unhealthy kind of madness but is to be pursued above all else, as it is this divinely inspired love that can help us to catch a glimpse of the true reality beyond the heavens.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas refers directly to Socrates's Great Speech in explaining how the Other both exceeds the boundaries of our ability to think and also makes thought possible. Levinas, citing Plato, claims that thought becomes delirious by a divine possession that is not irrational but is identified with "reason itself, rising to the ideas, thought in the highest sense."²³ As we saw in Chapter Three, for Levinas, the subject alone in interiority requires the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 247 A-C.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 248 A-B

²¹ *Ibid.*, 251A - 252B

²² *Ibid.*, 249 D-E.

²³ *TeI* 20, *TaI* 49-50

exteriority of the Other to be able to make sense of the world.²⁴ The idea that reason can be grounded in a subject who withdraws from the world in solitude is, according to Levinas, an illusion. In fact, he argues, our ability to make sense of the world requires the presence of the Other who teaches me. The Other overflows the capacity of the thinking subject but does not, in doing so, render our thinking irrational. Rather, it is precisely by overflowing our categories of signification that the Other provides the *sens unique* that gives us an orientation and an *arche* of meaning.

Similarly, Levinas argues, the divine madness Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus* appears at first glance to subvert rational thought--see, for example, Socrates's first speech about the dangers of love. But in fact, divine madness provides the condition and direction for rational thought. The madness of a "winged thought" that lifts the soul to the heavens to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond the ideas, is the source of philosophy itself and is not a destructive or irrational madness.

In Levinas's interpretation of this myth, the transcendent source of thought is figured as a relation with the Other who teaches me. He reads the movement of the soul towards a transcendent reality as "the end of the solitary (and which we will later call 'economic') or inward thought."²⁵ When Levinas refers to "solitary," "economic," or "inward" thought, he is describing the kind of thinking that arises through the withdrawal of the subject into its own sphere of interiority described in Chapter Three above.²⁶ As we saw in Levinas's analysis of

²⁴ See above pp 59-65.

²⁵ *TeI* 20, *Tal* 50

²⁶ See above pp 59-65.

Descartes's *Meditations*, the subject who attempts to ground truth in a purportedly self-sufficient subject, finds meaning to be an-archic, without principle. It is the the transcendence of the Other who teaches me and gives me the *sens unique* that grounds and orients meaning. In describing the flight of the soul in the *Phaedrus* driven by Eros to catch a sight of the Beautiful, Levinas thus draws a parallel between the movement of Eros in the *Phaedrus* and the shattering of the solitude of the subject by the Other who teaches me.

As we saw in the analysis of "Meaning and Sense" above,²⁷ the sense that the Other provides differs from cultural signification insofar as the Other, in speaking to me, "signifies of itself."²⁸ The Other who teaches me, as we have seen, teaches me by teaching me his very presence as one who calls me to responsibility.²⁹ The Other, in offering me meaningful signs, does so by *signifying*, i.e. by speaking, by addressing me. The sense of the Other who speaks to me cannot be reduced to the categories of understanding offered by any particular culture. Rather, the Other is present and responsive in speaking to me, and in this way, the Other's presence transcends any meaning that can be defined by the concepts and categories of a particular sign.

Just as, for Levinas, the meaning of the world as something that can be com-prehended, questioned, doubted, and so on, depends first on the sense of the Other who both precedes and orients the meaning of the world, the rational pursuit of philosophy for Plato in the *Phaedrus* is grounded in a pre-rational inspiration. For Plato, the pursuit of the highest objects of thought begins in a divinely inspired madness. The height of the rational for Plato is thus, on Levinas

²⁷ See above pp 50-59.

²⁸ *HAH* 39, *BPW* 47

²⁹ See above pp 75-79.

reading, grounded in a pre-rational Eros. It is in this way that Levinas finds in Plato an expression of what he understands to be the transcendence that many of his contemporaries, such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, have failed to articulate.

For Levinas, the transcendence of the Other must also be understood as motivating a response on the part of the subject. That which lies beyond being is the “highest” goal of thought, and is “already Desire.”³⁰ That is, the Other, for Levinas, does not only make meaning possible by dispelling the illusion of solitude, but the Other also inspires us to continue to strive for the Good. This work, the work of Desire, Levinas insists, is never completed. Desire, unlike need, he claims, is never satisfied and, in fact, only grows stronger as we approach the desideratum. He writes:

The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves. The metaphysical desire does not rest on any prior kinship. It is a desire that can not be satisfied.³¹

True Desire--metaphysical desire--is never fully accomplished. Rather the work of Desire, is work that is forever unfinished. My responsibility to the Other (and to all of the others who appear in the face of the Other)³² is endless.

In the myth of the chariots in the *Phaedrus*, Levinas thus finds a description of this structure of Desire as a task that is never completed. Mortal souls circle the heavens, straining their necks to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond, but they never arrive at what they seek and will eventually be weighed down by their own finitude. Similarly, to be a subject, for Levinas, is

³⁰ *TeI* 20, *TaI* 50

³¹ *TeI* 4, *TaI* 34

³² See above pg 39.

to always be obligated beyond what one is capable of achieving. We will never fulfill our responsibilities to the multitude of others who face us. But we must, nevertheless, continue to struggle to do so, because to cease struggling would be to turn away from the face of the Other who obligates me.

But while Levinas is clearly inspired by the accounts of transcendence that he finds in Plato's descriptions of our pursuit of the Good/Beautiful, his account of Desire also reveals the complexity that often characterizes Levinas's relationship to Plato. While Levinas finds a parallel between Plato's conception of a divine madness as it is found in the *Phaedrus* and his own conception of thought as subtended by the teaching of the Other, his distinction between need and Desire takes issue with Eros as it appears in the *Symposium*.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima offers a myth of origins for Eros, claiming that Eros is the child of Poros [wealth] and Penia [poverty]. But Levinas makes clear in his own work that metaphysical Desire does not originate in poverty, i.e. in need or lack. Levinas identifies need with satisfaction. The need for things is filled by their attainment. But true Desire is never satisfied, not because it is always in need, but because the movement of this Desire is not one of fulfillment, but, as he writes in "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," one of emptying. He writes, "The true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy, but hollows out. It is goodness. It does not refer to a lost fatherland or plenitude; it is not homesickness, is not nostalgia. It is the lack in a being which *is* completely, and lacks nothing."³³ The desire for things, is a desire to dominate and possess. True Desire, however, is not a desire to increase one's freedom, but to weaken it for the sake of the Other.

In his account of enjoyment, as we have seen, we find that Levinas describes our

³³ *PhI* 83-84, *PI* 114

neediness as the source of our sovereignty as subjects. It is by learning to satisfy our needs that we become capable subjects who take possession of the world.³⁴ Desire, however, does not increase our mastery of the world but calls it into question. Desire, for Levinas, is not a need, it is a response to the Other who always obligates me beyond my capacity to respond.

By both embracing and critiquing Plato's conception of Eros, Levinas, thus, uses one Platonic myth, that of the winged chariot in the *Phaedrus*, to point out what he sees as a problem with another myth, that of the birth of Eros in the *Symposium*. In this way, Levinas's retrieval of Plato is not simple, but involves a simultaneous recovery and critique of Plato's work. And as we will see, examining the tension in Levinas's relationship to Plato raises important questions in Levinas's own thought about the relationship between the two modes of alterity (i.e. absolute exteriority and intimate hospitality) that characterize my relationship with the Other qua teacher.

Among scholars who have studied the relationship between Levinas and Plato, Deborah Achtenberg has focused much of her work on the concept of Eros. In *Essential Vulnerabilities*, she argues that both Levinas and Plato are philosophers of vulnerability. Both philosophers, in her view, articulate a concept of Desire by means of which the subject is fundamentally exposed to alterity. But while both Plato and Levinas understand the subject to be essentially vulnerable, their understanding of the nature of Desire differs.

In particular, she argues that Levinas's and Plato's conceptions of Desire have different aims. In the *Symposium*, Achtenberg notes, Diotima asserts that the goal of love is to reproduce in beauty and, thereby, to attain the only kind of immortality that is available to mortals. For Levinas, by contrast, the erotic relation, as it is described in Section IV of *Totality and Infinity*, culminates in the creation *ex nihilo* of the child, who is not a means of obtaining immortality for

³⁴ See above pp 25-27.

the parent. Rather, the fecundity of Eros in Levinas is not a perpetuation of the Same but is the creation of genuine alterity.³⁵

Achtenberg argues that Levinas and Plato differ in their conceptions of Desire because their understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and that which renders it vulnerable differ. For Plato, the aim of philosophy is a shared knowledge of being. Philosophy, on this account, aims at a commonality among subjects who participate in the reality of the forms. Levinas, however, insists that the object of Desire remains always at an absolute distance. I speak with the Other, but in this speaking relation, the Other and I remain apart. Plato, Achtenberg argues, understands reality to be what it is through *participation* in the forms while Levinas understands ethics to originate in multiplicity and separation. It is Levinas's aversion to the possibility of a commingling between the Same and the Other, she argues, that leads him to reject Diotima's conception of Eros as aiming at reproduction in beauty through participation in the form of the Beautiful.

In his work on Levinas and Plato on Eros and *maieutics*, Francisco Gonzales makes a similar argument regarding this point of tension between Levinas and Plato.³⁶ Gonzales, like Achtenberg, claims that the notion of participation lies at the heart of Levinas's criticisms of Plato. Gonzales describes the difference between Levinas and Plato as one between Levinas's conception of "separation" and Plato's conception of "participation." As we have seen, the

³⁵ Sarah Allen offers yet another interpretation, seeing in Plato's own work a non-egoic generativity. She argues that there are two forms of transcendence in Plato's dialogues. The "vertical" transcendence of the Beautiful as universal and the "horizontal" transcendence of fecundity. See *The Philosophical Sense of Transcendence*. 24 - 45.

³⁶ Gonzales, Francisco J. "Levinas Questioning Plato on Eros and Maieutics," *Levinas and the Ancients*. Ed. Brian Schroeder and Siliva Benso. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 2008. 40-61.

ethical relation for Levinas requires that the terms of the relation remain at an absolute distance, “absolved” from the relation.³⁷ For there to be ethics there must be an irreducible multiplicity. Plato’s conception of “participation,” however, according to Gonzales, presents the subject not as separate but as dependent on the ideas for its existence. All beings are what they are by virtue of their dependence on and participation in a transcendent reality.

Following Derrida’s critique of *Totality and Infinity* in “Violence and Metaphysics,”³⁸ Gonzales asks whether Levinas is right to emphasize separation in the way that he does. He writes, “How can we welcome the Other, if our home is not in its being open to the Other, if it is fundamentally ‘egoist’?”³⁹ That is, Gonzales worries that the seemingly strict differentiation that Levinas makes between interiority and exteriority, the Same and the Other, makes the welcoming of the Other on the part of the Same impossible. He argues that it is Levinas’s own rejection of any possibility of the Other abiding within the sphere of the Same that leads to his ambivalence about Plato’s conceptions of Eros.

Platonic Eros, according to Gonzales, however, is preferable because it presents our relationship with transcendence as fundamentally ambiguous. Plato, he argues, presents an alternative to the distinction between self-sufficiency and the exteriority of the transcendence we seek. Pointing to Levinas’s rejection of an image in the *Phaedrus* in which souls nourish themselves on the truth,⁴⁰ Gonzales shows that Levinas draws a distinction between the egoic

³⁷ See above pp 23-34.

³⁸ Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics.” *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*. Ed. Claire Katz and Lara Trout. Vol 1. New York: Routledge, 2005. 88-173.

³⁹ Gonzales, 58.

⁴⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*. 248B-C.

movement of nourishment and the transcendent movement of our encounter with the truth.⁴¹

Gonzales argues, however, that Plato presents us with a third possibility, whereby we are nourished precisely by that which exceeds us. He argues that Plato offers us a way of understanding truth as simultaneously transcendent and immanent, beyond us but also within us, an image that is borne out by the metaphor of teaching as *maieutics*.⁴²

Thus, both Achtenberg and Gonzales claim that it is Levinas's rejection of "participation" that leads to his critique of Plato. Gonzales, however, in presenting his Platonic response to Levinas, overlooks the role of Levinas's conception of intimate or "feminine" alterity, which I propose offers a moment in Levinas's text when he, in fact, embraces what Gonzales calls participation.

Gonzales asks how we can welcome the Other in the home if the I is fundamentally egoic, that is, if the home is not already open. As we saw in Chapter Two, Levinas poses a similar question in *Totality and Infinity*. "How," he writes, "can the separation of solitude, how can intimacy be produced in the face of the Other?"⁴³ And as we also saw in Chapter Two,⁴⁴ Levinas's answer to this question is to present another mode of alterity, the alterity of the feminine who resides in interiority and makes possible subjectivity. Levinas answers his own question as follows:

⁴¹ We also saw this distinction between the world of nourishment and the teaching of the Other in the analysis of the notes, "*Les Enseignements*" in Chapter Three of the present work. See above pp 71-75.

⁴² *Maieutics* will be explored in greater detail below.

⁴³ *TeI* 128, *TaI* 155

⁴⁴ See above pp 34-37.

For the intimacy of recollection to be able to be produced in the oecumena of being, the presence of the Other must not only be revealed in the face which breaks through its own plastic image, but must be revealed, simultaneously with this presence, in its withdrawal and in its absence. This simultaneity is not an abstract construction of dialectics, but the very essence of discretion. And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.⁴⁵

Levinas, therefore, provides an answer to Gonzales's question. How can the Other enter the home, the domain of the Same? The answer is that the Other is already in the home; the Other who welcomes in generosity, gentleness, and hospitality is the very condition of the home.

This intimate Other who appears in the dwelling is, nevertheless, transcendent. Levinas refers to the intimate Other as the Other [*Autrui*], and claims that feminine alterity "includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other."⁴⁶ The alterity of the intimate Other is, therefore, not akin to the alterity of things that I can possess. The intimate Other as one who welcomes me, presents the possibility of genuine transcendence within the sphere of interiority. We see, therefore, that Levinas does not always draw as stark a contrast between the Same and the Other as Gonzales claims.

