KANT, LEVINAS, AND THE
THOUGHT OF THE “OTHER”

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Kant is on the way to thinking the being of reflection in the transcendental, that is, in the ontological sense. This occurs in the form of a hardly noticeable side remark in the Critique of Pure Reason under the title “On the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection.” The section is a supplement, but it is filled with essential insight and critical dialogue with Leibniz, and thus with all previous metaphysics, as Kant himself sees it and as it is grounded in its ontological constitution of egoity.

Martin Heidegger,
“Overcoming Metaphysics” (section XVII), Vorträge und Aufsätze

To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object. . . . The “intentionality” of transcendence is unique in its kind; the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work.

Emmanuel Levinas,
Totality and Infinity (trans. Alphonso Lingis), p. 49

Introduction

No one has more persistently and passionately confronted us with the ethical responsibility of thinking the human Other in its otherness than Emmanuel Levinas. The mere quantity of articles, anthologies, books, and conferences devoted to various aspects of his thought in the span of less than a decade clearly attests to the fact that his writings and ideas have tapped into a reservoir of widespread and deep-seated concerns. In particular, it seems that, for a number of contemporary philosophers rooted in the Continental tradition, Levinas’ thought has come to represent a potentially viable alternative, on the one hand, to the later Heidegger’s politically suspect “resignation” to the Siren-song of Being and, on the other, to the infinitely redoubling and finally nihilistic play of “differences” of Derridean post-structuralism.

Still, we cannot discount the serious reservations expressed by some of those who have flown close to the flame of Levinas’ passionate discourse. David Klemm, for example, has pointed to the tendency of Levinas to shift among a philosophical, religious, and prophetic “voice” in his writings, often (I would add) at precisely those points where we most wish to follow him further along the trajectory which he had just been following.1 Lodging a more radical charge, Paul Ricoeur describes the writings of Levinas as employing “hyperbole, to the point of paroxysm.”2 Indeed, Ricoeur argues that Levinas’ reliance upon the rhetorical excesses of hyperbole in expressing what might otherwise be valuable philosophical insights ultimately vitiates his entire project. Both themes are echoed in a recent work of John Caputo. On the one hand, he writes:

Levinas is a great prophetic voice and I love him, as I love father Abraham and all the prophets. But I have always allowed myself to think that it is not necessary to believe the stories the prophets tell, not

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literally. On the other hand, he flatly declares that "Levinas goes to excess." He continues:

That is exactly what I believe this is: an excess, an excessive statement, a bit of hyperbole, which is an operation of difference, a story—but a fabulous and important story that I love, a piece of powerful, impressive poetics.

Attracted by the passionate insights that Levinas' discourse expresses, repelled by the discourse's own overpowering excess: this is not an altogether unfair or ill-conceived response to the Levinasian text.

I have no intention in this essay of either defending Levinas' "excesses" against such critical reactions or of eviscerating his most profound insights by watering them down to some more palatable discursive formulation. Rather, I will follow Heidegger's lead that the "tradition of metaphysics" (which in some important ways approximates what Levinas would call "ontology") can only be "overcome" by creatively reappropriating the devices that the tradition itself makes available to us—but never by some "step out of it," rhetorical or otherwise.

In this essay, I want to explore an approach to the question of the Other in which Kant and Levinas might be brought into productive dialogue with one another. This approach involves a bi-directional reading. On the one hand, I want to develop out of Kant a framework for articulating the Otherness of the other and employ it to bring into sharper focus some of the Levinasian themes that most tend to provoke accusations of "excess." On the other hand, I want to use certain features of Levinas' thought to develop these Kantian insights in directions which admittedly go beyond what Kant himself might have sanctioned.

More specifically, I will adopt the following approach.

(1) I begin with the "Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection," the Anmerkung appended to the "Transcendental Analytic" of the Critique of Pure Reason (henceforth, KdV). In my discussion, I want specifically to explore the notion of Reflexion that Kant introduces there and to employ his categorial schematization of Nichts as a further articulation of Reflexionsbegriffe. On my interpretation, this section indicates a direction in which one might begin to articulate the "otherness of the Other," the irreducible asymmetry between consciousness and that which transcends it.

(2) I then briefly suggest certain areas of philosophical concern that Kant and Levinas share, areas broader, perhaps, than many of the figures whom Levinas cites with greater frequency.

(3) In connection with this, I briefly consider one possible source for the major objection to the rapprochement between Kant and Levinas which I am here proposing, the originally Kantian distinction between "autonomy" and "heteronomy," but as reformulated by Levinas.

