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EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND IRIS MURDOCH: ETHICS AS EXIT?

THE LEVINAS EFFECT it has been called, the ability of Emmanuel Levinas's texts to say anything the reader wants to hear, so that Levinas becomes a deconstructionist, theologian, proto-feminist, or even the reconciler of postmodern ethics and rabbinic Judaism. Talmudic scholar and postmodern philosopher, Levinas has become everything to everyone. Abstract and evocative, writing in what can only be described as the language of prophecy, we pretend we understand what he is talking about, writing in much the same style, so as to say whatever we wanted to say in the first place. Even those who disagree with Levinas generally criticize him from within the framework of his project, sharing his assumptions while trying to make Levinas more Levinassian.¹

How might one disrupt the Levinas Effect? By disrupt, I mean criticize Levinas sympathetically, from a perspective outside his "system," but not outside his world. Levinas's world is one in which the self is the enemy not only of the other, but of authentic existence. Iris Murdoch shares this view with Levinas. Like Levinas, Murdoch sees the self as the enemy. "Unselfing," as she calls it, is the means; the end is to overcome totality, which means the subjection of the other to my categories and my experience. Levinas means much the same thing by totality. It is his philosophical *idée maîtresse*, the troubling tendency of Western thought from Plato to Hegel and beyond.

"What breaks the drive of consciousness to totality is not an appeal to an abstract social or linguistic whole, but an encounter with the concrete other person." Levinas did not say this, nor did Iris Murdoch. Maria Antonaccio says it in a book about Murdoch, in which she compares Murdoch's views to those of Levinas. What they share, says

Antonaccio, is this critique of totality, even if “Murdoch would reject the language of command, lordship and accusation that pervade Levinas’s account.”²

Certainly Levinas’s language of persecution is one of the most striking aspects of his account, and I will not ignore it. But it is not the most important thing that distinguishes him from Murdoch. One might argue that it is the “concrete other person” that distinguishes Levinas from Murdoch, for in many respects the other is an abstraction for Levinas. “The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!” says Levinas.³ Only at a distance is the other abstract enough to remind us of infinity.

This distinction comes closer to capturing the difference between them. Even more important, Levinas shares Sartre’s nausea at the thingyness of the world. Levinas calls it the *il y a*, the “there is.” It is this that makes his account closer to Sartre’s than one might imagine, and more distant from Murdoch. This does not, of course, make Levinas wrong. The comparison with Murdoch is a way of getting out from under the Levinas Effect.

My goal is to better understand Levinas by comparing him with Murdoch. This requires that Murdoch’s philosophy be seriously considered, but perhaps not as seriously as that of Levinas. Murdoch is the other, Levinas the subject. Possibly we will end up understanding the other better than the subject.

I

The outlines of Levinas’s philosophy will be familiar to many readers. I will elaborate upon a story told by Levinas to recount it.⁴ Imagine that someone rings your doorbell and disturbs your work. As you walk to the door you are distracted, still thinking about your latest project. It takes you a moment to recognize your neighbor at the door, the one who lives upstairs; as soon as you recognize his face you invite him in. You talk for a while. He tells you his problem, you tell him what you might do to help him. You share some pleasant conversation, and soon enough your neighbor leaves. What you originally experienced as an interruption you now experience as a pleasant interlude, in which some understanding has passed between you and your neighbor. Or so it seems to you.

Instead of immediately returning to your work, or allowing the memory of a pleasant interlude to linger, Levinas asks that you try to

recapture the shock of the other's intrusion, the moment when you were first confronted with the other person's face, but before you recognized him. What did you feel? Was it not an irruption, not just into your life, but into the order of your world? Just for a moment did you not feel that a door had been opened into another world, not just into the hallway of your apartment building, but into infinity?

It cannot have been an entirely pleasant experience, but perhaps it was not so unpleasant either. The world of your apartment, your desk, and your work is fulfilling, but limited. You soak up the morning sunlight that pours in through the big windows, and at night the sparkling lights of the city make it seem as if you live in an enchanted world, ready to meet your needs. The women who come and go through your life have this same quality.

If one were going to characterize your life prior to the encounter at the door, it would come closest to a story told by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Not Rousseau's "noble savage," but his story about the earliest stages of civilization that follow, when men and women live together in families and towns, "maintaining a golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our vanity."⁵ An epigraph that introduces Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* is from Pascal. "'That is my place in the sun.' That is how the usurpation of the whole world began." It sounds like Rousseau talking about the advent of private property, only for Levinas it is not property, but the individual's belief that he owns himself that spoils things.