Nevertheless, Gonzales's point is not without textual justification. As we saw in Chapter II, Levinas, at times, does seem to draw a strict boundary between interiority and exteriority.⁴⁷ We see this tendency, for example, when he claims that the feminine is "a relation without teaching."⁴⁸ In this moment of the text, Levinas seems to indicate that the alterity of the Other

⁴⁵ *TeI* 128, *Tal* 155

⁴⁶ *TeI* 129, *Tal* 155

⁴⁷ See above pp 79-84.

⁴⁸ *TeI* 128, *Tal* 155

qua teacher leaves no room for the intimacy of the “feminine” Other. I have argued, however, that both modes of alterity are necessary for the teaching relation and for ethics more broadly and that we ought not forget the importance of intimate alterity in this relationship. The text of *Totality and Infinity* is, therefore, not entirely consistent but reflects Levinas’s struggle to clarify the concepts that structure his work. This struggle, as Gonzales rightly notes, appears in Levinas’s complex retrieval of Platonic Eros.

Speech and writing

In addition to retrieving Plato’s conception of Desire, Levinas also draws inspiration from the primacy that Socrates gives to speaking over writing in the *Phaedrus* in the myth of Theuth. And it is by combining this privileging of speech with the Desire for a transcendent reality that Levinas finds his own philosophy reflected in the *Phaedrus*. That is, for Levinas, metaphysical Desire for that which lies beyond being is, as we saw in Chapter Two, conceivable concretely in the relation with the Other who faces me and, in doing so, *speaks* to me.⁴⁹ In his own way, therefore, Levinas finds the *Phaedrus* to reflect his claim that “[l]’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui.”⁵⁰ The absolutely Other of Desire is concretely realized in the human Other who speaks to me.

The myth of Theuth from which Levinas takes inspiration appears at the end of the dialogue after Socrates and Phaedrus have considered what makes a good speaker and determined that good speaking requires that one be both skilled at dialectic and have knowledge of human souls. That is, the speaker must be good at crafting speeches but also good at knowing when and to whom to give particular speeches. Having discussed the characteristics of excellent

⁴⁹ See above pp 23-24.

⁵⁰ *TeI 9*

speaking, Phaedrus insists that they complete their inquiry by investigating what makes *writing* good, and Socrates responds with a myth.

The Egyptian god, Theuth, he says, invented many things and went to the king of the gods, Thamus, to show him the arts [*technai*] that he created. As they go through his various inventions and come to writing, Theuth is especially proud, claiming that he has “discovered a potion [*pharmakon*] for memory [*mnēmē*] and for wisdom [*sophia*].”⁵¹ Thamus responds, saying that Theuth, as the father of writing, is too close to his own creation and is, therefore, mistaken about its worth. Thamus insists that writing will not aid memory but will cause people to forget because they will no longer practice remembering but will rely “on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own.”⁵²

Phaedrus and Socrates discuss this claim of Thamus and declare that he is right that writing is problematic. Socrates claims that writing is like painting insofar as the “offspring” of painting, like written words, remain silent when you question them. The problem with writing, Socrates claims, is that written discourse is untethered from its author.

When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.⁵³

Unlike the skilled speaker who knows the souls of those to whom he speaks, a written speech cannot answer for itself but needs its “father” to come to its assistance in order to explain and contextualize the writing for a particular audience.

⁵¹ Plato. *Phaedrus*. 274E.

⁵² *Ibid*, 275A.

⁵³ *ibid*. 275e

There is, however, according to Socrates, a “legitimate brother” of written speeches, *viz.* writing in the souls of students. This kind of discourse can defend itself and knows to whom it should speak. Phaedrus clarifies as follows: “You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image.”⁵⁴ To write in the souls of students is to teach others in such a way that they themselves come to share the knowledge of the teacher and can defend it themselves.

It is this ability of the speaker to be present to take part in a “living, breathing discourse” that inspires Levinas’s account of the primordial teaching relation. That is, for Levinas, the teaching dimension of speech brings conversation to life and by shattering the solitude of the subject and opening up the plane of question and answer. As we saw in Chapter Three, Levinas argues that the Other is my teacher insofar as she is present in speaking to me.⁵⁵ Teaching, he writes, is “explaining oneself with respect to speech.”⁵⁶ And teaching occurs through “an attendance of being at its own presence.”⁵⁷ The teaching dimension of speech opens up the possibility of conversation that, as we have seen, Levinas argues lies at the origin of the meaningfulness of the world. Quoting the *Phaedrus*, Levinas writes,

Plato maintains the difference between the objective order of truth, that which doubtlessly is established in writings, impersonally, and reason *in* a living being, ‘a living and animated discourse,’ a discourse ‘which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent’ [*Phaedrus* 276a].⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 276A

⁵⁵ See pp 75-59.

⁵⁶ *TeI* 71, *TaI* 98

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *TeI* 45, *TaI* 73

Levinas finds in the critique of writing in the myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus*, an affirmation of the priority of the address in conversation which, in *Totality and Infinity*, he names the teaching dimension of speech.

Maurice Blanchot, Levinas's close friend and interlocutor, however, has challenged Levinas's emphasis on speech over writing. In his work, *Infinite Conversation* (1969), Blanchot argues against Levinas's assertion that Socrates is correct in privileging speech over writing. Blanchot's work is itself written as a conversation with a number of thinkers and reveals both in its execution and in its themes, the ability of a text to be dialogical. In conversation with Levinas, he writes:

Levinas often invokes Socrates on this point, recalling the well-known pages of Plato where the pernicious effects of writing are denounced. But I wonder whether this comparison doesn't introduce into Levinas' thought some ambiguity--unless it is a necessary ambiguity. On the one hand, language is the transcendent relation itself, manifesting that the space of communication is essentially non-symmetrical, that there is a kind of curvature of this space that prevents reciprocity and produces an absolute difference of levels between the terms called upon to communicate...yet suddenly, this speech once again becomes the tranquil humanist and Socratic speech that brings the one who speaks close to us since it allows us, in all familiarity, to know who he [the interlocutor] is and from what country, according to Socrates' wish.⁵⁹

Blanchot points to a tension or ambiguity in Levinas's text between the absolute transcendence of the Other and the concrete presence of an Other who is "familiar," who can be known as a concrete and particular being. In this way, Blanchot, like Gonzales, wonders whether or not Levinas can maintain the absolute separation of the terms of the metaphysical relation and also emphasize the concrete encounter between interlocutors as the site of the ethical relation.

Blanchot, however, unlike Gonzales and Achtenberg who find resources in Plato for

⁵⁹ Blanchot, Maurice. *Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 56.

resolving the tension in Levinas's text, rejects the critique of writing in both Levinas *and* Plato. For Blanchot, Levinas's problem is that he is *too* Platonic. Blanchot, and Derrida after him,⁶⁰ argue that in fact it is writing that should be given priority over speech, because writing, in not being fully present, opens up the possibility of an infinite conversation. That is, writing, because it does not fully answer for itself remains open to a multiplicity of interpretations. The text opens itself up to an ongoing conversation precisely because the author does not have the final say.

But in this way, as Michael Naas points out, Levinas and Blanchot are not as far apart as they may seem.⁶¹ Both seek to emphasize the dimension of language that prevents it ever being fixed and completed. That is, both Levinas and Blanchot are concerned with ensuring that conversation remains alive and ongoing. Levinas argues that it is the presence of the Other that brings speech to life while Blanchot finds this possibility of an infinite conversation in the varieties of interpretation that the author's absence makes possible. The question, therefore, is whether or not we locate the unending unsettling of language in the absence inherent in texts or in the overflowing presence of the one who comes to their defense.

And to respond to Blanchot's critique, it is important to note that Levinas's emphasis on a living discourse, as for Socrates, does not amount to a rejection of writing. For both Levinas and Socrates, a text can speak, but it needs someone to come to its defense. That is, the text needs someone to read it and engage with it to bring it to life, to turn it into a "creature," a living text,

⁶⁰ Derrida is influenced by Blanchot in "Violence and Metaphysics." See "Violence and Metaphysics," pp 111-112.

⁶¹ Naas, Michael. "Lending Assistance Always to Itself: Levinas's Infinite Conversation with Platonic Dialogue," *Levinas and the Ancients*. 79-102.

as we saw Levinas describe the teaching quality of texts in Chapter Three⁶² and as Plato describes the living seed of discourse that is planted when one writes in the souls of students.

We also see this kind of living engagement with a text in the analysis of Lysias's speech in the *Phaedrus*. Lysias himself is not present, so Socrates has Phaedrus read Lysias's speech out loud so that they can examine it. Phaedrus comes to the defense of Lysias's speech, standing in for Lysias and serving as the "father" of the discourse, as Socrates calls him. Not only does Phaedrus read the speech at the beginning of the dialogue, he later comes to its defense again by re-reading the opening so that he and Socrates can more closely examine it. Socrates asks Phaedrus to reread it so that he "can hear it in his [Lysias's] own words."⁶³ Thus we see that, while Socrates is concerned about writing, he also exhibits a way in which we can engage with written texts so that they open up the possibility of engaging with texts in a way that keeps discourse alive.

And we have seen also that Levinas does not reject writing, a rejection that would be absurd given that he is a writer of philosophy. Rather, as we saw in his discussion of turning the Talmud into "teaching texts" in Chapter Three,⁶⁴ Levinas's emphasis is on bringing texts to life through an ongoing conversation. Bringing texts to life by allowing them to enter into ongoing conversations is what he names the teaching dimension of all speech, whether that speech be written or spoken.

But while Levinas may not reject writing in the way that Blanchot worries, the ambiguity that Blanchot identifies between the Other who is absolutely other and the concrete interlocutor

⁶² See above pp 65-72.

⁶³ Plato. *Phaedrus*. 263E.

⁶⁴ See pp 72-75.

who approaches in familiarity is nevertheless important. As I have argued, the Other who teaches me is simultaneously my master who comes from on high and the intimate Other who welcomes me in gentleness and familiarity. Both of these modes of alterity are necessary for ethics as well as for teaching relation. And Levinas, especially in *Totality and Infinity*, does not consistently recognize the presence of both modes of alterity in the Other who teaches me. This is especially true, as we will see in the following section, in his rejection of Socratic education understood as *anamnēsis* and *maieutics*.

Levinas's critique of Socratic education

The first reference to Socratic education in *Totality and Infinity* appears in Section I in the important chapter, "Metaphysics Precedes Ontology." In this chapter, Levinas argues that in Socratic education, we find an account of teaching and learning that defines learning in terms of the mastery characteristic of comprehension. He makes this argument by distinguishing between two ways of understanding the theoretical attitude that gives rise to knowledge.

On the one hand, Levinas claims, knowledge involves a respect for the alterity of that which the knower knows. The knower "lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity."⁶⁵ This kind of knowing involves allowing what is known to remain other. Insofar as theory maintains this attitude of respect for the alterity of its object, it can be traced back to the metaphysical relation in which the terms of the relation remain separate. Levinas writes, "In this sense metaphysical desire would be the essence of theory."⁶⁶ That is, insofar as the theoretical attitude allows the alterity of what is known to persist, this attitude can be traced back to the

⁶⁵ *TeI* 12, *TaI* 42

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

ethical relation wherein the Other remains other.

On the other hand, knowledge can also involve the loss of the alterity of what is known through the comprehension of the knower who appropriates what is known to himself. When theory operates in this mode, knowing “is identified with the freedom of the knowing being encountering nothing which, other with respect to it, could limit it.”⁶⁷ That is, as a kind of comprehension, theory exhibits the subject’s attempt to take up a position of mastery and control over that which he knows.

In his 1957 essay, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,”⁶⁸ Levinas makes a similar distinction between two dimensions of truth. On the one hand, truth involves what he names “experience.” As experience, the truth involves a heteronomous encounter, an encounter with something that is unfamiliar, different from our everyday comfortable dealings with a world in which we feel at home. At the same time, however, he insists that truth can also function as an appropriation of otherness, an expression of autonomy rather than heteronomy. That is, truth can involve the generalizing of the particular. When something other presents itself to me in this mode, I reduce it to something that I can understand. The thing is a tree, a bicycle, a jump rope. In this sense, truth involves a preservation of the feeling of being at home in the world; it is a “refusal to be alienated.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite.” Trans. Adriaan Peperzak. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993. 88-120. “La philosophie et l’idée de l’Infini.” Collected in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. 73-87. Originally published in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*. 62 (1957): 241-53.

⁶⁹ *PhI* 74, *PI* 91

The alterity that I encounter in experience can be transformed and reduced into something that is mine, that is the Same. "Western" thought, for Levinas, has largely understood truth only in terms of an appropriating autonomy, a reduction of otherness to sameness. For Levinas, this reduction of otherness to sameness is an expression of the freedom of the subject. This freedom, however, must be understood, not as liberating moment, but as a dominating, unjustified "conquest of being by man over the course of history" (*Phi* 74, *PI* 91). This conquest is what characterizes the self-identifying movement of the I.⁷⁰

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas no longer describes these dimensions of our search for truth in terms of autonomy and heteronomy, but instead draws a distinction between two theoretical attitudes--metaphysics, which maintains alterity, and ontology, which does not. Metaphysics, Levinas argues, inherently involves a critique of our very ability to know. It "does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same."⁷¹ But in order for the theoretical attitude to operate in this mode, Levinas argues, it requires an encounter with the Other, with something that cannot be encompassed by its powers of understanding.

This encounter is concretely manifested, according to Levinas, in our being spoken to by one whose appearance reveals to me my responsibility. In this way Levinas argues, the encounter with the Other "accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge."⁷² That is, for Levinas, insofar as knowledge requires exteriority to call it into question, it is dependent on the relation with the

⁷⁰ See above pp 15-20.

⁷¹ *TeI* 13, *TaI* 43

⁷² *Ibid.*

Other. This relation is concretely manifested in my being spoken to by the Other who calls me to responsibility. This relation with alterity that allows the Other to remain other, Levinas names metaphysics, as opposed to ontology, which neutralizes alterity by converting it into the Same by means of a third term.

After describing these two possibilities of theory—metaphysics which respects alterity and ontology which does not—Levinas goes on to claim that “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.”⁷³ We have seen that Levinas finds exceptions to this tendency of Western philosophy, most notably in Plato’s concept of a transcendent Good/Beautiful in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*,⁷⁴ and in Descartes’s idea of the Infinite.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the tendency of Western thought, on the whole, he believes, has been towards a reduction of alterity. And despite Plato’s formulations of transcendence, Levinas insists that Socratic education is a manifestation of this tendency.