(4) I then attempt to reformulate Kant's "transcendental problem" along lines suggested by Levinas. That is, I want to claim that the relevant "other" of Kantian transcendentalism can be fruitfully viewed neither as the epistemological "thing-in-itself" nor the metaphysical "nousmal," but rather as the Other, understood as a concretely existing human being or person presented in an irreducible face-to-face, ethical relation.

(5) Bringing these themes together, I want briefly to sketch how the categorial schema of Nichts which Kant proposes at the end of the "Transcendental Analytic" provides a determinate framework that can, in turn, be fleshed out, concretized, and extended using the most important of Levinas' own modalities of articulating the transcendence or "otherness" of the Other.

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“The Structure of Otherness”: Kant

Kant’s basic idea of a “Critical Philosophy,” and in particular of a “Critique of Pure Reason,” involved establishing a limit, a Grenze, to the field of that which could be asserted as knowable. This “difference” that Kant sought to think appears in his philosophy under numerous inflections—the knowable versus the merely thinkable, the “object” of possible experience versus the Ding-an-sich, the phenomenal versus the noumenal, the sensible versus the supersensible, and so forth. But, as most of his readers from Reinhold to Hegel agreed, such a project could be carried off only at the expense of a fatal inconsistency. The very establishing of such a Grenze between a knowable “here” and an unknowable “there” already presupposed the sort of knowledge of the transcendent “there” that the Critical Philosophy itself explicitly excluded.

Put more specifically, if the categories, the most fundamental concepts operative in providing unity to our experience, were held to be meaningful only in application to possible objects of experience, then they must a fortiori be empty or meaningless if applied beyond this limit. All rational discourse concerning an “other” of experience should therefore be regarded as impossible, at least if construed in any epistemic sense. On the other hand, the critical project of establishing such a limit implied, of itself, a discursive stance which would be capable of sufficiently articulating the “parts” of the realm being divided in order to establish a meaningful and non-arbitrary division between them.

Hegel, in his Differenzschrift, formulates the problem facing a critical philosophy in a way which is, for all its pointed criticism, true to Kant’s own concerns. There Hegel distinguishes between a philosophical approach based upon Reflexion, associated with the understanding, and one oriented by Vernunft. A fair gloss of Hegel’s critique might be that, whereas Kant had set out to provide a “critique of pure reason” from the standpoint of pure reason itself, he had really only succeeded in producing an arbitrary delimitation or division of pure reason from the more limited standpoint of the understanding and its “reflexive” procedures.

When Hegel accuses Kant of being mired in the limited standpoint of a Reflexionsphilosophie, he means to indicate that Kant’s philosophical procedure consists in positing conceptual distinctions which presuppose a broader field that they divide without, however, “reconstituting” or bringing that field to articulation in some higher concept or discursive structure. I say that this is, in an important way, true to Kant precisely because Kant himself had already developed a response to another earlier Reflexionsphilosophie, that of Leibniz.

The “Appendix” to the “Transcendental Analytic” of the KdrV entitled “The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection [Reflexionsbegriffe]” occupies what one might well expect to be a significant, even pivotal place in the work’s argument. In this section, Kant turns his attention to “the consciousness of the relation of given representations to our different sources of knowledge.” Clearly, the major focus of this “Appendix” is to show how Leibniz (and his Wolffian followers) went astray in failing to keep the understanding and sensibility distinct, especially in their treatment of percepts as a merely “confused” forms of concepts. This, of course, serves the overall argument of the KdrV in that it allows Kant to underscore the fundamental and irreducible distinction between the understanding and intuition, upon which he had been insisting all along. Heidegger, however, was quite right to refer to this “Appendix” as a “supplement,” since Kant returned to the same issues in the “Transcendental Dialectic,” although from a rather
different angle. The question thus naturally arises: Why include this section at all? It was, on any account, a quite uncharacteristic departure from his otherwise spartan architectonic discipline.

Articulating “the Difference of Identity and Difference”: Kant’s Notion of Reflexion

I want to argue that, in the “Amphiboly” section of the *KdrV*, Kant broached an issue, always lurking in the shadows of his critical procedures, to which he would later return in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and which he tended to think of in terms of the problem of *Reflexion*.

For Kant, reflection referred to the process by which the consciousness of the asymmetry between the conceptual and sensible orders is determined and articulated. As Kant developed the notion of reflection, it concerned the assignment of representations to their proper “transcendental locations,” which depended upon the recognition of irreducible asymmetries between universal concepts and particular intuitions (and, of course, the judgments in which they are expressed). Reflection was thus a process of thinking and articulating a set of irreducible differences, hence of maintaining a position or attitude which steadfastly refused the reduction of one side to the other without introducing some further concept or intuition within which they would be united.