Strikingly similar to Levinas is Rousseau's emphasis on the narcissism of this earliest stage of civilization, in which men and women use each other without acknowledging their dependence, their need for others. It is not just property, but mutual dependence, that spoils this idyllic state. Or as Levinas puts it, "in enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am . . . outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate."⁶ Levinas puts it this way because he wants awareness of separateness without awareness of difference, for that would imply that there is a totality that encompasses self and other through which we know both. For Levinas, I know others in my world, having intercourse with them, but they remain part of the wallpaper of my life, present but unnoticed.

Though you live a satisfying existence in your apartment, something is missing from your life, and your encounter with the face at the door reminds you of what it is: the rest of the world, one that extends to infinity. When you heard the doorbell ring it could have been anyone,

a world of infinite possibilities at your door. Or at least so you might have imagined for a moment. For a moment the order of your world was exposed to the disorder of infinite possibility. Your neighbor could have been anyone, needing anything, asking everything.

Levinas's work is a reflection upon this moment of infinite possibility, though it is I, and not Levinas, who locates this moment in time, and it is I who makes it a reflection. Levinas would call it an imperative, the experience a command to serve the other. For Levinas it is an experience that comes from somewhere beyond "scientific" time, which is why one cannot say that it occurs prior to becoming an adult, a responsible human being, or whatever (*EI*, p. 85). It is prior to everything.

How might you respond to this experience of the infinite?⁷ You feel shocked, maybe a little scared, but mostly you feel gratitude for being released from your little world of pleasures and worries. It is a defeat of your self-satisfied little world that is ultimately a victory, as you now belong to another. You feel small and insignificant, but not devalued, because your life now has a purpose, to serve the other. It is almost as if you were called to devote your life to a god.

Prior to your exposure to the other you existed in your own little world, like the apartment in which you were working before the doorbell rang. Others existed, they met your needs, but they were part of the background. One might say the same thing about your self. It is only with your exposure to the other that you come to be. Not, however, by means of what Hegel called the dialectic of mutual recognition, in which you define yourself through struggle with me. Dialectic requires dialogue, contact, even struggle, and across the infinite space that divides us there can be little human contact. Levinas calls it a "relationship without relation." An encounter takes place, but it is "without relation," as the other remains absolutely other (*T&I*, pp. 79–80).

The face of my neighbor at my door renders me guilty as one who has done less than he could. This must always be so, for the other's need is infinite, as well as infinitely unknowable. I can never get it right, which is why I must devote myself to trying. Once I am exposed to the other, I can never return to my desk and forget about the other, no matter how much I might want to. The other has intruded itself between me and myself. Responsibility is persecuted subjectivity, the only way in which subjectivity may be known, as the prosecution of the narcissism of the I. "The word I means to be answerable for everything and for everyone," says Levinas.⁸

This, says Levinas, is real humanism, one that knows that it is the other human who comes first, defining me as the other's hostage. I am able to be (that is, to experience my own subjectivity), only as a hostage to the other. The subject comes into existence only through its exposure to the other, which is what Levinas means when he defines subjectivity as the other in the same. "The psyche in the soul is the Other in me, a malady of identity."⁹ A malady of identity it may be, but it is the only identity there is, hostage being. I am responsible to the other because my existence as individuated, self-conscious subject depends entirely on my relationship to the other. Before that I was not much different from a contended cow, but one that drank up the milk of the world.

Students of Levinas are quick to note the "relation without relation" that marks the encounter with the other. "Even to describe the relationship with the Other as a relationship implies a totalizing perspective," says Davis.¹⁰ An encounter takes place, but it is "without relation," as the other remains absolutely other. I serve the other, but I am not attached to the other, in the sense of needing or desiring the other. Though Levinas uses the term "proximity" to characterize the relationship to the other, proximity is as much about distance as closeness.

The persecution of the narcissism of the I, as Levinas puts it, keeps the ego in a cage, so that it cannot devour the other. "Oh digestive philosophy," said Sartre, and about that he and Levinas agree. Servitude is the alternative to digestion and attachment, a love that observes the borders and boundaries of indenture. Not love but conscience is the result of the encounter with the other. Conscience is above all about boundaries and limits, as Freud taught us with his story about the origin of conscience in the little boy's desire for his mother.