For example, he writes, “This primacy of the Same was Socrates’s teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside—to receive nothing, or to be free.”⁷⁶ In this passage, we see that Levinas seems to find Socratic education to be at odds with Plato’s conception of philosophy as the pursuit of that which is “beyond being.” Socrates’s teaching, according to Levinas, does not represent learning as a movement of transcendence but prioritizes the Same, insofar as what I

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ See above pp 91-104.

⁷⁵ See above pp 59-65.

⁷⁶ *TeI* 13-14, *Tal* 43

learn is already within me.

One of the ways in which Plato presents this idea, that what I learn is already within me, is through the myth of recollection. In the *Meno*, Socrates introduces the theory of recollection as a way of resolving Meno's famous paradox concerning the apparent impossibility of inquiry. If we do not know what we are searching for when we seek knowledge, Meno insists, then we cannot search for it, but if we do know that for which we are searching, we do not need to search for it; thus, inquiry appears impossible. Socrates introduces recollection as a way of resolving this paradox. He suggests that inquiry is possible if the soul has seen the true nature of reality in a previous existence before birth. To learn is to recall this prior vision of reality. We *do* know what we are searching for in one sense, he claims, but we have forgotten. And learning is the process of recollecting knowledge that we previously possessed.

Socrates goes on to "prove" to Meno that learning is recollection by giving a demonstration with one of Meno's slaves. Through a series of questions, Socrates guides the slave to the knowledge that a square made on the diagonal of another square will be double the size of the original. Socrates never explicitly tells the slave that this is the case but uses questioning to lead the slave first into and then out of *aporia*. Because Socrates never directly tells the slave what he teaches him, Socrates claims that he must have already known what he learned and that his learning was, in fact, a process of recollection.

A similar account of learning as recollection appears in the *Phaedo*. This dialogue takes place in Socrates's jail cell just before he is executed by the city of Athens. The two main interlocutors in addition to Socrates are Simmias and Cebes, both of whom are Pythagoreans. Unlike the *Meno*, which is explicitly a dialogue about teaching, especially the teaching of virtue,

the arguments of the *Phaedo* are primarily aimed at demonstrating the immortality of the soul.

Socrates introduces the argument that learning is recollection to support his larger argument that the soul is immortal and that the philosopher ought not fear death.

Levinas indicates throughout *Totality and Infinity* that the idea that learning is recollection involves a neutralization of the alterity of the Other. As noted above, he writes that Socrates's teaching is "the primacy of the same" and presents knowledge "as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside--to receive nothing, or to be free."⁷⁷ The idea that freedom means receiving nothing from outside, is a modern notion of freedom in which freedom is found in autonomy. This freedom is not exhibited as an ability to do whatever one wants. Rather, as Levinas writes, "Its ultimate meaning lies in this permanence in the same, which is reason."⁷⁸ Freedom, for modern philosophers like Kant, is found not in the whims of a will that does whatever it wants, but in the universal demand of reason. That is, freedom is the ability to rule oneself in accordance with what reason demands of all of us. For Levinas, the image of the learner in *anamnēsis* as already possessing the knowledge that he seeks, is another affirmation of our power as subjects. We do not need anyone to teach us because we already know everything that we need to know if we just consider carefully what reason demands of us. For this reason, Levinas worries that *anamnēsis* presents the subject as fully independent and without need of the Other's teaching.

Furthermore, insofar as we understand reason to be universal, Levinas finds that the unique particularity of the Other is neutralized by being reduced to a third term, in this case a shared logos that lies in all of us. He writes:

⁷⁷ *TeI* 13-14, *TaI* 43

⁷⁸ *TeI* 14, *TaI* 43

The relation with the other is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself. The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology.⁷⁹

The teaching relation, Levinas worries, is hereby reduced to a moment of recognition within myself. The teacher only serves to activate something that is already in me. The encounter with the teacher is, thus, not an encounter with a concrete, unique person who speaks to *me* as a concrete individual. Rather, the teacher could be anyone or even anything which sparks this moment of recognition. This process does not call me into question but reaffirms my autonomy and mastery over the world.

Complementing the idea in Plato's work that learning is *anamnēsis*, is the notion that teaching is a practice of *maieutics* or midwifery. This idea is presented by Plato in the *Theaetetus*. In this dialogue, Socrates converses with the mathematician Theodorus and the young Theaetetus who is presented as one of the most promising young men of Athens. Theaetetus is both courageous and thoughtful, quick to learn but exhibits self-control, and is genuinely dedicated to the pursuit of philosophy. In conversing with the impressive young man, Socrates claims that he himself, like his mother before him, practices the art of *maieutics*. When, as anticipated, his interlocutors are surprised by this claim, Socrates elaborates. He insists that he is a midwife to the souls of young men, helping them to give birth in their souls by prescribing the right treatments to them and also determining which of their offspring are genuine and which must be abandoned.

For Levinas, the fact that *maieutics* also presents students as already having within them

⁷⁹ *TeI* 14, *TaI* 44

that which the teacher helps bring to light⁸⁰ reveals that *maieutics* and *anamnēsis* are two aspects of the same egological understanding of teaching and learning. Levinas writes, “Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain.”⁸¹ Just as the idea that learning is recollection emphasized the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the subject, *maieutics* also fails to leave room for the teacher as Other to play an essential role in learning as the one who offers me the *sens unique* that orients me to responsibility. For Levinas, the Other’s concrete presence in speaking to me overflows the categories by means of which I understand the world. To be taught by the Other is, as we have seen, not to realize what I already know but to encounter an alterity that can never and *must* never be made commensurate with my understanding.⁸² For this reason, Levinas views Socratic education as problematic in its portrayal of teaching as *maieutics*.

But while Levinas criticizes Socratic education, he nevertheless also recognizes that Socrates represents, in a positive way, the advent of philosophy. Levinas claims that Plato and the “admirable Greek people” are to be credited with overcoming a certain kind of “false spiritualism.”⁸³ The introduction of philosophy, Levinas claims, “substituted for the magical communion of species and the confusion of distinct orders a spiritual relation in which beings

⁸⁰ Socrates’s mother’s name is purported in the dialogue to be Phaenarete, which can be translated as one who brings virtue to light.

⁸¹ *TeI* 22, *Tal* 51

⁸² See above pp 21-22.

⁸³ *TeI* 19, *Tal* 48

remain at their post⁸⁴ but communicate among themselves.”⁸⁵ Even when philosophy fails to recognize that the freedom and self-sufficiency of the subject are illusions, philosophy is to be credited with recognizing the need for the separation of the subject from the world that is required so that we can represent and analyze it. He writes, “To be sure, representation does not constitute the primordial relation with being. It is nonetheless privileged, precisely as the possibility of recalling the separation of the I.”⁸⁶ For Levinas, as we have seen, separation is necessary for the terms of the metaphysical relation to remain “absolute” in the sense that they are “absolved” of the relation.⁸⁷ “The separation of the I”, he writes, “is thus affirmed to be non-contingent, non-provisional.”⁸⁸ And philosophy, he claims, originates in the recognition of the necessity of separation by Ancient Greek philosophers.

In fact, in this passage, Levinas distinguishes between three kinds of transcendence: 1) an ecstatic, fusional transcendence whereby the individual is lost through participation in a false spiritual reality wherein one does not question the traditions and norms of one’s culture; 2) a philosophical transcendence in which the interiority of the subject is created and the individual transcends her situation to accomplish the separation necessary for representation; 3) the genuine transcendence of the Other beyond being. In explaining these three kinds of transcendence, Levinas first distinguishes between the ecstatic transcendence of pre-philosophical religion

⁸⁴ This language is an implicit reference to the discussion in the *Phaedo* concerning suicide. One of Socrates’s arguments against suicide is that we should not desert the post at which we have been stationed by the gods. (62B2-6).

⁸⁵ *TeI* 19, *TaI* 48

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ See above, pp 23-24.

⁸⁸ *TeI* 19, *TaI* 48

wherein one is unified with the divine, and philosophical transcendence which involves the separation of the subject. He writes:

Philosophical transcendence thereby differs from the transcendence of religions (in the current thaumaturgic and generally lived sense of this term), 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.⁸⁹

What Levinas here calls religion, which must be distinguished from his positive characterization of religion as the genuinely transcendent relation with the Other itself, is overcome by the introduction of philosophy. While philosophy's attempt at total mastery and control, epitomized by the self-sufficient subject must *also* be called into question by the relation with the Other, this initial separation between oneself and the world is, for Levinas, the overcoming of what he considers to be a dangerous loss of the self in participation.

Socratic philosophy, Levinas claims in the passage quoted above, marks an important first step in that it recognizes the need for the individual to break away from unreflective participation in a community's practices. Socrates teaches us that we must examine ourselves, and in doing so, we will discover that we already have within ourselves a means to critique ourselves and our practices. This provisional praise of Socratic education is also repeated later: Levinas writes, "Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind."⁹⁰ Again we find that Socratic education, by recognizing the value of what the student already knows, overcomes a violating form of pedagogy that foregoes reason and "teaches" by seducing the student.

But while Socratic education overcomes the dangerous ecstatic transcendence wherein

⁸⁹ *TeI* 19, *TaI* 48

⁹⁰ *TeI* 146, *TaI* 171

the self is lost, the transcendence of Socratic education, also must be differentiated from a further kind of transcendence, *viz.* the genuine transcendence of the Other. He writes:

To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object. But to think what does not have the lineaments of an object is in reality to do more or better than think. The distance of transcendence is not equivalent to that which separates the mental act from its object in all our representations, since the distance at which the object stands does not exclude, and in reality implies, the *possession* of the object, that is, the suspension of its being.⁹¹

Our relation to objects of thought, Levinas argues, involves a kind of distance, but this distance is illusory insofar as it, in fact, implies adequation between my thought and the object. Although the object is separate from me, in thinking about the object, I suspend its being as an existent and understand it as something that I can represent to myself and others. Genuine transcendence found in the relation with the Other, Levinas insists, must be differentiated from this philosophical transcendence that allows objects to be represented by us.

This genuine transcendence is found, according to Levinas, in only a few moments in the history of philosophy. He writes, “We find that this presence in thought of an idea whose *ideatum* overflows the capacity of thought is given expression not only in Aristotle’s theory of the agent intellect, but also, very often in Plato.”⁹² He then goes on to quote the passages from the *Phaedrus* concerning the divine madness of the lover that were explored above.⁹³

But while Plato expresses genuine transcendence “often,” Levinas insists that this transcendence is not found in Socratic education. At the end of the chapter “Transcendence and the Idea of Infinity” he writes, “It [the face] signifies the philosophical priority of the existent

⁹¹ *TeI* 20, *TaI* 49

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ See above, pp 91-104.

over Being, an exteriority that does not call for power or possession, an exteriority that is not reducible, as with Plato, to the interiority of memory, and yet maintains the I who welcomes it.”⁹⁴ In this passage, we see again the tension that often characterizes Levinas’s relationship to Plato. While for Levinas, Socrates took an important first step in recognizing the need for us to think for ourselves, and Plato at times expresses the genuine transcendence of the Other, Plato’s work also exemplifies the philosophical desire to neutralize the exteriority of the Other through the knowing powers of an independent subject. In this way, Plato is, for Levinas, a complicated figure exemplifying both the promise and the danger of philosophy.

This critique of Socratic education both as *anamnēsis* and as *maieutics* continues to appear throughout *Totality and Infinity*. For example, Levinas writes, “[Speech] first of all teaches this teaching itself, by virtue of which alone it can teach (and not, like maieutics, *awaken in me*) things and ideas.”⁹⁵ And also, “Teaching does not simply transmit an abstract and general content already common to me and the Other. It does not merely assume an after all subsidiary function of being midwife to a mind already pregnant with its fruit.”⁹⁶ In these places in the text, Levinas’s critique of Socratic education remains consistent. He worries that *anamnēsis* and *maieutics* present learning as though it involves uncovering a universal reason already possessed by an independent subject. As such, Levinas worries Socratic education overlooks the way in which all knowledge relies on the relation with the Other who teaches me in a primordial sense.

In criticizing *anamnēsis* and *maieutics* for affirming a notion of the subject as self-sufficient and in possession of a universally shared reason, we see that Levinas’s critique of

⁹⁴ *TeI* 22, *TaI* 51

⁹⁵ *TeI* 41, *TaI* 69

⁹⁶ *TeI* 71-72, *TaI* 98

Socratic education is rooted in Levinas's insistence that the Other who teaches me comes from the exterior. The teacher must be absolutely other and bring me something that could never be found within myself, namely responsibility. Levinas worries that in Socratic education, the alterity of the Other is lost and is subsumed in the Same. The Other who teaches me would be not a concrete existent who speaks to me and thereby offers me a *sens unique* irreducible to a particular cultural expression, but simply an occasion for the student to share in a universal reason common to all.

But is Socratic education really so incompatible with Levinas's account of the teaching relation? I will argue in the following chapter that it is not. The Other who teaches me appears both as one who comes from the exterior and calls me into question and also as one who is familiar and welcomes me generously into a way of being in the world. Socratic education, I will show does not deny the alterity of the Other but recognizes instead the dual nature of teaching as at once both foreign and intimate.

A Defense of Socratic Education

While Levinas worries that Socratic education offers us a vision of the subject as self-sufficient and independent, I will argue here for a different reading of both *anamnēsis* and *maieutics*. I will show that it is possible to read Socratic education in such a way that it does not deny the alterity of the Other but recognizes instead the dual nature of teaching as at once both foreign and intimate. In Plato's account of recollection, I contend, we find a description of Desire insofar as *anamnēsis* describes our fundamental receptivity to the Other. Furthermore, *maieutics*, I will argue, offers us a way of understanding the practice of teaching as one in which it is incumbent on us to attend to our students as concrete, vulnerable individuals who are necessarily

in relation to the Other. To make this case, I begin with a discussion of the *Symposium* in which I show that there is an implicit account of *anamnēsis* before turning to the more explicit accounts of recollection in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. Following this analysis of *anamnēsis*, I turn to a discussion of *maieutics* in the *Theaetetus*.