Read from Hegel’s later perspective, I am inclined to claim that, in his notion of reflection (and despite Hegel’s invectives in the *Differenzschrift* and later writings), Kant, at this point, formulated the problem of the “difference of identity and difference,” the “suppressed moment” of Hegel’s own dialectical energetics based upon the “identity of identity and difference.” This may help us explain the pivotal position of Kant’s unusual “Appendix” and, perhaps, the somewhat “uncritical” character of the trajectory of his thought there.

In the “Transcendental Analytic,” to which the “Appendix” (Kant calls it *Anmerkung*) is attached, Kant’s procedure had been to establish a difference between the conceptual and the sensible, or between spontaneity and receptivity, from the standpoint of the understanding, that is, of a differentiation out of a presupposed identity or sameness. In other words, he had laid out the difference between understanding and sensibility (as Hegel, I think, correctly claimed in the *Differenzschrift*) from the standpoint of understanding viewed as a self-limitation of reason. In the “Transcendental Dialectic,” the standpoint alters in the sense that the transcendental philosopher now occupies the position of logical ratiocination (*Vernunft*), which was, by his own admission, merely that of the understanding freed of its limitation to possible objects of experience. However, in both cases, that of the “analysis” of the conditions for experience and that of the “dialectical critique” of transcendent assumptions, Kant’s standpoint remained firmly rooted in identity or sameness.

Reflection, however, cannot be equated with the standpoint of either *Verstand* or *Vernunft*. As Kant himself presents it, reflection must be something beyond *Verstand*, inasmuch as *Verstand* is one of the terms in the difference which it is the task of reflection to articulate from “beyond” *Verstand* itself. But neither can reflection be identified with *Vernunft*, since *Vernunft* is always, for Kant, purely formal and operates in abstraction from all particular determinations (unless, of course, it becomes self-canceling and hence “dialectical.”) However, Kant’s contention in the “Amphiboly” is precisely that reflection deals with a difference which cannot be purely formal or logical; if it were, Kant’s critique of Leibniz there would entirely lose its force.

On these grounds, I am suggesting that it is fair to view Kant’s notion of reflection as the articulation of the consciousness of dif-

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ference from the standpoint of difference. Reflection may thus be interpreted as a thinking and articulation of the “difference of identity and difference” which does not constitute another (higher?) identity as its outcome nor immediately resolve itself into an “understanding” of the “already limited” or a “rationation” involving concepts freed of all critical restrictions.

The Categorial Schema of Otherness: Kant’s Account of “Nichts”

Now we must turn to what can only be considered “the Appendix to the Appendix” (or perhaps “a remark about a remark”), that is, Kant’s “categorial sketch” of a treatment of “Nichts” which concludes his discussion of “The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection.”

Kant, while several times touting the philosophical interest and utility of his “Amphiboly” discussion, sounds downright apologetic about his brief discussion of “nothing.” On the present reading, however, no apologies were necessary, since, for my purposes, this is perhaps the most interesting part of this section, if not the entire first Critique. I say this because it seems to me that, given how Kant has situated reflection between Verstand and Vernunft as the “thinking of difference from the standpoint of difference,” he has posed the possibility of a rather different sort of “critique” than the epistemological one that he had been pursuing, namely, a path toward articulating the limitations of our knowledge, discourse, experience, and practice otherwise and yet more concretely than the merely logical conundra developed in the “Transcendental Dialectic.”

What Kant has sketched, in effect, is a framework that brings some specificity and determinateness to that which must necessarily elude and defy us, a sort of rudimentary “logic of the Other.” I want to claim that Kant provides us here with a schema for reflecting on the Other in its otherness which, on the one hand, does not abandon the Other as an indeterminate and radically incommensurable surd nor, on the other, re instituted a regime of the Same or of identity in which the Other is assimilated, eviscerated, into the sameness of the Self or thought. Put in somewhat different terms, Kant, in this brief section, provides a framework for reflectively orienting ourselves within an asymmetrical relation to the Other which at once requires us to acknowledge, examine, and articulate our own finitude and limitations in the face of the Other without casting us into the paralysis of utter abjection or misology.

In this brief section, Kant deliberately and graphically maps his discussion of Nichts onto his previous fourfold division of the Categories. We must pay careful attention, however, to how he does this. In no case does Kant conceive Nichts as the absence, obliteration, or erasure of one of the categorial divisions. Rather, Nichts has a fourfold inflection, generated in each case by a specific asymmetry between concept and putative object. Kant’s fourfold articulation of Nichts might be developed in the following manner.16

Quantity: “Empty concept without object.” Kant calls this the ens rationis. He also specifically refers to this as the “noumenon” properly speaking, that is, a concept lacking any possible object. It is important to notice, however, that, from the standpoint of reflection, quantitative Nichts signifies not a mere absence of a correlative “possible object of experience” (as it would for the understanding) nor an ultimately “dialectical” concept (as it would for reason) but rather an asymmetrical relation between an actual, thinkable concept for which no “intentional fulfillment” (as Husserl might have put it) is or can be forthcoming.