Equally important, but less remarked upon, is the encounter with the other in the pre-doorbell state, before his or her otherness is recognized. Levinas describes the pre-doorbell state in terms of "living from" (*vivre de*). "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas sleep . . . These are not objects of representation. We live from them" (*T&I*, p. 110). We need others in the sense of needing to consume them as we consume soup, but we don't need them for themselves. In some ways it sounds like Eden, "a utopia in which the 'I' recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself" (*T&I*, p. 156). What it is not is a place of human relationships. Not that it would be correct to characterize the pre-doorbell state as a place of inhuman relationships. The term

“relation without relation” that Levinas uses to characterize the encounter with the other applies here too. I use others, but I don’t know them as other. After my encounter with the other, I know the other only as other. Never were we intimate. In Levinas’s account we move directly from babies to saints.

Attachment as need for others, as the desire for particular others, the desire for one’s other half in order to feel whole, the desire that Aristophanes talks about in Plato’s *Symposium*, is absent in Levinas. It is absent in the encounter with the other, which is not surprising. It is absent in the Edenic but empty state before the encounter with the other as well. Two reasons are generally given for this absence. The first has already been suggested. Relatedness and need define self and other in terms of their need for each other, and so risk falling into totalization. The second reason is that a self who needed the other too much could never serve the other.

One way to think about the absence of attachment is in terms of Enlightenment psychology, the psychology of egoism, the psychology of Freud, who wrote about object of an instinct, in which one seeks others to satisfy a drive, not for purposes of relationship. Though Levinas opposes this way of thinking, his own thought is defined by this opposition. As it always is with great thinkers (and probably lesser thinkers as well), they are imprisoned by what they oppose, the prison of the opposite, the prison of standing this or that thinker on his head. If the problem were not egoism, if the problem were not “that is my place in the sun,” then the solution would look different too.

Another way to think about the absence of attachment is in terms of the tendency to read Levinas as a postmodern. Jacques Derrida made Levinas famous by criticizing him for not being Levinasian enough, inadvertently totalizing the other by defining the other in contrast to the same.¹¹ We are accustomed by now to thinking that the postmodern problem is to preserve diversity and difference, and that almost any relationship must spoil it. As Iris Marion Young says, “this metaphysics consists in a desire to think things together in a unity, to formulate a representation of a whole, a totality.”¹² By “this metaphysics” she refers not to philosophy, but to the practice of community, as though the desire of people to feel close to one another was automatically and inevitably an attempt to “totalize” them. Often it is; sometimes it’s not. When we write about attachment in the language of metaphysics, we forget what it is to think about the richness of actual human attachments.

In metaphysics, the tendency is to think in terms of abstract opposites,

such as other and the same. In reality, there are countless variations, as many variations as there are relationships. Or rather, as many variations as there are relationships times minutes of the day, for it changes constantly. To be sure, we are trapped in a web of words, words referring to other words, the world as wall-to-wall text as Edward Said puts it. But, we imagine that our words evoke experiences that are more subtle than words can say, including experiences that can be put into words that make more distinctions than other and same, experiences such as “like me, but different at the same time.” Levinas tries to capture this desire for words to be more than words with his distinction between saying and said.

Saying (*le Dire*) is the unspoken, unwritten dimension of the said. The said (*le Dit*) is the text, my words, what I say. Saying is my exposure to the other, in which I wordlessly assert “here I am, naked and exposed to you.” It is this aspect of Levinas’s work that many deconstructionists have become so intrigued with, as it seems to justify what is sometimes called reading against the grain. But notice what saying is not: conversation. In saying I expose myself to the other, but I do not talk with the other. Saying is not a dialogue. I am asking the reader to think about experiences with others that involve dialogue, experiences that involve give and take, experiences of exchange between sovereign selves. Out of such experiences the same sometimes becomes a little more like the other, and vice-versa. Sometimes same and other even like it, each enriched by the other.

The absence of attachment in Levinas is no mere reflection of the zeitgeist. The absence of attachment reflects a passionate commitment to exit. One sees this most clearly in Levinas’s account of a horrifying experience, the experience of “there is” (*il y a*). The experience evidently began in Levinas’s childhood, though the idea of it occurred to him while he was in the stalag (Levinas was imprisoned in a camp for French officers during World War Two).