The role of Desire in teaching and learning: *anamnēsis*

The *Symposium*

While the *Symposium* is not explicitly a dialogue about teaching, Diotima's speech at the heart of the dialogue presents us with a distinct pedagogical strategy whereby the teacher serves as a guide who directs the student's already existing orientation toward the Beautiful. In the speech, Diotima claims that Eros serves as a messenger between humans and gods. As we have seen, she describes the nature of Eros as the child of Poros (Wealth) and Penia (Poverty).⁹⁷ As an inheritor of both of these traits, Eros is never completely without resources but he is also never rich. Instead, he is always desirous of beauty and wisdom, never fully possessing them but never fully lacking them either. If Eros utterly lacked what he sought, she argues, he would not even know that he needed to look for it. In a claim that is strikingly similar to Meno's paradox, Diotima states, "[i]f you don't think you need anything, of course you won't want what you don't think you need."⁹⁸ In describing this pre-existing relationship to the Beautiful, Diotima emphasizes a receptivity on the part of the learner. To progress in wisdom, we need not possess wisdom, but we do need to want wisdom, which means we are in a relation of desire with regard to it.

⁹⁷ See above pp 26-27, 98-99.

⁹⁸ Plato, *Symposium*. 204A

In the activity of perpetually pursuing the object of his desire, Diotima claims, Eros, is like a philosopher. Philosophers are not wise but neither are they ignorant. Philosophers know enough to pursue wisdom, but as long as they remain mortal, they will never possess wisdom fully. But while we can never fully possess wisdom in this life, we can, however, come in closer contact with the source of reality, the Beautiful (or the Good) itself. Eros helps humanity by being a spirit or *daimon* that serves as a mediator between humans and gods, mortality and immortality, ugliness and beauty, ignorance and wisdom. Eros compels us to seek out higher and higher objects of desire and in this way serves as a kind of catalyst that makes the transcendent movement of philosophy possible.

Diotima is Socrates's teacher who has taught him all about matters of love (*ta erōtika*).⁹⁹ And if we proceed correctly in loving, Diotima teaches, we will progress through a series of stages in which we refocus our desire onto a desideratum that is closer to the source of that which compels us. According to Diotima's famous description of the so-called "ladder of love," the lover begins with desiring one beautiful body, then all beautiful bodies, then the beauty of the soul (which animates and directs the body), then the customs of the city that shape the soul, then the knowledge that gives rise to customs. And finally, if one is lucky, one catches a glimpse of the ultimate source of beauty, the Beautiful itself.¹⁰⁰ To progress as a philosopher is to ascend, insofar as one is able, towards this original source of all good and beautiful things.

When we consider what Diotima can teach us about teaching philosophy, one important insight is that we are all already oriented by a desire for what we think is good and/or beautiful.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 204d.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 210A - 211D.

The object of desire, for the new student, is not yet the Beautiful itself, but we are all, according to Diotima, lovers. That is, we are all compelled by or filled with wonder at what we believe are beautiful things, although our understanding of those things is flawed. The role of the teacher is to correct the student's false understanding and direct her to a more accurate vision of beauty.

But in order to pursue beauty in the first place, we must already be in a relationship with it. If Socrates came to Diotima with no conception of or desire for beauty, she would not have been able to direct him in his learning. The desire for the beautiful is what fuels the ascent up the "ladder of love." This condition of the possibility for learning as a process of being guided by a teacher is what Plato describes when he offers the myth of recollection, as I will show in greater detail below.

While Levinas worries that the myth of *anamnēsis* is meant to assure us that we already possess a rationality common to all, I argue that its role is instead to reveal and describe a Desire for the truth of the Good and Beautiful that is a necessary condition of learning. What we share in *anamnēsis*, need not be understood only or even primarily as a set of universally shared ideas. Rather, what we share in this account is an orientation towards transcendence, which Plato characterizes as a pursuit of the Good/Beautiful that is never fully satisfied. The primary role of the teacher in Socratic education, I argue, can be seen not as attempting to reveal commonly held ideas, but as motivating and guiding the student's pre-existing orientation towards the Good/Beautiful.

In this way, *anamnēsis* may be read as presenting education as structured by the Desire that Levinas finds in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* and not as a moment of the appropriating movement of the same. That is, if we understand the myth of *anamnēsis* to be a description of

our pre-existing desire for the Good/Beautiful, then *anamnēsis* need not be interpreted as a description of our *possession* of a universal knowledge common to all, but rather a description of our *longing* for transcendence.

In fact, this idea that teaching depends on a prior receptivity to the Other on the part of the student is something that Levinas himself recognizes when he writes:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*].¹⁰¹

In this passage, we find that Levinas recognizes that in order to be taught, I must welcome the Other as my teacher, and it is only through a welcoming on the part of the student that a conversation is a teaching conversation. Levinas thus identifies a receptivity on the part of the subject that is necessary in order for that which the Other teaches me to be received. In other words, in order for the Other to be able to teach me that I am responsible, I must be capable of welcoming the Other's teaching.

This receptivity, as Derrida notes, has a strange and paradoxical temporality. In order to welcome the Other, I must exist as a separate being with my own dwelling into which I can welcome the Other. He writes, "The *possibility* of the welcome would thus come--so as to open them up--*before* recollection, even *before* collecting, before the act from which everything nonetheless seems to be derived."¹⁰² I am receptive to the Other "before" I am. As Derrida notes,

¹⁰¹ *TeI 22, Tal 51*

¹⁰² Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 29.

Levinas insists that “to possess the idea of infinity is to have already welcomed the Other.”¹⁰³

That is, as we have seen, I must have already accomplished subjectivity through the recollection that occurs in the dwelling in order to open up my home in hospitality to others.¹⁰⁴ And as I am suggesting here, understanding Socratic *anamnēsis* as an articulation of this receptivity to transcendence allows us to resolve the conflict that Levinas finds between his own account of teaching and Socratic education.

The *Meno*

To further make the case that *anamnēsis* can be understood as a receptivity to transcendence, it is helpful to take a closer look at the *Meno*. In this dialogue, we find that Socrates uses the myth of recollection to encourage Meno, who is a difficult student enamored of sophistry, to remain committed to philosophical inquiry. The dialogue begins with a famous question from Meno to Socrates. Meno asks, “Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue [*aretē*] be taught [*didaktos*]? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?”¹⁰⁵ The dialogue, from the beginning, is oriented by the question of education, and specifically the nature of the development of virtue.

Socrates proceeds by asking Meno to first define virtue and in doing so successfully brings him to *aporia*. When Socrates urges Meno to continue, nevertheless, in their pursuit of a definition, Meno introduces his famous paradox. He says, “How will you look for it [virtue], Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you

¹⁰³ *TeI* 66, *Tal* 93

¹⁰⁴ See above pp 31-38.

¹⁰⁵ Plato. *Symposium*. 70A.

do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?”¹⁰⁶ Socrates, upon hearing this apparently common paradox, which he refers to as a “debater’s argument,”¹⁰⁷ introduces the idea that learning is *anamnēsis*. Claiming to have heard the idea from priests and priestesses and from Pindar and other divine poets, he explains:

As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only--a process men call learning--discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. We must, therefore, not believe that debater’s argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. I trust that this is true, and I want to inquire along with you into the nature of virtue.¹⁰⁸

We see here that the idea that learning is recollection is introduced so that Meno will not give up in his search for the truth. If Meno wants to be like the strongest, bravest, and wisest men described by Pindar, Socrates tells him, he must not give up so easily. The advantage of believing Socrates’s account, as Socrates states, is that it leads to persistence in inquiry. In this way, we see that one of the primary purposes of the myth of *anamnēsis* is to get Meno, a student who wants to be told all the answers, to be more diligent in his pursuit of knowledge and virtue, to remain open to the possibility of finding new answers.

Later in the dialogue, Socrates again indicates that the goal of the myth is to inspire Meno to pursue philosophy. After presenting his argument that what we learn must be something recollected from a previous life, Socrates says:

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 80D.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 80E.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 81C-E

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs in both word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver, and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it.¹⁰⁹

In this passage, we find Socrates at his most confident. Despite his numerous claims to ignorance throughout this and other dialogues, he confidently and “at all costs,” asserts one thing--that we are better off if we pursue knowledge than if we do not. Whether or not the soul really is immortal it seems, is not the primary issue. If we are concerned about virtue and whether it is teachable--the original question that structures the dialogue--we must begin by believing that it is possible to learn. The myth of recollection, whether literally true or not, assures us that learning is possible because it asserts that we are all already in relation to the truth. In this way, the myth, is not aimed nostalgically at the past. Rather its purpose is an orientation towards an open future of inquiry.

In addition to giving us hope that inquiry is worthwhile, we can also understand the myth to be phenomenologically explanatory. What Socrates seems to be describing in the myth of recollection is the fact that when we learn, we must be able to recognize the truth as the truth. Our experience of learning is often one in which, upon discovering something new, we recognize that what we have learned was true all along, waiting to be articulated. The myth of *anamnēsis* offers a description of our experience of learning as involving this kind of re-cognition. And in order for us to experience learning in this way, we must already be in relation to the truth in some way. This is the crux of Meno’s paradox. As we have, seen, Levinas describes a similar paradox in his account of the metaphysical relation. In order to welcome the Other, we must have already accomplished subjectivity. But the accomplishment of subjectivity itself requires that we

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 86B-C.

have received the hospitality of the intimate Other. In this way, the paradox of learning found in the myth of *anamnēsis* parallels Levinas's account of the metaphysical relation and in particular the relation with intimate alterity.

In his work, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, Jean-Louis Chrétien offers an interpretation of *anamnēsis* that supports this reading of *anamnēsis* as a fundamental receptivity to transcendence and not as a claim about the self-possession of knowledge.¹¹⁰ Chrétien claims that Plato's account of *anamnēsis*, seems to combine a "philosophical thesis"--knowledge as contemplation of being, and a religious doctrine--reincarnation of the soul. While some¹¹¹ have tried to "purify" *anamnēsis* of its religious dimension by transforming it into a claim about *a priori* knowledge, something that Levinas also at times seems to do, Chrétien insists that the tension between myth and reason in *anamnēsis* is essential insofar as it is only through this tension that our experience of what he terms an "immemorial past" is properly expressed.

For Chrétien, the immemorial is a past that has never truly been present but that serves as an orientation, nevertheless, for the future. In Chrétien's view, if we understand that which is recalled in recollection to be *a priori* knowledge, the object of recollection is not forever lost, but eternally present. To reduce *anamnēsis* to the recognition of *a priori* truth is, therefore, to deny our experience of the immemorial as that which has been truly lost as opposed to merely covered over or hidden. The immemorial as expressed in myth, Chrétien argues, gives us a means of expressing a paradox at the root of our being, namely that to be a human being is to never

¹¹⁰ Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.

¹¹¹ Chrétien cites Leibniz, Hartmann, and Natorp in particular. See *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*. 3-7.

completely be in possession of oneself. We can see that this image of the self as in relation to that which it can never possess is resonant with Levinas's account of the welcome prior to teaching described above.¹¹²

Furthermore, the mythical dimension of *anamnēsis*, Chrétien argues, does not draw us backwards into the past, but pushes us forward. "The thought of knowledge as recollection does not lead to an exercise of memory," he writes, "but to an exercise of anticipation."¹¹³ Our experience of the loss of the immemorial motivates us to do philosophy, to recollect what we have lost. "The way of recollection, just like the way of love," he writes "begins with emptiness and dispossession, and not with the accumulation of rediscovered or re-conquered memories."¹¹⁴ Chrétien follows Plato in portraying our longing for the immemorial, which we have always already lost, as that which motivates our seeking. To be a human being is to experience oneself as insufficient, finite, and temporal. In our temporal mode of being, we long for that which we express metaphorically as lost, even though it is not something that we have ever truly possessed.

Levinas, in his critique of *anamnēsis*, seems to find in it an expression of *a priori* truth. Rather than reading *anamnēsis* as a description of receptivity to transcendence, Levinas finds in it an account of eternal possession. But Chrétien's reading of *anamnēsis*, helps us to see another possibility, one that parallels Levinas's notion of Desire. Desire, as we have seen, is, for Levinas, an ongoing task that is oriented perpetually towards a future that will never be reached. Chrétien finds just such a structure of human longing in Plato's concept of *anamnēsis*.

¹¹² See above pp.124-127,

¹¹³ Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *The Unforgettable and Unhoped For*. 13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

The *Phaedo*

The other dialogue in which *anamnēsis* plays a prominent role is the *Phaedo*. As in the *Meno*, Socrates introduces the myth of *anamnēsis*, to inspire his interlocutors to remain dedicated to the never-ending work of philosophy. In the *Phaedo*, however, Socrates faces a very different pedagogical challenge. His students are not stubborn and difficult, but are instead devoted followers. Simmias and Cebes, the primary interlocutors, love Socrates and are devastated that he is about to die. In this context, the hope that Socrates offers his students is of a different kind than that offered in the *Meno*. While Meno needed to be brought into *aporia* to understand the necessity of continuing to seek the truth, Simmias and Cebes need consolation so as to remain committed to philosophy and not fall into despair. We find that the myth of *anamnēsis* is offered by Socrates in the dialogue as a kind of consoling remedy for his students' souls.

That Socrates's aim is to soothe his interlocutors and spur them on to continue philosophy is apparent when, after several arguments for the immortality of the soul have failed to convince those present, they become, as *Phaedo* claims, depressed. He says that they had been convinced by the earlier arguments but that now they doubted the conclusion. Echebrates, to whom *Phaedo* is offering the entire account, speaks up saying that he too was convinced by Socrates's earlier arguments but is now doubtful. He admits that he "is quite in need, as if from the beginning, of some other argument to convince [him] that the soul does not die along with the man."¹¹⁵ *Phaedo* explains how Socrates responds, saying:

I have certainly often admired Socrates, Echebrates, but never more than on this occasion. That he had a reply was perhaps not strange. What I wondered at most in him was the

¹¹⁵ Plato. *Phaedo*. 88D.

pleasant, kind, and admiring way he received the young men's argument, and how sharply he was aware of the effect the discussion had on us, and then how well he healed our distress and, as it were, recalled us from our flight and defeat and turned us around to join him in the examination of their argument.¹¹⁶

For Phaedo, what is really impressive about Socrates is not primarily that he is able to give successful arguments. Rather, Phaedo is most amazed at Socrates's ability to recognize what he and his friends needed and to offer remedies that allowed them to continue on in their pursuit of the truth. And as Socrates soothes them, Phaedo says that Socrates "stroked [his] head and pressed the hair on the back of [his] neck."¹¹⁷ We see here Socrates's tenderness towards Phaedo. The arguments that Socrates presents must, therefore, be read in this context of concern for his friends. That is, Phaedo draws our attention not just to Socrates's ability to make arguments but to his skill as a teacher/healer. Socrates's goal in making his philosophical arguments is not simply to convince his interlocutors of the truth of a proposition, but to comfort them in their despair and offer them hope for a meaningful life.