Extending this idea, we might say that Kant’s notion of “quantitative Nichts,” de-
scribed from the standpoint of reflection, serves to indicate a modality of transcendence (or an awareness of the “otherness of what is other”) whereby certain concepts that we might form will ultimately be inadequate to their putative intentional correlates. For reflection, such concepts will be “empty” not because there simply is no object that they intend, but because they will be inadequate to any object that might be proposed as their “counterpart.” The logic of reflection thus depends not upon the “either/or” of Verstand and Vernunft but upon the always only partial adequation of a given concept to its intentional correlate; “quantitative Nichts” serves to mark the place of this asymmetry or “reflective difference.” It is important to see, however, that the emphasis in “quantitative asymmetry” is upon a concept being “empty” not because it has no object at all, but because the relevant “object,” however we might adjust our concept, will always overflow and exceed the concept by which we attempt to grasp it.

Quality: “Empty object of a concept.” Here, the asymmetry involves not that of the inescapable inadequacy of concept to the excess of the transcendent other, but that relation of what otherwise is, of itself, fully conceivable and articulable but reduced to “zero-degree.” Kant calls this inflection of Nichts nihil privatium and invokes things “such as shadow, cold” as illustrations of his meaning. From the standpoint of reflection, therefore, “qualitative asymmetry” concerns not excess on the side of the intentional correlate but on the side of conceptualization itself. “Qualitative Nichts” serves to mark the place, in reflection, whereby we come to recognize that conceptualization has itself exceeded and overpowered its object, thus reducing it to the status of “nothing.” Again, the point is not that there simply is no “object” for the concept nor that the concept itself is incoherent, but rather that conceptual thought, in attempting to grasp an object, has reduced its object to utter inconsequentiality. It has overpowered its object and reduced it to a “something” in which there is no longer anything left to grasp.

Relation: “Empty intuition without object.” The Nichts of “relational reflection” Kant calls ens imaginariun. Here, he explicitly points to the pure forms of intuition which, while they “are indeed something, as forms of intuition,” are nevertheless “not themselves objects which are intuited.” However, it must immediately be added that they are not concepts either, so the issue cannot concern any asymmetry of concept to object.

What sort of reflective asymmetry is at stake here? I will take Kant’s lead in his use of the term ens imaginariun. An “imagined being” would be one of which we could form a determinate representation without its actually becoming present within the given spatiality and temporality of our experience. The emphasis, however, must fall not upon the representation (or its “object”) but upon the difference between our dynamic preconceptual intentionality within the conditions of the lived space and time of our concrete existence and the inability of any bringing to completion of this intentionality in the form of a determinate concept or representation.

Our spatio-temporal existence is certainly “not nothing,” but neither can any concept, representation, or object succeed in converting it to a determinate “something.” It is, rather, a continual “transcendence” or “going out toward” an other at which it will never, nonetheless, finally arrive. The asymmetry of “relational reflection,” then, is a movement “away” and “into the future” toward an “imagined” destination which must remain ever elusive.

Modality: “Empty object without concept.” Kant calls this inflection of Nichts nihil negativum and describes it as “the ob-

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ject of a concept which contradicts itself ... because the concept is nothing, is the impos-
possible.” While Kant’s treatment here might seem relatively unproblematic from the point of
view of Vernunft, it leaves obscure what this inflection of Nichts might mean from the
standpoint of “modal reflection.” The problem is that if both concept and object are
contradictory, they are equally “self-cancel-
ling”; in such a case, there would be no “difference” otherwise required by reflection
to assign such concepts or objects to their “proper transcendental locations.”

It might help here to recall that modality reenters Kant’s discussion under the heading
“The Ideal of Pure Reason” in the “Transcen-
dental Dialectic.” There, Kant takes up the
arguments of “natural theology” in order to
show why it is impossible to demonstrate the
existence of a “supreme being” or ens real-
issimum logically, even though the concept of
such a being is not, of itself, contradictory.
The key, of course, is that “existence” does
not enter into judgments as a predicate but
indicates a particular (modal) relation be-
 tween thought and its object. Rather than
being a self-contradictory concept, that of an
ens realissimum turns out to be consistent
and thinkable, but only so long as the modal
category of “existence” is excluded from its
category. On Kant’s view, the illicit employ-
ment of “existence” as a predicate destroys
this consistency and renders both the concept
and its putative object logically impossible
(if not self-contradictory).