My reflection on this subject starts with childhood memories. One sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as “rumbling.” It is something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. . . . *Existence and Existents* [written while Levinas was in the stalag] tries to describe this horrible thing, and moreover describes it as horror and panic. (*EI*, p. 48)

Søren Kierkegaard writes that we dread “the presentiment of something that is nothing.”¹³ We dread nothingness, not just our death and dissolution, but our own non-being, as though one were afraid of waking up to find one was no longer there. Levinas is writing about an experience that is in important ways the opposite: not the dread of nothingness, but the dread of somethingness, of becoming mere being, some-thing. One confronts this dread of being in experiences such as insomnia.

In insomnia one can and one cannot say that there is an “I” which cannot manage to fall asleep. The impossibility of escaping wakefulness is something “objective,” independent of my initiative. This impersonality absorbs my consciousness; consciousness is depersonalized. I do not stay awake: “it” stays awake . . . In the maddening “experience” of the “there is” (*il y a*), one has the impression of a total impossibility of escaping it, of “stopping the music.” (*EL*, p. 49)

The roar one hears when putting an empty shell to one’s ear is another example of the same experience, says Levinas. It is almost as if one were hearing the echo of the horror of finding oneself being in the world. Not “being alone” in the world, just being—that is the true horror.

Levinas insists that he is not writing of a psychological experience. “It is not a matter of ‘states of the soul,’ but of an end of objectivizing consciousness, a psychological inversion” (*EL*, p. 50). About this Levinas is just right. It is not a psychological phenomenon because all that makes an experience psychological, that is subjectively knowable, is overwhelmed with the dread of mere existence, mere being. The dread of existence is an end to objectivizing consciousness because consciousness has become objectified, a thing, like all the other things of the world. I becomes it. Not because another treats me as an it. Then at least I have something to fight for my subjectivity. But because I am absorbed into the it; or rather the it engulfs me.

Experiences of depersonalization and derealization, as psychoanalysts call them, would come close to what Levinas is talking about, even as these terms lack ontological weight.¹⁴ For Levinas the “there is” is not a dissociative defense against anxiety, but its source—the terrible burden of being. “A night in a hotel room where, behind the partition, ‘it does not stop stirring’”; “‘one does not know what they are doing next door.’ This is something very close to the ‘there is’” (*EL*, p. 50). Under the horizon of “there is,” the meaning of experience is lost

because the capacity to feel a sensuous connection between self and experienced world is lost. In place of sensuous experience there is merely the experience of being: being absent the experience of being because no boundary or mediation between me and being remains. Not "I am being," but "being," is all that exists. In Sartre's language, I become like the objects of consciousness, the in-itself (*être-en-soi*).

Levinas said he first tried to deal with this horrifying experience (he means deal with it philosophically, but it is the beauty of Levinas that emotional experiences, insomnia, and philosophy become one) by strategies that reconnect being to the world. "One refastens being to the existent" is how Levinas puts it, by which he means that one finds "an exit toward the world in knowledge." Trapped in the solitude of one's being, one tries to rejoin the larger world of being through knowledge of beings, that is, knowledge about the things of the world. It was not, says Levinas, a satisfactory solution. Every connection to a larger world felt like one was becoming more deeply enmeshed in the stickiness of mere being (*EI*, pp. 51–52).

The resemblance to Roquentin's nausea in Sartre's novel of the same name is striking, especially when one considers that Levinas published *De l'évasion*, where he first posed the escape from sticky being, in 1935, three years before the publication of *Nausea*.¹⁵ Roquentin is nauseated by the sheer thingyness of the chestnut tree, or a glass of beer. The world becomes a swooning abundance of brute matter devoid of meaning. "To exist is simply to be there" says Roquentin, as his consciousness is inescapably drawn into the viscous, sticky world of things.¹⁶ Joining this world isn't the solution; it is the problem. Or as Levinas puts it, "it is not a matter of escaping from solitude, but rather of escaping *from being*" (*EI*, p. 59).

One can see the connection here between "there is" and what Levinas writes about as totalization. Totalization means to bring everything under the horizon of the humanly knowable, as Western philosophy since Plato has done according to Levinas. Or as Roquentin puts it, "in vain I tried to count the Chestnut trees . . . to compare their height with the height of the plane trees."¹⁷ Roquentin tries, in other words, to subdue reality with the categories of his mind, much as Kant does with the synthetic a priori, categories that appear to be about the world, such as time and space, but are really projections of human reason. For Levinas, all Western thought is Kantian in this sense, an attempt to find the other in the same.