That one of Socrates's goals is to serve as a healer to his friends is further indicated when he compares the arguments that he presents to incantations.¹¹⁸ After presenting his argument for the immortality of the soul on the basis of *anamnēsis*, when Simmias and Cebes are still unconvinced, Socrates gently scolds them saying "You seem to have this childish fear that the wind would really dissolve and scatter the soul, as it leaves the body, especially if one happens to

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88E-89A.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89B.

¹¹⁸ We will see in the account of *maieutics* below, that the singing of incantations is also a practice of the midwife.

die in a high wind and not in calm weather.”¹¹⁹ Cebes laughs in response and says “[P]erhaps there is a child in us who has these fears; try to persuade him not to fear death like a bogey.”¹²⁰ Socrates then replies that Cebes should “sing a charm over him every day until you have charmed away his fears.”¹²¹ We see here an indication that part of the goal of the arguments in the dialogue is to provide such a remedy. Furthermore, one argument is not enough but several are needed and they must be repeated again and again, like a song. This need for repetition further indicates that Socrates’s goal is not simply to make a logical argument for a proposition--namely that the soul is immortal. If this were the goal, one argument would be sufficient. Instead, Socrates’s aim is a transformation of his interlocutors’ souls through the use of song.

The term for singing incantations, *epaeido* appears in several of Plato’s dialogues, including the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Phaedrus*. In each case, philosophical conversation or argumentation is compared to singing chants designed to have a particular effect on the soul. We see that here in the *Phaedo* the incantatory dimension of philosophy is meant to soothe the fears of the interlocutors about death. Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates claims that a rhetorician knows how “to inflame a crowd and, once they are inflamed how to hush them again with his words’ magic spell.”¹²² In Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates claims that the argument he has given against poetry can ward off a childish predilection for immoral poetry. Socrates insists that he and his interlocutors must “repeat the argument...like an incantation so as to preserve

¹¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*. 77D-E.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77E.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 77E.

¹²² Plato. *Phaedrus*. 267D.

ourselves from slipping back into that childish passion for poetry which the majority of people have.”¹²³ Thus, we find that in several of the dialogues including the *Phaedo*, philosophical discourse has an incantatory power to transform the soul, to inflame or soothe its passions, and this power can be used by a philosopher/teacher to guide students down the proper path.

In the *Phaedo*, the argument for *anamnēsis* is a part of a larger set of arguments for the immortality of the soul. But these arguments are presented in the context of music, and Socrates describes them as incantations. These incantations are intended to transform the souls of his interlocutors to orient them towards a philosophical life. Belief in the immortality of the soul is only important insofar as it is a part of a broader practice of living.

In fact, after Socrates goes to bathe in preparation for drinking the poison, Crito asks Socrates for his final instructions, and he replies saying:

Nothing new...but what I am always saying, that you will please me and mine [*kai emoi kai tois emois*] and yourselves by taking good care of your own selves in whatever you do, even if you do not agree with me now, but if you neglect your own selves, and are unwilling to live following the tracks, as it were, of what we have said now and on previous occasions, you will achieve nothing even if you strongly agree with me at this moment.¹²⁴

As in the *Meno*, Socrates emphasizes that he is not so concerned with whether or not his interlocutors are convinced by the arguments that he has offered for the immortality of the soul. If they agree with the arguments but fail to lead their lives well, they will achieve nothing. In this way, Socrates again insists that his main concern is with living well, not with convincing his interlocutors of a particular doctrine. It is only insofar as believing that the soul is immortal will help one to live well that one should “risk belief” in the immortality of the soul.

¹²³ Plato. *Republic*. 608A.

¹²⁴ Plato. *Phaedo*. 115B-C.

Levinas criticizes *anamnēsis* because he sees it as presenting knowledge as a kind of eternal *a priori* knowledge that we all have access to insofar as we are rational beings. I have argued here, however, that *anamnēsis* is not unlike the Desire for the ethical in Levinas's work. As we know, the Other, according to Levinas, does not offer me specific principles by which I can live my life. Rather, the Other disrupts my possession of the world. The face of the Other, we might say, *reminds* us of our responsibility. And this reminder must be encountered again and again and again. We are never finished with ethics just as, for Socrates in both the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* as well as in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, we never remain in view of true reality but, insofar as we are mortal, always fall back to the world of forgetting. Levinas views *anamnēsis* as representing a need to return to a point of origin. But, I have presented an alternate interpretation, namely that *anamnēsis* represents the structure of Desire insofar as describes us as being fundamentally in a state of longing for transcendence.

Concretely, throughout the dialogues, Socrates's interlocutors, for the most part, do seek out what they believe to be good and beautiful things, even though many of them may have mistaken views about what constitutes goodness or beauty. They may think, like Phaedrus, for example, that beauty is found in the bodies of young men. Or they may believe, like Meno, that goodness can be equated with honors bestowed by one's culture. But most of Socrates's interlocutors desire *something* that they believe to be of value. Furthermore, Phaedrus and Meno and the rest of Socrates's students are usually not entirely wrong in their appraisals. There is beauty, according to Socrates, in the body, and there can be goodness in the honor bestowed by a city. The problem is the mistaken view that beauty is nothing more than the beauty of a body or that goodness is whatever the city deems worthy of honor. An understanding of the reason *why*

these objects are good and beautiful is needed so that we can avoid being tricked by false appearances. The role of the teacher is, thus, to guide the student by correcting students' mistakes and directing their attention, step by step, to more fundamental understanding of that which makes good and beautiful things what they are.

Teaching as hospitality: *maieutics*

Just as *anamnēsis* can be read in a way that pushes back against Levinas's criticisms, understanding teaching as a practice of *maieutics* can also, I argue, be read in a way that renders it consonant with Levinas's philosophy. Rather than emphasizing the self-sufficiency of the student as Levinas worries, I contend that the metaphor of midwifery offers us a way of understanding the student as open to a relation with genuine alterity. Furthermore, the metaphor of the teacher as midwife reveals the necessity of familiarity and intimacy in the teaching relation. The teacher, as midwife, is presented as one who knows her students well and cares for them not only as autonomous cognizers but also as affective, vulnerable, beings who are always in relation to others. In this way the figure of the teacher as midwife, in my view, can be read as a description of what Levinas names intimate or "feminine" alterity.

The account of teaching as *maieutics* is found in Plato's *Theaetetus*. The dialogue is framed by a conversation between Terpsion and Euclides after the death of Socrates and just before the tragic and untimely death of Theaetetus. After the introductory dialogue, there is a brief conversation between Socrates and the mathematician Theodorus in which they discuss which of the youth of Athens show the most promise. Theodorus sings the praises of Theaetetus, claiming that he is an especially good student. Soon after, Theaetetus approaches with his friends and Socrates engages him in conversation to see if he is indeed as promising a thinker as

Theodorus claims. The question which Socrates poses to Theaetetus is that of the definition of knowledge, and through the discussion, they arrive at several answers--knowledge is perception, knowledge is true opinion, and knowledge is true opinion with an account--each of which is found to be unsatisfactory, and the dialogue ends aporetically. The interlocutors, however, plan to continue the discussion the next day, a conversation that is recounted in the *Sophist*.

In talking to Theaetetus, Socrates presents his own pedagogical style as being one of *maieutics*. He claims that he, like his mother before him, practices midwifery, and he goes on to enumerate several characteristics of midwives, which he claims to share. Midwives are barren but were previously able to bear children.¹²⁵ They have techniques (namely, drugs [*pharmakia*] and incantations [*epadousai*]) that can bring about and relieve labor pains.¹²⁶ Their best skill, which is both surprising and controversial according to Socrates, is that they are excellent match-makers, best at knowing what erotic encounters are likely to be fruitful.¹²⁷ Socrates claims that his own art is like that of a midwife except that he is concerned not with the body but with the soul and he deals with men and not women.¹²⁸ Furthermore, because he deals with ideas and not children, he must also determine whether the ideas that his art gives rise to are “real” or mere “phantoms.”¹²⁹ Theaetetus is, Socrates suspects, “pregnant and in labor.”¹³⁰ It is Socrates’s task to help Theaetetus to give birth to his ideas and to determine whether or not they are worthy of

¹²⁵ Plato. *Theaetetus*. 149B-C.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149C-D.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 149D-150A.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150B-C

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 150B.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 151B-C.

maintaining or if they must be rejected.

The themes of intercourse, conception, pregnancy, and birth appear throughout the dialogue. When Theaetetus is introduced, he is described as a “thoroughbred” [*gennikon*]¹³¹ and also as looking like Socrates, with the same snub nose, bulging eyes, and aptitude for philosophy.¹³² This comparison invites us to think of Theaetetus as a kind of child of Socrates, the product, perhaps, of Socrates’s fertile dialogical encounters with the men of Athens. We find that Theaetetus has grown up and has been, thus far, well educated in the city and he now comes to Socrates pregnant and in need of help in giving birth to his own ideas.

If we reimagine the course of Theaetetus’s “conception” and “pregnancy” as well as Socrates’s *maieutic* pedagogy, we discover that Levinas’s claims that *maieutics* presents the learner as a self-sufficient, autonomous subject who already knows what she learns, are not justified. First, *maieutics* requires that the student become pregnant through an encounter capable of resulting in conception. Levinas insists that teaching must bring me “more than I can contain.”¹³³ *Maieutics* is criticized because, according to Levinas, it does not recognize that exteriority is necessary for knowledge. When we examine the metaphor of midwifery, however, we find that *maieutics* not only allows for exteriority, but requires it. In being “pregnant,” Theaetetus certainly has within him “more than [he] can contain,” something that Theaetetus himself claims at the end of the dialogue when he says, “As far as I’m concerned Socrates,

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 144D.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 143E-144A.

¹³³ *TeI 22, Tal 51*

you've made me say far more than ever was in me, Heaven knows."¹³⁴

Maieutics, contrary to Levinas's criticisms, presents us with a relational subject who not only encounters exteriority but is capable of welcoming and embodying this alterity within himself. The subjectivity of the student as metaphorically pregnant in the *maieutic* model is, therefore, not the dominating, self-sufficient, independent, autonomous subject that Levinas criticizes. Rather, knowledge originates, in the *maieutic* model, through fertile dialogical encounters with others. As we saw in the analysis of the *Phaedrus* above, learning, for Socrates involves having another "write" in your soul. He describes the process as follows:

The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge--discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others.¹³⁵

In understanding teaching and learning as a generative encounter, Socrates's conception of teaching as *maieutics* does not, therefore, indicate that one is always pregnant. Rather, one *becomes* pregnant through conversation. Thus, the *maieutic* metaphor does not deny the exteriority of the Other qua teacher, but, rather requires it.

In fact, Levinas himself uses the metaphor of maternity to describe the ethical subject in *Otherwise than Being*. In this later work, Levinas's account of the subject is such that subjectivity is substitution, the-one-for-another. I am utterly vulnerable and passive in my responsibility for the Other. The maternal body represents, for Levinas, the corporeality of this vulnerability and passivity. For the later Levinas, the corporeality of responsibility in the form of sensibility is represented in the pregnant body, which literally holds and nourishes another within

¹³⁴ Plato. *Theaetetus*. 210B

¹³⁵ Plato. *Phaedrus*. 276E.

itself,¹³⁶ making his earlier rejection of *maieutics* all the more puzzling.

Further evidence that knowledge, understood through the *maieutic* metaphor, is not possessed for all time by a self-sufficient soul, but is generated through encounters with others can be found in the case of Theaetetus's "first-born child," i.e. the idea that knowledge is perception, Socrates says:

So we find the various theories have converged on the same thing: that of Homer and Heraclitus and all their tribe, that all things flow like streams; of Protagoras, wisest of men, that man is the measure of all things; and of Theaetetus that, these things being so, knowledge proves to be perception. What about it, Theaetetus? Shall we say we have here your first-born child, the result of my midwifery? (160d-e)

We find that Theaetetus's first fully formed idea--that knowledge is perception--does not spring from his own soul alone, but is the product of several generations of thought. Homer and Heraclitus introduce the idea that everything is in flux. Protagoras inherits this idea and transforms it to say that, because everything is in flux, humans are the measure of everything. And finally, Theaetetus develops Protagoras's idea into the conclusion that knowledge is perception. The picture of learning that is presented here is not one of isolated souls all in communion with a shared, abstract, universal *logos*, as Levinas worries, but of ideas generated through fertile encounters between teachers and students with each generation contributing something new.

Finally, we also find in the *Theaetetus* that *maieutics* presents us with an example of teaching that is attentive to the contextual situation of the students. This recognition of the concrete situatedness of the interlocutors is precisely what makes speech preferable to writing according to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. In Levinas's retrieval of Socrates's argument favoring

¹³⁶ *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Dusquesne UP, 1981. 75-81.

speech, it is the unique and concrete presence of the Other in the address that opens up the field of conversation. In insisting on this presence, Levinas emphasizes the way in which knowledge originates in concrete encounters with others, with existents, who always exceed the categories that I use to understand them. The *maieutic* model, I argue, is attentive to the uniqueness of interlocutors insofar as it presents learning as a process of coming to an understanding that occurs over time that involves a contextualized negotiation. The midwife/teacher, Socrates insists, must use his art to make practical decisions about when to bring about pain and when to relieve it based on the particularities of the situation.

In fact, we find that Socrates himself exhibits this ability to attend to the particularities of the situation and his interlocutors, most strikingly in his dealings with Theodorus. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates attempts to get Theodorus to engage in the dialogue and Theodorus repeatedly refuses, urging Socrates to talk with the young Theaetetus instead.¹³⁷ Eventually, however, Socrates convinces Theodorus to take part, which leads to the important digression in the middle of the dialogue about the difference between the philosopher and the sophist. The reason that Socrates is finally successful is that he appeals both to Theodorus's friendship with Protagoras and to his passion for mathematics, asking Theodorus to consider whether Protagoras's claim that humans are the measure of all things can apply also to the proofs of geometry. At this point, Theodorus can no longer refuse to take part. Socrates, the skillful teacher, knows who Theodorus is and what he cares about. As a result, Socrates is able to engage Theodorus in the discussion. As Theodorus says, "Socrates, it is not easy for a man who has sat

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 146B, 162A-B, 165A, 168E.

down beside you to refuse to talk.”¹³⁸ Thus, we see that the skillful midwife who knows when to bring about and when to relieve labor pains must attend to the concrete particular student who comes to him ready to give birth. In this way, contrary to Levinas’s critique, *maieutics* presents us with an example of a teacher who *attends* his speaking, who is present in the conversation to answer the students’ questions and fulfill the promise that is made by the opening of the plane of conversation.

In these ways, *maieutics* presents the teacher-student relationship as a concrete, intimate, and contextualized relationship of care. And the knowledge that results from *maieutic* encounters is not the illumination of *a priori* knowledge possessed for all time. Rather, knowledge is seen, through the metaphor of fertility, as something that is produced over time through productive encounters between interlocutors. In this way, *maieutics* like *anamnēsis* can be seen as presenting us with a conception of the learner as receptive and vulnerable to transformation by teaching.

Levinas worries that Socratic education presents the teaching relation as one in which the subject is free and independent of the Other, in no need of learning from her. This critique, however, is only valid if we fail to recognize that the Other who teaches me appears not only as an unsettling exterior presence but also as an intimate Other who approaches in gentleness and affection. When we recognize that this intimate alterity is just as necessary as absolute alterity for the ethical relation, we see that Levinas need not reject *maieutics* insofar as the teacher as midwife in fact exhibits characteristics of what Levinas calls “feminine” alterity.

First, Socrates, in acting as midwife, serves as a gentle and welcoming presence who is concerned for students not only as thinking beings but as affective and vulnerable beings.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 169A.

Furthermore, the midwife is also “barren.” She does not claim to possess the truth, but rather provides the opportunity for the student to learn through struggling on his own. Like the intimate Other who abides in silence to allow me space to accomplish subjectivity, the teacher as midwife knows when to withdraw from the conversation to let the student struggle with an idea. In this way, by *not* giving his own ideas, Socrates makes room for the student to think for himself.

While identifying silence, affection, and hospitality as “feminine” is problematic, as I argued in Chapter Three,¹³⁹ the practice of teaching is nevertheless one in which the effective teacher acts both as the Socratic gadfly who calls students into question and as the Socratic midwife who generously welcomes students into a conversation. We see Socrates expertly show his ability to prescribe the right treatment to his interlocutors throughout the dialogues. For instance, in the *Meno*, Socrates is tough on his student, recognizing that Meno needs to be shaken from his stubbornness and brought to the uncomfortable state of *aporia* if he is to advance in wisdom. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, the interlocutors are distressed and need their teacher to provide a soothing remedy. They are afraid of death and distraught about losing their teacher, and Socrates recognizes that what they need is comfort not further distress. In the *Theaetetus*, we see Socrates provide both comfort and discomfort to Theaetetus, reassuring him when he feels uncertain but also pushing him on to relentlessly pursue the truth even when it means acknowledging that he was previously mistaken. In this way, in both his actions and his accounts of teaching and learning, Socrates provides us with a model of teaching that is not aimed at awakening a universal logos but one in which students are recognized and cared for in their unique particularity.

¹³⁹ See above pp 43-46.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that Levinas's relationship to Plato is complex. On the one hand, Levinas is inspired by the *Phaedrus* and, in his own way, finds a unity within the disparate themes of the dialogue. For Levinas, the relation with the ultimate object of deepest human Desire is concretized in the ethical face-to-face conversation between interlocutors. If we understand the structure of Desire as a break with interiority that aims at that which is beyond what can be grasped by signification grounded in interiority, it is the Other who speaks to me and calls me into question that presents me with precisely that which transcends signification. Levinas's goal in *Totality and Infinity* is to show that the relation with genuine transcendence, *i.e.* transcendence in which the Other is "beyond being," is concretely realized in the epiphany of the face of another who speaks to me and in doing so, teaches me. In this way, *Totality and Infinity* may be read as a "return to Platonism."

But while Levinas finds in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Republic* expressions of genuine transcendence that he sees as lacking in the work of his contemporaries, he also has reservations about "Western" philosophy, which, as Levinas understands it, is fundamentally indebted to Plato and to Greek thought more generally. Not only does Levinas reject Plato's characterization of Desire as rooted in lack, but he also finds in Socratic education an expression of the "Western" subject as self-sufficient and independent. Rather than viewing Socratic education as an expression of transcendence, he sees in *anamnēsis* and *maieutics*, a vision of the student as autonomous, and independent from the Other.

I have argued, however, that Levinas fails to see that Socratic education is, in fact, consonant with his own understanding of teaching. Rather than affirming the self-sufficiency of

the subject, Socratic education, I have argued, offers us a way of seeing teaching and learning as practices that recognize our vulnerability as subjects and our Desire for transcendence.

Furthermore, the practice of *maieutics* makes manifest the intimate dimensions of the teaching relation that Levinas himself often ignores. Socrates offers us a model for the teacher as both gadfly and midwife, both one who unsettles us and one who welcomes us into the practice of philosophy with affection and hospitality.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Throughout this work so far, my concerns have largely been grounded in questions concerning the history of philosophy and the interpretation of Levinas's texts. I have attempted to understand what Levinas means when he insists that the Other is my teacher in a primordial sense and how this understanding of a primordial teaching is shaped by Levinas's critical retrieval of Plato's texts. But if we are to fully receive the teachings that Levinas's texts offer us, we must also read his work as a demand to better respond to the concrete others who call us to responsibility every day. In this chapter, therefore, I explore how we can better respond to those concrete others who show up as our students, by drawing inspiration from the works of both Levinas and Plato.

But as we make this move to an examination of the practice of teaching, it remains unclear exactly how the primordial teaching relation that Levinas describes relates to the concrete practice of teaching insofar as, for Levinas, *all* speaking has a teaching dimension. Therefore, I will begin in the first section with a consideration of the difficulties of relating Levinas's ethics to concrete ethical situations. I will argue that while we cannot "apply" Levinas's thought as one applies a principle to an instance, we can conduct a phenomenological investigation of a concrete situation in order to better understand what the Other demands of us in that situation. That is, through phenomenological description, we can work to *listen* to what the Other has to teach us in particular context. In the second section, I consider what the phenomenon of teaching reveals to

us about our responsibilities as teachers. This phenomenological investigation will lead me to claim, in the third section that the task of teaching philosophy should be understood as a practice of hospitality whereby we give the world to students as a place in which they are responsible to the Other.

A phenomenological ethics

The move from Levinas's account of the primacy of the ethical to the practice of responding to the Other in a concrete situation is a complex task. While Levinas aims to reposition ethics at the center of philosophical questioning, he is not interested in providing a set of rules or principles against which we can check our actions to see if they are good or bad, permissible or impermissible. Rather, he is in search of what makes ethics possible in the first place.

The only way that we are not "duped by morality"¹ as he writes in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity*, is if our responsibility to the Other precedes our freedom as subjects. We do not choose to be responsible; we simply are responsible whether we want to be or not. And this unchosen and inevitable responsibility is, he claims, a condition of any genuine ethics, which must not begin from a self-interested war of all against all. He writes, "The moral consciousness can sustain the mocking gaze of the political man only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war."² That is, for Levinas, prior to the political rationality of self-interest whereby my freedom is limited by the freedom of others, is a peaceful relationship of responsibility to the Other. For Levinas, it is only because I am in relation to an Other to and for whom I am responsible, that I can become an autonomous and self-interested subject.

The primordality of this relationship, however, makes it difficult to understand how

¹ *TeI ix, TaI 21*

² *TeI x, TaI 22*

Levinas's ethics might inform our practices. That is, because the ethical relation to the Other precedes the very meaningfulness of the world and even reason itself, it can never be entirely captured by a set of articulated norms or principles. In *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, Diane Perpich discusses this problem, arguing that Levinas's ethics must be understood as a kind of normativity without norms. What Levinas offers us, she insists, is not the solution to a problem. Rather, his philosophy amounts to a demand that we perpetually allow ourselves and our ways of responding to be unsettled and interrupted by the call of the Other who faces us.

Levinas's insistence that the face of the Other calls me to responsibility is not, in the first place, an empirical or ontological claim about the nature of human beings. Although the claim is in some sense phenomenological, Levinas also insists that we cannot understand the face of the Other as a phenomenon in the typical sense. Our relation with the Other is a relation that challenges the definition of intentionality itself. The Other is not a phenomenon that is adequate to an intention. Rather, the Other demands that I take her on her own terms. The Other does not exclusively receive her meaning from her relations to other phenomena but speaks for herself, "attends" her expression, and offers me a sense that is irreducible to the meanings offered to me by the signs offered by my culture.

Levinas himself recognizes the challenges of writing about something that, by its very definition (or rather, its lack of a definition) unsettles every attempt to thematize it in language. In the conclusion to *Totality and Infinity*, he writes,

The description of the face to face which we have attempted here is told to the other, to the reader who appears anew behind my discourse and my wisdom. Philosophy is never a wisdom, for the interlocutor whom it has just encompassed has already escaped it.³

Levinas emphasizes that what he writes is written *to* a reader and, as such, his own writing is it-

³ *TeI* 273, *Tal* 293

self a kind of addressing. And in speaking about the Other whom he also addresses, the Other has already eluded the thematization that he has offered.

What Levinas teaches us is not that we can ever avoid this slipping away of that which we attempt to thematize, but that we must always remind ourselves of it. In our thematizing, which is inevitable, we must always be careful not to thematize the Other such that we can no longer *hear* him. As Perpich argues, we ought to view Levinas's claim that we are responsible for the Other not as a claim about a being but as itself a performative repetition of the call of the face of the Other. That is, Levinas's work must be seen as yet another instance of the call of the Other who teaches us. Levinas's own text is itself a demand that I be more vigilant in ensuring that I am serving the Other in the best way that I can. The content of Levinas's teaching is thus a demand that we continually work towards responding better to the needs of concrete others. In this way, Levinas does not tell us exactly how to act but orients us toward the Other by reminding us of the necessity of listening to what the Other has to teach us.

The way that we respond to this call cannot be articulated as a set of rules that must be followed. Rather, our responsibility, as Levinas shows, is endless. Unlike Kant, for whom "ought" implies "can," for Levinas, what we ought to do always exceeds what we can do. As we have seen, the work of ethics is never finished but has the structure of Desire; it increases as we progress in it. For this reason, it would be impossible to concretize Levinas's ethics by offering a list of guidelines that would somehow be sufficient for describing the ethical task. But, while we cannot deduce our responsibilities in a given situation from a set of clearly defined principles, we can, nevertheless, engage in a phenomenological investigation of a concrete situation in order to explore how the face of the Other calls us to responsibility in that particular context by listening

to what the Other's presence teaches us. Here, I will examine the concrete situation of teaching in order to better hear what the Other qua student demands of us in the particular context of the classroom.

Before offering this analysis of what the Other demands of me as a teacher, it is first necessary, however, to explain in greater detail the relationship between the primordial teaching relation that Levinas describes and the concrete practice of teaching. The primordial teaching relation, as we have seen, refers to the dimension of the relation with the Other whereby I am offered the possibility of a meaningful world. The world is proposed to me by the Other, who makes it possible for me to understand the world as something about which we can speak. The Other's presence as one who escapes every thematizing, is what opens up the plane of discourse and the possibility of inquiry. As the relation that makes possible the very meaningfulness of the world, the primordial teaching relation is, therefore, presupposed by every event that we would normally call teaching. But how do we define the practice of teaching? And what are we doing when we teach others philosophy?

A phenomenological definition of teaching and learning

To answer the questions of what it means to teach and what it means more specifically to teach philosophy, we might begin by considering what it is we can learn. One kind of learning is coming to understand what experts in a certain field have discovered about the world by using the particular methods of inquiry that define their discipline. This kind of learning can occur in different ways with different levels of understanding. For example, someone may be said to have "learned" the laws of thermodynamics when she can recite these laws to someone else. A deeper level of learning, however, might be achieved when a person can not only recite the laws, but

apply them in a novel context or explain them to someone else. But both of these forms of learning involve understanding, at differing levels of sophistication, what others have already discovered about the world.

In addition to this kind of knowledge about the world, one can also learn *how* to implement the methods that govern a specific discipline. In this way, a person learns how to produce the kind of discipline specific knowledge that makes up the content described above. For example, a person can learn how to carry out a scientific method or how to evaluate the authenticity of a historical document. This kind of learning gives us a set of inquiry tools that guide our approach to the world. When we master a particular method, we gain expertise and can eventually contribute to the growing body of knowledge that particular disciplines provide.

In addition to learning the results and methods of particular disciplines, we can also learn skills that do not seek to produce content in a discipline. For example, I can learn how to play the piano, how to build a house, how to cook, and so on. In these cases, what I learn is a way of interacting with the world that is aimed at something other than propositional knowledge. This kind of learning often involves the explicit development of new ways of embodied relations with the world. When I learn how to play the piano, for example, I learn a way of physically interacting with the piano to produce sounds that evoke a particular feeling. Or when I learn to cook, I learn to anticipate how heat will affect different ingredients and become able to imagine what flavors will taste like when combined. When I learn to paint, I learn to *see* differently so that I gain an intuitive sense of which colors ought to go where. In learning these kinds of skills, I am thus transformed not only in my knowledge about the world but also in my corporeal modes of relating to the world.

Furthermore, and in a related way, some kinds of learning involve the development of dispositions, like being more critically minded, humble, empathetic, inquisitive, and so on. This kind of learning also involves a transformation in my ways of responding to particular situations. If I learn to be more curious, for example, I may develop a habit of asking questions or of looking for the causes of phenomena. If I learn to be more self-critical, I am transformed in my manner of responding to others. I develop a habit of hesitating, of asking myself if I am sure of what I claim. Such changes involve both a cognitive transformation and also an affective shift in how I physically and emotionally respond to others. For example, I can learn to stay calm and patient when I am faced with someone who disagrees with me, or learn to experience uncertainty with less anxiety, and so on.

In trying to offer a definition of learning, as Socrates might ask us to do, we are, thus, faced with the question of whether there is any “form” that unites these different kinds of learning. Is there anything in common between knowledge about the world, methods that produce that knowledge, other skills, and dispositions? If we follow a phenomenological account of meaning, I propose that we can unite these forms of learning by seeing that they all involve the development or transformation of modes of intentionality. That is, whether we learn facts, methods, skills, or dispositions, when we learn, our ways of relating to a meaningful reality are transformed.