The best philosophy is rooted in the deepest emotional experiences

of awe, what the Greeks called *deinos*, which means both wonderful and terrible. Most *deinos* is not non-being, or even Kierkegaard's dread. The fundamental anxiety is not death. Hamlet, says Levinas, recoils not just against "not to be," but also "to be," for he knows that mere being is already death.¹⁸ The fundamental anxiety is mere being, being with no exit, being unto eternity. The other is my exit, my release, my salvation. Here finally is an exit from being, says Levinas, in an explicit reference to Sartre, relief from the horror of "condemnation to perpetual reality, to existence with 'no exits.'"¹⁹

But the other serves as exit only if I don't get too close. Levinas puts it pointedly. "Transcendence is only possible when the Other (*Autrui*) is not initially the fellow human being, or even the neighbor; but when it is the very distant, when it is Other, when it is . . . an abstraction . . . which pierces the continuity of the concrete. . . . Consequently, it is necessary to avoid the words *neighbor* and *fellow human being*, which establish so many things in common."²⁰

The experience of the awesome otherness of the other serves, it is apparent, not merely to protect the other, but the self, who would use the other as exit. When encountering the other I must tightly squint my eyes, so that I recognize a human face, but never well enough to know this other person as a neighbor (or even a fellow human?).

Socrates' account of the ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium* is Levinas's model. He refers to it frequently (*T&I*, pp. 53, 254, 292). We begin our climb hand in hand with our beloved, but only to leave the other somewhere along the way on our climb to the infinite, the "good existing beyond being" (*agathon epekenia tes ousias*). For Levinas the leaving begins the moment one encounters the face of the other at one's door. The other is infinitely other, the good existing beyond being. So I can be too. (In making this argument, I am mixing the ladder of love from Plato's *Symposium* [211c] with Plato's account of the form of the good as beyond being from the *Republic* [509b–c]. That is, I am mixing being with beyond being. While not quite fair, it is not misleading in the current context.)

Could a relationship with another, a relation with relation, to turn Levinas's phrase around, be equally respectful of the other? Such a relationship will not, evidently, provide an exit from being, but that was never a concern of the other anyway. That is the project of the subject, and in that sense at least selfish. Iris Murdoch's account of love's knowledge will provide this alternative, allowing us to consider it as another project, not just an abstract idea.

Before turning to her account a possible objection must be addressed. That I have, and continue, to confuse realms, the ontological with the ethical. When he talks about ethics, Levinas is talking about a relationship with the infinitely other, the profoundly distant and different. When he talks about ontology, Levinas is talking about our day-to-day relationships with other people, relationships that run the gamut from erotic relationships to the institutions of law and justice. I fail to observe the distinction, the Levinasian critic might argue. Indeed, Levinas himself posits an intermediate realm, midway between the narcissism of Eden and the encounter with the other. In this realm people vainly try to salve the solitude of their suffering through work, friendship, and eros; failing this they seek power over others.²¹ It is in this intermediate realm that most of what we call life takes place.

Such criticism is relevant, but for two reasons it is not decisive. First, Levinas often writes about ethical relationships as though they were real relationships with real people. The rhetorical, almost magical, power of his texts stems from this strategy. One moment the other is a person, the next a mirror whose face is infinity. Alphonso Lingis, translator of *Totality and Infinity*, says that with the author's permission he capitalizes the word "Other" when the word refers to another person, the "personal Other, the you," as it generally does (*T&I*, 24). Most of the appearances of the term are capitalized. One might still argue that when he talks about the infinitely other, Levinas is referring to an aspect of our relationship with real others (that is, not every aspect), and that would be true. What is not true is that Levinas is talking about some Other more august and transcendent than real other people. That would miss the point Levinas is trying to make, that we know the infinite only through other people.

The second reason it would be unfair to argue that I have mistaken the ontological for the ethical is that it is this very distinction I am challenging. To make this distinction sacrosanct would be to place Levinas beyond fundamental criticism; one could argue only about details. In turning to Murdoch, I am turning to a theorist who remains strictly within the realm of everyday life, finding there subtleties of knowing, caring, and being that Levinas believes come only by way of the infinite. (Though most of her work is a defense of moral particularity, Murdoch devoted some attention to developing an ontological proof of the reality of the good, which roughly parallels the ontological argument for the existence of God. While hardly the stuff of everyday

life, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* remains concerned with establishing the reality of goodness in this world.²²)

II

For Murdoch, the fundamental moral problem is the tendency of the ego to erase the reality of others. Her solution is love. "Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real."²³ Already we see how similar, and how different, Murdoch is from Levinas. The problem is the same, the problem that both define in terms of the "drive of consciousness to totality." But Murdoch's solution comes close to the solution Levinas rejects, his first solution to the experience of "there is," knowledge of the real world of others.