Teaching, however, is not necessarily identical with learning. Not every instance of learning involves an explicit act of teaching. Although in many cases we learn from our parents, school teachers, professors, friends, colleagues, etc., we also say that we learn from our experiences or our mistakes. In these cases, if there are people who teach us, they may not intend to or

even know that they are teaching us. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that in cases in which we learn from our experiences, we teach ourselves by using our experiences as the material from which to learn.

It is also the case that once we have learned a method of inquiry or a skill that leads to further learning, we do not necessarily need a teacher to continue to gain knowledge about the world. For example, once I have learned how to conduct a scientific experiment, I may no longer need a teacher to guide me through the process of performing an appropriate method of inquiry. In the case of scientific research, it is the natural world itself that becomes, in a sense, my “teacher.” We find, therefore, that, while all teaching requires or aims at learning—even if it is not always successful in this aim—not all learning seems to require an explicit act of teaching.

As we have seen, however, for Levinas, all learning *does* in fact presuppose a certain kind of teaching, a primordial teaching that underlies ontology itself. All learning, insofar as it involves our relationship to a meaningful world, is made possible by the Other’s teaching which opens up the very possibility of conversation. In this way, for Levinas, the primordial teaching encompasses much more than the everyday understanding of teaching. In fact, every time another person addresses me, she is my teacher in the primordial sense if not in the everyday sense. The everyday notion of teaching is only one possible manifestation of the broader phenomenon of the primordial teaching--the dimension of my relationship with the Other whereby the Other offers me the *sens unique* that is both the condition of the possibility and the orientation of meaning.

Considering the particular nature of the practice of teaching within the context of Levinas’s philosophy, we therefore find that the practice of teaching, in the everyday sense, is to

take responsibility for giving the world as meaningful to others. That is, when I teach, I aim to change, in some way, how my students live in and relate to the world. For example, when I teach students a text of Plato, one of my goals is to transform how students interact with texts. Many of my students come to philosophy classes skeptical about the value of reading Ancient Greek philosophy. The texts of Plato often show up in their experience as “homework,” “drudgery,” “an obstacle to getting an ‘A,’” and so on. In my own practice of teaching, therefore, I work to transform how the text shows up to students. I work to help them experience the texts instead as “interesting,” “relevant,” “puzzling,” “worth re-reading,” and so on.

I may or may not be successful in accomplishing this or the many other transformations that I hope to accomplish in my classes, but all teaching necessarily aims at achieving some kind of change in how students see, understand, and/or relate to the world and others. To bring about such a change in other people is no small matter. When we teach, we take responsibility for nothing less than giving *the world* to students in new ways. Sometimes these changes in the world may be relatively minor when, for instance, I teach students facts about the history of particular philosophers. But at other times, my goals are much more important when, for example, I aim to help students to develop habits of thinking critically and being more attentive to the evidence that they use to support their positions. In these latter cases, I take responsibility for the very responsibility of my students as thinkers and citizens.

It is important, however, to note that from the perspective of the *primordial* teaching relation, the roles of student and teacher will be reversed. Because I am here considering the concrete practice of teaching philosophy from the perspective of the teacher, it is, in fact, the student who appears to me as the Other, and, therefore, as my teacher in the primordial sense. In the pri-

mordial sense of teaching, as opposed to its practical everyday sense, I can only ever approach the Other from the perspective of the I who receives the Other's teaching. In this sense, therefore, it is the students who teach *me* in the primordial sense even as I teach them in the everyday sense.

What students teach me is not, however, the same as what I teach them. What the Other as primordial teacher provides is the *sens unique* that offers an orientation for meaning [*signification*]. The sense that the Other presents to me is a sense that calls me to responsibility. As a philosophy teacher, I offer students a new way of being in the world that is characterized by philosophical questioning. This way of being in the world involves the development of knowledge about, for example, the history of philosophy, as well as a variety of capacities and dispositions such as openness to a multiplicity of points of view, and the use of evidence to support positions. What the Other qua student teaches *me* is what my responsibility as a teacher is. To say that the student is my teacher in a primordial sense is not to say that my students teach me about philosophy per se (although this may also be true) but, rather, to say that students are my teachers insofar as their concrete presence continuously teaches me how to remain open to learning from them the orientation of responsibility that their presence demands of me. In other words, my students teach me how to continue to listen to them and learn what their needs are as students so that I can better serve them as their teacher.

To illustrate this point, a concrete example may be helpful. Recently in one of my courses, I was planning a class with the goal of helping students to understand how systems of oppression are intersectional. In particular, my goal was to help students to realize that often when people talk about "women" in general or "men" in general, what they often have in mind without

realizing it are “white women” and “white men.” In order to help students to realize their unconscious tendency to think of “white people” as the default when they thought about “people,” I asked students to list stereotypes about “women” and stereotypes about “men.” They generated a fairly predictable list. “Women,” they said, are stereotyped as submissive, domestic, small, quiet, empathetic, and so on. “Men,” they said, are stereotyped as strong, unemotional, providers, etc. Then I asked students for stereotypes about “black women.” Student were uncomfortable at first, but before long, they generated a predictable yet disheartening list. “Black women,” they said, are stereotyped as loud, bossy, and aggressive. “Black men,” they said are stereotyped as criminals, absent fathers, violent, threatening, etc.

While generating these lists was uncomfortable, the point of the lesson became starkly clear to the students. When they were originally generating the list of stereotypes about “women” and “men,” what they had in mind without recognizing it, were stereotypes about “white women” and “white men,” and not only white but also young and middle to upper class American men and women.

In the end the activity was quite effective at helping many of the students to realize why being vigilantly intersectional is necessary for deconstructing systems of oppression. That is, many students realized that it is impossible for us to talk about “women” or “men” in general as a monolithic category. We have to realize how these conversations often render people of color, not to mention people who otherwise fall outside the norm, invisible. But while in a certain sense the lesson was effective, after this lesson, a black student in the class was clearly upset by the ease with which her classmates generated stereotypes about black women. She expressed how hard it was to know what was in people’s minds and she felt stuck, unable to escape the racist

gaze of her peers.

In this moment, my student taught me just as much or more about teaching than I had taught the students in the class about racism. This student's response to my lesson flooded me with uncertainty about whether or not my lesson had been a good one. I was immediately confronted with a number of questions. Did my attempt to help white students understand their own racism come at the expense of students of color in the class? My aim in the exercise was to help students to see their complicity in systems of domination, but in doing so, was I failing to respond appropriately to marginalized students? In one sense, my aim *was* to center the needs of marginalized students by teaching in a way that brought to light the structures of inequity that infiltrate our minds and culture. But was I engaging in an idealized mission that allowed me to see myself and my teaching as anti-racist but in fact, harmed the concrete students in front of me?

I still do not have answers to these many questions, but there is no doubt that I have learned and continue to learn from this student's response to my teaching. And it is only by listening to students that I can continue to learn how to be a better, more responsible teacher to my students. So, it is in this sense that my students teach me how to teach them. If I listen carefully, they send me subtle and not so subtle indications of how I can better respond to their needs as students.

And if we continue to interrogate our responsibilities as teachers, we find that when we engage in the practice of teaching, we are not only responsible to our students. We are also responsible to colleagues who may teach the same students in the future, to other philosophers who rely on us to help maintain the traditions of philosophy, to the authors of the texts that we read to

do justice to their writing, to other members of our political community who rely on us to help educate our fellow citizens, and so on. The face of the Other, as Levinas shows, always contains within it the face of all of the other others.

This complex web of responsibility, thus, raises the question of the larger purpose of teaching philosophy in our current social and political context. And while philosophers are certain to disagree about the purpose of philosophy, my own view takes guidance from Levinas by way of Claire Katz. Katz, in her work on Levinas's conception of teaching, argues that Levinas views the goal of Jewish education to be to respond to a crisis in humanism. This crisis is the fact that the humanist principles of egalitarianism and individual liberty are insufficient on their own to prevent horrors like those of the twentieth century. In her work, Katz implies that we have yet to fully learn this lesson. We sometimes think, Katz argues, that teaching humanities classes and offering students the skills of "critical thinking" will automatically make students "better" people. What Levinas shows us, however, is that "critical thinking" on its own, if it is not oriented by an ethical sense, does not guarantee justice. For education to be able to respond to the crisis of humanism that Levinas identifies, Katz argues, it must teach not only skills of reasoning, but also the lesson that responsibility precedes freedom, that the Other demands that we break with egoism and decenter ourselves by orienting ourselves to the demands of the Other. This, Katz argues, is what Levinas believes is the fundamental teaching of Jewish education, the particular lesson that Judaism offers the world.

While philosophers may not agree entirely about what philosophy is or what texts we should teach when we introduce students to philosophy, one of the central goals of philosophy courses, that most philosophers agree on is that we aim to teach students to be "better thinkers."

But if Levinas is right that ethics is first philosophy, then it is impossible to “think well” without thinking about what the Other demands of us. That is, if we follow Levinas, then one of the primary goals in teaching philosophy is to offer the world to students in a way that invites them to see the Other as one to whom they are responsible and to recognize that this responsibility is perpetual and requires ongoing critique.

One might, however, object to this line of thought by saying that, for Levinas, it is impossible to *not* hear the call of the Other, and, therefore, that there is nothing that can *teach* anyone to hear this call. If someone claims not to feel obligated by the face of the Other, there is no argument that can be given to convince him that he is, indeed, responsible. For Levinas, our responsibility is what grounds reason, not the other way around. But as Katz notes, and common sense also tells us, we *can* learn to listen better, to be more or less receptive to the Other’s demands. We can become better students of the Other’s teachings, better equipped to respond to their concrete needs. But in order to do so, we have to practice listening to our students so that we can better hear what they have to teach us.

Teaching as a practice of hospitality

In order to hear what students have to offer us as teachers, we must begin by understanding who students are and what they care about. Only then can we figure out how to connect what they care about to what we it is we are teaching. This is the approach to pedagogy that we saw Diotima take in the *Symposium*. That is, Diotima insists that we are all lovers and that the role of the teacher is to help the student to progress in loving by directing this love towards more fundamental truths.

In fact, this approach to pedagogy is not limited to Socrates, but has long been recognized

as the cornerstone of constructivist theories of education. What thinkers like John Dewey have recognized is that learning happens when we build on the positive pre-existing interests, questions, and desires of our students. Students are not empty vessels that need to be filled with facts, but are actively involved in the construction of meaning from their experiences. The teacher must recognize the active engagement of students with their worlds and build on this already existing openness to the world as a dynamic reality. Doing so, therefore, requires that we get to know students so that we can make these connections.

Or to use Levinas's framework, we might say that students demand that I welcome them in hospitality into the classroom, which means that I must welcome *them* as they are in their concreteness as unique existents. As we saw in Chapter Three, it is precisely this ability to respond to another as an individual that makes speaking preferable to writing in the *Phaedrus*. That is, the benefit of speaking is that we can respond to one another in a specific and concrete context. As we have seen, Levinas finds in Socrates's argument for the priority of speaking an expression of the face-to-face encounter described in *Totality and Infinity*. A pedagogy oriented by Levinas's philosophy, therefore, necessarily involves a recognition that students present us with an absolute alterity that obligates us endlessly to welcome them as concrete particular existents.

In practice, extending hospitality to students means not asking them to transform themselves to suit our own needs. As Derrida has acknowledged in his work on Levinas's ethics, in this way, being a host requires that one be a guest in one's own home, in a certain sense. In being a host, I become a kind of hostage to the needs of the Other. That is, as we have seen, for Levinas, to be a subject is to establish oneself at a site of possession, but subjectivity also always involves having one's right to one's site called into question. To be a subject, for Levinas, is to

be a sojourner in a foreign land. We establish ourselves in a dwelling, but we are always responsible for making sure that the Other has a place within our dwelling.

In the practice of teaching philosophy, the “home” or “dwelling” into which I welcome students can be understood as both the physical space of the classroom but also as the discipline of philosophy itself. Here I understand philosophy to be at root a series of ongoing conversations. Welcoming students into the conversations of philosophy, thus, requires that I allow for students to bring themselves and their worlds to these conversations. As the host who is welcoming students into the dwelling of philosophy, I must not ask students to leave their interests, questions, skills, etc. at the door of the classroom. Rather, I, as the host, must figure out how to make room for their questions and ways of being within the dwelling of philosophy. I have to build on their prior receptivity to the Other and show how their particular concerns, interests, desires, and talents make their contributions to philosophical discourse important and meaningful.

In his work, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too*, Christopher Emdin expertly what teaching hospitably entails.⁴ Emdin focuses his work on teachers whose students are largely young people of color growing up in poor urban settings. In studying the schools at which these teachers work, he finds that the schools devalue both explicitly and implicitly the ways the students' pre-existing ways of being in the world. Schools often reject students' fashion choices, hair styles, manners of speaking, musical tastes, etc., claiming that such ways of being are “inappropriate” in the context of the school.

In fact, Emdin even compares many of these urban schools to assimilation schools, like the Carlisle School, that attempted to integrate indigenous students in the United States into

⁴ Emdin, Christopher. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...And the Rest of Ya'll Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2016.

mainstream society in the late nineteenth century. While arguably well-intentioned, these schools harmed students and native cultures by requiring students to leave their relationships to family and friends, languages, and cultural and religious practices behind.

Emdin argues that we can understand students in poor urban communities as, in a sense, “neo-indigenous,” insofar as these students are also asked to leave their ways of being and relating to the world at the door of the school. That is, the ways of speaking, interacting, and engaging that students have received from their communities, are often unwelcome in the classroom, considered to reflect a lack of intelligence or obedience. In his own teaching, Emdin works to legitimize his students’ already existing ways of being in the world by incorporating music and hip hop into his teaching practices. In this way Emdin sends the message to students that who they are and what they care about are not only welcome in the classroom but essential for their own learning.

While as a philosopher, my own context of teaching may be different from that of Emdin insofar as my students are older and tend to be more economically well-off, his work demonstrates what pedagogy can look like when it is oriented by hospitality. Emdin starts by learning from his students what they need rather than assuming that he already knows what is best for them. He does not try to fundamentally change who students are but to creatively construct his lessons to connect with who they are. What Levinas reveals and Emdin puts into practice, is the need for teachers to transform the space of learning into a place of hospitality by celebrating students as concrete existents, not devaluing their ways of being in the world or asking them to leave themselves behind when they enter the classroom.

While many of the students we teach in philosophy may not have the same backgrounds

as Emdin's students, the world of philosophy can seem quite foreign and even inhospitable to many beginning college students. And philosophy has long suffered from a lack of voices coming from perspectives other than those of well-prepared "elite" students. We have a responsibility, however, I argue, to make our classrooms welcoming to all of our students, which requires that we work to understand our students and what they care about so that we can make the necessary connections between their interests and desires and the material at hand. Doing so requires that we take the time to learn about students. We have to ask them what they care about, what they are interested in, what questions motivate them, and so on. And we have to be open to the fact that students may have concerns that differ from our own.

Of course, the fact that there are a multiplicity of unique others in the classroom, each of whom obligates us infinitely, also raises difficulties for teaching insofar as it presents us with the challenges of our sometimes conflicting responsibilities. The fact that there are multiple others in the class to whom we are responsible as well as the many others to whom we are responsible outside of the classroom, requires that we sometimes view the students from what Levinas would understand to be a political perspective. That is, there are times when I have to treat all the students as equal qua students, which requires that I approach them from the perspective of reason or justice. For example, it may be the case that a particular classroom policy conflicts with the needs of a particular student, but out of a concern for fairness, I maintain the policy nevertheless.

For Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, this kind of political perspective, wherein one is treated similarly is necessary for ethics, but it requires the orientation offered by the ethical. That is, taking up a position in which everyone is considered equal cannot be the starting place of ethics. Levinas writes, "Equality is produced where the other commands the same and

reveals himself to the same in responsibility; otherwise it is but an abstract idea and a word. It cannot be detached from the welcoming of the face, of which it is a moment.”⁵ The notion of equality is necessary for acting responsibly, but this equality is a “moment” of the ethical relation, not its underlying principle. With regard to teaching, this means that seeing students as the same must be grounded in and oriented by a desire to welcome each student into philosophy as a concrete individual. The rules and policies that I adopt as a teacher must be aimed at creating a classroom space that allows each individual student to bring herself and world to the discourse of philosophy, rather than seeing her as first falling into the category of “student.”

Much more work needs to be done to fully develop a pedagogy inspired by Levinas, and here I have only begun to explore what this pedagogy might look like. Such a pedagogy, however, will never take the form of a list of classroom policies. Levinas cannot tell us exactly how to go about establishing rules that best welcome our students. Rather, what Levinas teaches us is that we have to be always responsive to the call of the Other in the context in which the Other appears. As teachers we must constantly listen to our students and interrogate our practices to discover what we need to do to better meet our responsibilities, even as we know that we will never be able to fully satisfy our Desire to serve the Other. Most importantly, we must remember that while we teach our students the content and skills of a particular discipline, our students continue to teach us how best we can teach them.

Summary

This chapter has explored the relationship between Levinas’s primordial teaching relation and the concrete practice of teaching others. We have seen that an investigation of the experience of teaching presents us with a demand that we orient our teaching practices around making the

⁵ *TeI* 189, *Tal* 214

“dwelling” of our classrooms and of the discipline of philosophy welcoming to our students. But this account does not give us specific principles that will apply in every context. Rather, the responsibility to be a hospitable teacher, in fact, involves a responsibility to be open and flexible to the particular needs of students which can never be totally foreseen in advance and continue to change as our students change.

In this sense, we have to look to students to teach us how to teach them. That is, the Other who is my student is also my teacher in the primordial sense. As the Other, the student overflows whatever idea I may have of him and demands that I listen. The student “attends” her presence and this attendance brings me more than I can know in advance. In this sense, teaching in the practical sense is always a response to the Other’s primordial teaching.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The study of a philosopher whose work is as complex and difficult as that of Levinas allows for multiple points of entry, each of which opens up our understanding of the work in new ways. The fertility of Levinas's work is borne out by the rich scholarship that has emerged as his status as an essential figure in the development of European philosophy has been solidified. One of the central goals of the present work has been to contribute to this scholarship by conducting an analysis of a concept that has not yet been fully explored by scholars, that of the primordial teaching relation. My aim has been to show that this concept is an especially fruitful lens through which to examine Levinas's work insofar as it helps us to better understand both *Totality and Infinity* itself as well as Levinas's relationship to Plato.

At the same time, in exploring these themes in Levinas's work, I have also tried to show that questions concerning the nature of teaching and learning lie at the heart of who we are as human beings and that these questions are essential to understanding the practice of philosophy. If we were unable to learn from and transform one another through dialogical encounters, philosophy, it seems, would have no goal and no inspiration. Philosophy, as both Plato and Levinas recognize, is not a solitary, but a dialogical endeavor that is constituted by an ever-evolving tradition of questioning. To do philosophy is, in fact, to learn from and to teach others.

And yet, in our contemporary situation, discussions of learning and teaching are at times relegated to the margins of philosophical discourse. Teaching is often seen as a craft that one

must develop in order to make a life as a philosopher and not as a practice that involves us as philosophers. While not every philosopher needs to dedicate her research to the theme of teaching, I have attempted to show here that we ought not see the practice of teaching as entirely separate from the work of philosophy. I have tried in this dissertation to challenge the marginalization of questions concerning teaching and learning in the discipline. And in doing so, I have also sought to better understand how we ought to engage in the practice of philosophy, which is always, in some sense, a practice of teaching and learning.

With regard to conversations about Levinas scholarship, I have proposed here that an examination of the concept of teaching, particularly in Levinas's writings surrounding *Totality and Infinity*, illuminates a number of important themes in Levinas scholarship. In particular, I have shown that the concept of teaching illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of Levinas's relationship to Plato, which itself is reflective of a broader tension in Levinas's work between the intimacy of the relation with the Other in interiority and the absoluteness of the Other who is characterized by exteriority. As we have seen, many scholars, including Derrida and Blanchot, as well as more recently Gonzales and Achtenberg, have been perplexed by Levinas's reluctance to embrace the intimacy and ambiguity inherent in the metaphysical relation with the Other. In the present work, I have argued, following thinkers like Katz and Guenther, that Levinas's concept of the "feminine," while problematic and underdeveloped, can nevertheless help us to better understand and come to terms with this tension between interiority and exteriority in *Totality and Infinity*.

In particular, I have argued that the problem of the relationship between interiority and exteriority in *Totality and Infinity*, is one for which Levinas himself provides a solution, though

not one that is fully articulated. The introduction of the “feminine” Other who is at once one who obligates me and one who appears as a welcoming presence in the space of interiority is the key to resolving the problem of how I, as a separated being, am capable of welcoming another in intimate hospitality. That is, in order for it to be possible for me to welcome the Stranger into my home, one who is exterior into the interior, I must have been given a home in the first place. The dwelling is not something that I am capable of establishing on my own. I only have the possibility of receiving the Other in my own sphere of interiority because of the Other who welcomed me in intimacy and made it possible for me to become a separated being and showed me how to be hospitable. In this way, we have seen that the introduction of “feminine” alterity is essential to the coherence of *Totality and Infinity* as a whole. That is, without the welcoming presence of the Other in the dwelling, the metaphysical relation in which the terms of the relation remain ‘absolved’ of the relation is not possible.

And yet, it has also become clear that Levinas worries that the communion and participation of intimacy present dangers for ethics. If it is not interrupted by the Other of exteriority, intimacy can allow us to forget our responsibilities, to close ourselves off from the demands of justice. Interiority, by its very nature as an enclosed space, presents us with the possibility of excluding others. We can close ourselves in with those we love, shutting our doors and windows and refusing to acknowledge the Stranger who knocks at the door. Thus, while the gentle and intimate presence of the “feminine” other in the dwelling is necessary, this very intimacy can lead to a failure to listen to the Other who appears in a mode that is foreign.

Levinas’s legitimate worry about the dangers of intimacy, however, ought not prevent us from recognizing how the metaphysical relation inevitably and necessarily involves intimacy.

That is, while the exteriority of the Other of ‘absolute’ distance is essential for ethics, so too is the intimacy of the Other who is gentle and welcoming. This view is not inconsistent with Levinas’s own, but there are times in the text when he seems to draw what is, in my view, too harsh of a distinction between these two modes of alterity. That is, there are moments in the text when Levinas seems to indicate that the ethical relation is incompatible with intimacy. We have seen this for example, when Levinas claims that the relation with the “feminine” Other is a relation without teaching. As I have shown here, however, the ethical relation must be one of *both* intimacy and distance. In my view, our understanding of the metaphysical relation is deepened when we recognize the ways in which these modes of alterity intertwine and support each other.

This intertwining of intimacy and distance, interiority and exteriority, is apparent when we closely examine the Other who appears as my teacher. To encounter the Other as my teacher is to encounter one who both appears as a foreign presence who calls me into question and as a gentle presence of one who welcomes me into a conversation. As the *sens unique* that orients the world as meaningful, the Other who teaches me appears as an exteriority whose sense cannot be understood by means of the network of significations given to me by my cultural context. But although the Other cannot be reduced to the network of significations, the Other is also the one who gives me this network of meanings. As a child, I am taught a language and a particular way of being in the world. My parents, friends, and teachers tell me what things are, how to interact with others, what one ought or ought not to do, and so on. Furthermore, throughout my life, my friends, colleagues, and family continue to sustain the world for me and also give it to me in new ways. Thus, these intimate others, others whom I know and who know me, act as my teachers by opening the world up to me and allowing me to make sense of things. All the others with whom I

am in relation give me a place in the world from which I can live, work, and understand the world. As Levinas recognizes, the Other is, in this way, the giver of the given.

And in teaching me, the Other not only speaks herself but, as Levinas shows, by attending her presence before me, the Other also allows *me* to speak. The Other opens up the plane of conversation by allowing me to ask questions and promising by her presence to remain to answer them. In this way, the Other who teaches me approaches me also as one who welcomes me into the world.

This attendance of the Other to her presence in teaching me is, as we have seen, influenced by Plato's prioritization of speech over writing in the *Phaedrus*. And in fact, as noted in Chapter Four, Levinas views *Totality and Infinity* as a retrieval of a certain kind of Platonism. The *Phaedrus* in particular is especially influential for Levinas because of the surprising unity of its seemingly disparate themes. The *Phaedrus*, on Levinas's reading, brings together the Desire for transcendence and the priority of speaking over writing. For Levinas, it is precisely the Other who speaks to me and attends his concrete presence in speaking that provides the orienting sense that motivates Desire.

And yet, Levinas criticizes Socratic education because he finds in it an assertion that the student is free and self-sufficient. While Levinas believes that Plato at times expresses genuine transcendence, he also sees in Plato's work the danger of a philosophy that aims to identify our search for truth with powers that can be found in us. For Levinas, the idea that I already know all that I learn is emblematic of a denial of the genuine exteriority of the Other on whom I depend and to whom I am responsible.

In this dissertation, however, I have argued instead that *anamnēsis* and *maieutics* reveal to us the inevitable complexity of the teaching relation as one that involves both intimacy and distance. Rather than presenting the student as already in possession of what he learns, *anamnēsis*, I have argued, can be understood to reveal the fundamental receptivity that necessarily precedes the welcoming of the Other who teaches me. Similarly, *maieutics* does not obviate the need for the teacher, but shows instead that the student is always in relation to alterity, to the point that the student embodies alterity within himself. And the role of the teacher in *maieutics* is not incidental. Rather, in his role as a midwife, we find that Socrates cares for his students and gives them room to give birth to their own ideas. And, in this way, Socrates's hospitable withdrawal allows his students to enter into the conversations and ways of thinking that make up philosophy. Thus, *anamnēsis* and *maieutics* reveal that learning and teaching do not deny but require a recognition of intimacy, vulnerability, and receptivity.

Furthermore, I have argued that Socratic education, understood in this way, has much to teach us about the concrete practice of teaching. In particular, by acknowledging and embracing our vulnerability as learners and teachers, Socratic education recognizes that all learning involves a prior relation to that which we learn. We are all, as Diotima claims in the *Symposium*, lovers of the beautiful and the good. The challenge of the teacher is to channel and direct this pre-existing receptivity, which Levinas, following Plato, names Desire. Understood in this way, Socratic education does not presuppose that we are already in possession of all that we learn. Instead, it recognizes the Desire that underlies our capacity to learn and shows how a teacher who has taken up the responsibility of teaching others might go about encouraging and guiding this Desire.

When we choose to engage in the practice of teaching others, I have argued, we must understand teaching as a practice in which we deliberately take on the responsibility of the giving the world to others. Following Levinas, we see that the world has been given to us and continues to be given to us by our parents, teachers, friends, and others. And whether we are explicitly engaged in the practice of teaching or not, we are always involved in and responsible for giving the world to others. To speak to one another is, in a sense, always to teach, just as to receive the Other as a teacher is always to learn. To be a teacher in the traditional sense, therefore, is simply to engage in this practice more explicitly and within the context of a particular discipline and institution.

Taking guidance from Levinas's ethics, I have argued that to teach philosophy is to give students a world that involves philosophical questioning and to welcome students into this world by making a space for them in the conversations that make up this questioning. Doing so means recognizing that while I may be the teacher in the classroom, the students are still my teachers in the primordial sense. That is, even as I take responsibility for giving the world to my students in a new way, my students teach me my responsibilities as a teacher. To welcome my students as teachers is to recognize that I must listen to what my students have to teach me about how to teach them. In this sense, what I teach my students and what they teach me is not identical. My students may not teach me how to read Plato, but, if I am willing to listen, they can teach me who they are and what they care about. And in this way, I can learn from them how best to be a host to their learning.

To read Levinas's work well, one must receive his texts as "teaching" texts. That is, Levinas's work must not be approached as a mere object of history, but as a living, breathing

presence that challenges us to recognize our unending responsibility to the Other. The lesson that Levinas's work teaches us as readers is the lesson that we are responsible. In this way, his work is not so much a description of the way things are, but an iteration or reminder of the perpetual demand of the Other in our own lives. Levinas's claim that ethics is first philosophy is, therefore, not a claim about what philosophy has been but a reminder to never forget that when we do philosophy, we are always involved in the project of serving the Other.

This dissertation has been my own attempt to respond to the challenge and the welcome that Levinas's work offers. Levinas, in his difficult generosity has, together with my many other teachers past and present, made it possible for me to do philosophy. And what I have learned from Levinas is that my work as a teacher is to give the gift of responsibility to my students in turn.

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