"The central concept of morality," says Murdoch, "is the individual thought of as knowable by love."²⁴ The goal is to see the other person justly, honestly, and compassionately. Doing so means moving away from universality and principles, and toward increasing depth, privacy, and particularity. Murdoch illustrates her argument with a story about a mother reflecting on her son's choice of a wife. The mother feels hostile toward her daughter-in-law, whom she finds common and unpolished, lacking in dignity and refinement. Her son, she is sure, has married beneath himself. The mother, who is always correct, behaves beautifully toward her daughter-in-law. Time passes, and Mother decides it is time to reevaluate her position. Her daughter-in-law, she discovers, is not really vulgar, but refreshingly simple, not undignified, but spontaneous. The mother's outward behavior never changed; she was always and continues to be perfectly correct. But the mother has gone on a moral journey, a pilgrimage of the soul (*Sovereignty*, 17–23).

The question of whether this new vision of her daughter-in-law is in fact more accurate does not arise for Murdoch. Not the correspondence of the mother's vision with some objective reality, but the ability of the mother-in-law to overcome narcissism and convention, and so see the other more clearly is at stake. Instead of the term narcissism, Murdoch uses the term "neurosis," but she means the same thing. Neurosis refers to "fantasies that inflate the importance of the self and obscure the reality of others." Convention refers to the tendency of the individual to become "sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as

so determined" ("Sublime," p. 216). Both narcissism and convention acted as barriers to the mother-in-law's perception of her daughter, though in what mix is impossible to tell. Murdoch says she may have been moved by love or justice.

Narcissism and convention are the barrier to loving knowledge. "The enemies of art and of morals, that is the enemies of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis" ("Sublime," p. 216). Both obscure our vision of the particular other, what Murdoch calls "attention," a term she draws from Simone Weil "to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual" (*Sovereignty*, p. 34).

Compare this simple story with that other simple story about answering the doorbell. The most obvious difference is that for Murdoch the particular other is important. The goal of morality is to know the unique other person. Murdoch does not say serve the other, but since this knowledge is impossible absent a love of the particular other, one can hardly imagine that it could be used to exploit the other, at least not intentionally. This, of course, is the problem. Must any contact with the real other exploit the other? And if our answer is yes, then what sort of human relationships shall we have in this world?

But is Murdoch really talking about a relationship, one might ask? Isn't she really talking about knowledge, which may be at a considerable distance, even if not the infinite distance that Levinas posits? In fact, there is no difference between relationship and knowledge when the relationship is love, as Martha Nussbaum argues in *Love's Knowledge*. Imagine that Peter is the most important person in the world for Joan. You know this because she has told you this many times over lunch. Suddenly Peter dies, and Joan just goes on with her life, hardly pausing to go the funeral. You would have to say (unless you think Joan was lying) that Joan does not yet really "know" that Peter has died, that it will take a while for the knowledge to sink in. When it does she will be devastated.²⁵ Murdoch's view is similar. Knowledge of a particular other is already an intimate relationship. Which is why Levinas would not even notice the color of the other's eyes.

Are Murdoch and Levinas similar, or worlds apart? They come closest in Murdoch's reinterpretation of Kant's account of the sublime, but only before going off in different directions. For Kant, beauty results from a harmony between imagination and understanding, whereas sublimity results from a conflict between imagination and reason. The sublime shatters human categories, which is why Kant thought the experience was most likely to occur in our encounters with nature. Like

Levinas, Murdoch is not impressed with natural beauty, except as it distracts us from our egos.²⁶ The true experience of the sublime, says Murdoch, is “not of physical nature, but of our surroundings as consisting of other individual men.” What ruptures our preshrunk categories is not the Grand Canyon at sunset, but the spectacle of human life in all its manifold and amazing diversity and particularity.²⁷ The sublime is close at hand, if only we would but look. Close at hand, but never within our grasp. The sublime is most fully experienced, suggests Murdoch, in the disturbing recognition that “others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves” (“Sublime,” p. 216).

More than one student of Levinas has seen the connection between Kant’s account of the sublime as that experience that ruptures human categories and Levinas’s account of the experience of the other.²⁸ Like Murdoch, Levinas transforms the experience of the sublime into an experience of other people. Like Levinas, Murdoch seeks to “reconstitute the ideas of consciousness and the good beyond the drive to totality,” as Antonaccio puts it in comparing Murdoch’s work to that of Levinas.²⁹ There the similarity ends, though one must consider the possibility that it never began. Levinas was never interested in the concrete reality of the other person, whose fleshy reality can only get in the way of transcendence. Murdoch, who does not seek transcendence, is interested in the reality of the other as it may be known through what she calls “love: the non-violent apprehension of difference” (“Sublime,” p. 218).

But perhaps Murdoch does seek transcendence after all. It depends in part by what we mean by transcendence. Transcend comes from the Latin, meaning to climb over or go beyond the limits of something. Like Levinas, Murdoch’s goal is to go beyond the limits of the self. Unlike Levinas, Murdoch is content to remain within a world of beings, the same place Martha Nussbaum ends up.³⁰ One enters the realm of beings through “techniques of unselfing” as Murdoch calls them. These are not grand, but mundane, and found in experiences of nature and art, intellectual studies, such as learning a language, and paying attention to other people. Imagine, says Murdoch, the experience of looking out the window in an anxious and resentful state, brooding on some damage to my prestige. “Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important”

(*Sovereignty*, p. 84). In a similar way, intellectual studies (a category Murdoch thinks about in terms of Plato's *techné*), such as learning a language, confront one with "an authoritative structure which commands my respect. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. . . . Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal" (*Sovereignty*, p. 89).

Especially when she is talking about overcoming tendencies toward totalization, Murdoch sounds so much like Levinas one wants to cheat and call them soulmates. Yet they are talking about something quite different. For Murdoch, "the self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion." The goal is to escape this veil of vanity, and "see the unself," the real world as it is, a world filled with particular others, far more different from us than we ever imagined (*Sovereignty*, p. 93). The result is that Murdoch has a very different take on Sartre's nausea. "Sartre's *nausée* express the horror of those who can no longer love or attend to or even really *see* the contingent, and fear it as a threat to their imaginary freedom and self-regarding 'authenticity.'"³¹

Unlike Murdoch, Levinas would never call the self an illusion. Far from being an illusion, the self is remarkably real, a tangible fleshy thing that threatens to become the prison of the "there is," and a barrier to infinity. For this reason, knowledge of the reality of others will not overcome it. A shattering experience is necessary, like that of Saul on the road to Damascus, an experience that does not bring me closer to my deliverer, emphasizing instead the infinite distance between us. Only this can open me up—not to reality, but to infinity.

Several times I've compared Levinas's vision to that of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*. Murdoch would create a symposium (her novels have this quality) whose participants climb the ladder of love only high enough to be free of their vanity and egoism, but never so high as to leave the world behind. Her Socrates is James Taper Pace, a spiritually charismatic but limited character in her novel *The Bell*, who says "the chief requirement of the good life . . . is to live without any image of oneself. . . . We were told at school . . . to have ideals. This, it seems to me, is rot. Ideals are dreams. They come between us and reality—when what we need most is just precisely to see reality. And that is something outside us. Where perfection is, reality is."³² Where perfection is, reality is. The good is to know it, which means to see as clearly as possible. The

less ego, the more we know, and the less we are led to totalize, which means to put ego in place of other.

IV

Murdoch leaves room for tragedy. Our capacity to know others through love does not lead to harmony. We may know them as justly and truly as we can, and still not be able to get along with them ("Sublime," p. 216). Love's knowledge is not love's concord. Which suggests a point insufficiently appreciated by both Murdoch and Levinas. Both assume that the problem is the ego, the narcissism of the pre-doorbell state of "living from" as Levinas calls it, "neurosis," as Murdoch calls it. In fact, much of the misery in life comes from what might be called dependent attachment, something Murdoch writes about repeatedly in her novels, only occasionally in her philosophy. Charles Arrowby, protagonist of *The Sea, The Sea*, holds his long-lost girlfriend, Hartley, a prisoner in his country house. One might argue that this represents the power of totalizing egoism, but it seems more a sign of his utter dependence upon her to keep from going insane.

In her novels, but not in her philosophy, Murdoch recognizes the power of our need for others. It is this, not the vanity but the insufficiency of the ego, its terrible need to find its other half, that so often spoils relationships, turning them into tyrannies. Murdoch knows this in her novels, Levinas not at all.

There's no tragedy in Levinas, for the same reason there is none in Plato. There never is for those who believe in exit. Infinity is incompatible with tragedy. One might argue that infinity produces its own tragedy in Levinas. The needs of others are infinite, and so is my responsibility to them. But my capacity to meet the needs of others is finite, no matter how I suffer. Is this not a type of tragedy? No. Guilty man is not tragic man. Levinas's favorite quotation (he quotes it half a dozen times throughout his works) is from Dostoevsky. "Every one of us is guilty before all, for everyone and everything, and I more than others." The triumphant idealization of guilt is incompatible with tragedy.

While there is no tragedy in Levinas, there is a passion quite missing in Murdoch, the author who writes of love. One is tempted to refer to the passion of Jesus Christ, and many Christians have read Levinas this way, and for good reason, as when Levinas says "I am responsible for the

persecutions that I undergo" (*EL*, p. 99). But passion is not just guilt and suffering in Levinas. A barely contained passion for otherness, exit, and transcendence runs through Levinas, a thrill that in his early works is directed toward the experience of the voluptuous nude body, as though eros could free us for infinity. (Reading Levinas sometimes feels like one is reading Plato's *Symposium* in turgid language.) Almost one-third of *Totality and Infinity* is devoted to sensuous experience.

One wants to say that the body exists for exit in Levinas's work, but that puts it too Socratically. Levinas distances the other not simply to maintain the other's power to provoke transcendence, but to protect the other from the power of passion. For all her knowledge of love, it's a power largely missing in Murdoch. To be sure, Murdoch's characters, such as Crimond and Jean in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, are often possessed by passion. But Murdoch's authorial presence lacks passion in both the novels and essays. Passion, Murdoch seems to believe, is a barrier to seeing clearly, an obstacle to just love. About this she may be mistaken.

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1. Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 140.
2. Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 181, 223.
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 85; hereafter abbreviated as *EL*.
4. This is my version of a story told by Levinas in "Enigma and Phenomenon," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 65–78. I have added some details and made it more concrete.
5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men" (Second Discourse), in *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger Masters and Judith Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp. 77–228.
6. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 134; hereafter abbreviated as *T&I*.
7. The term "infinity" means several things in Levinas, and he rarely distinguishes the different senses in which he uses the term. He becomes much clearer when we do. (A)

Infinity means timelessness in the sense of the medieval *nunc stans*, eternity as a place outside of time. The shattering experience of the other about which Levinas writes is located (if that is the right word) under this sense of infinity. (B) Infinity means absolute difference, as in an infinity of difference between you and me. This is the practical version of infinity, so to speak, how it manifests itself in our everyday world. No matter how similar I am to another person in sociological terms, we are completely and utterly different by virtue of being separate people, so different we cannot be compared. See “Transcendence and Height,” *Basic Philosophical Writings*, pp. 11–31. The difference between us is infinite in the sense that it is not subject to comparison. I am asking the reader to think about whether this is true. (C) Infinity means an intrusion of otherness so shocking and complete it tears me from my ego. “The epiphany of the other, which is the concrete form of the infinite,” is how Peperzak puts it, in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1983), p. 182. Here infinity refers not just to otherness, but a shattering experience of non-being, as though someone ripped open the vault of the heavens to reveal nothing. It is in this sense of the term that Levinas is writing here. (D) Sometimes infinity means God.

8. “Substitution,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, pp. 79–96, 90.

9. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 69.

10. Davis, *Levinas*, p. 45.

11. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79–153.

12. Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 300–323.

13. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 38.

14. Burness Moore and Bernard Fine, eds., *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (New Haven: Yale University Press and the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1990), p. 52.

15. Levinas, *De l'évasion* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1982).

16. John-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 179.

17. Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 174.

18. Levinas, “There is: Existence Without Existents,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), pp. 29–36, 33.

19. Levinas, “There is,” p. 33.

20. Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” p. 27.

21. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

22. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

23. Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 205–20, 215; hereafter abbreviated as "Sublime."
24. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 30; hereafter abbreviated as *Sovereignty*.
25. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 41.
26. Levinas, "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 231–34.
27. Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 261–86, 282.
28. Stuart Dalton, "Obligation to the Other in Levinas and the Sublime in Kant," <<http://uhavax.hartford.edu/~dalton/sublimeobligation.html>>.
29. Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, pp. 222–23.
30. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 53, 370.
31. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 377.
32. Murdoch, *The Bell* (New York: Penguin, 1958), p. 131. Murdoch also has a real (and less down to earth) Socrates as a character in *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (New York, Penguin 1986).