Following this lead, though admittedly
not in full accordance with Kant’s own ex-
pressed view in the section under discussion,
I want to formulate the asymmetry involved
in “modal reflection” as, in fact, a dual rela-
tion: on the one hand, between the finite
representation of an infinite Other and, on the
other, the thought of an infinite other on the
basis of finite appearance. On this interpre-
tation, “modal reflection” is the problematic
recognition of the incommensurability be-
tween our resources to articulate the infinite
in finite terms and the implicit infinity of our
discourse in the face of always finite appear-
ances.

To conclude this part of my discussion by
returning briefly to the beginning of this es-
say, I am departing from Heidegger’s state-
ment quoted earlier in one important sense. I
do not mean to claim that my interpretation
of Kant amounts to an “ontology” of the
Other, for, on my reading of this section, that
would make no sense at all. Rather, I mean
to suggest that, in thinking the difference
between identity and difference from the
standpoint of difference, Kant’s notion of
reflection provides us, not with an “ontol-
ogy” of the Other, but with a schema that
specifies the various dimensions of experi-
ence and thought in which the Other eludes
us. It is, in a sense, Kant’s way of fleshing
out Socrates’ practice of “systematic igno-
rance,” of coming to know what and in what
respects we ultimately cannot know.

Proximities of Kant and Levinas

Although Levinas mentions Kant on sev-
eral occasions as one of his major intellectual
influences, references to him are otherwise
surprisingly sparse in his writings, especially
when compared with the frequent citations
of Plato, Descartes, Husserl, and Heidegger.
With a few scattered exceptions, commentators on Levinas’ philosophical views have
also tended to avoid pursuing such connec-
tions. On one count, it is easy to understand
why this might be so, since Kant’s invocation
of an overarching, universal Reason in both
the theoretical and practical spheres would
seem to exemplify exactly the sort of “redu-
don of Difference to Identity” or “of the
Other to the Same” against which the entire
thrust of Levinasian thought is directed. An-
other more ad hominem factor might also be
a certain tendency on the part of Levinas to
accept as valid Heidegger’s interpretation of what is most significant in Kant in such works as Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, thus, in effect, allowing Kant subsequently to be tarred with the same brush as Heidegger.

However, at a deeper level (and leaving aside certain post-Heideggerian ways of reading Kant), there are some important convergences between basic Kantian and Levinasian concerns. I especially want to call attention to those points at which Kant would appear to be a much more natural interlocutor for Levinas than the figures he usually invokes, especially Descartes and Husserl and, in some respects, Plato as well.

(1) Both Kant and Levinas view ethics as the focal point of the philosophical enterprise.

In the Preface to the second edition of the KdrV, Kant adopts the rhetoric of “negative” and “positive” in describing the relation between the Critiques of “Theoretical” and “Practical Reason.” In response to the question, “What sort of a treasure is this that we propose to bequeath posterity?,” Kant’s uncompromising answer is that, while the “theoretical” critique “negatively” establishes the possibility of freedom, this constitutes the starting-point of a “positive” account of morality.25 That is, by Kant’s own admission, the KdrV may fairly be regarded as the “propaedeutic” to ethics as presented in the Critique of Practical Reason, which has often been regarded as the lynchpin of Kant’s philosophical system.

In his essay, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Levinas presents a radicalized version of the same claim. He concludes this essay with the statement, “The question par excellence or the question of philosophy. Not ‘Why being rather than nothing?’, but how being justifies itself.”26 Of course, Levinas does want to privilege “the ethical” over “the theoretical” in a much stronger sense than is generally in evidence in Kant, but there can be little doubt that, on this score, Levinas is decidedly closer to Kant than to Descartes or Husserl, both of whom he mentions far more frequently.

(2) Both thinkers regard “subjectivity” as a sphere circumscribed by limits, the elucidation of which is a major philosophical concern.

Although Levinas clearly wants to indicate the priority of the “Other” or “Difference” over the “Same” or “Identity” implied by subjectivity, and in a way which is admittedly rather different than in Kant, he at the same time wants to emphasize that transcendence nonetheless requires, perhaps even presupposes, subjectivity. In Totality and Infinity (p. 26), Levinas writes:

This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity.

Although caution is required, one could equally well say of Kant that subjectivity can neither be regarded as “egoist protestation” nor “anguish before death,” but as delineated and articulate only on the assumption of differences marked, among other devices, by the asymmetries articulated by “amphibolic reflection” which I discussed above. Another way in which Kant delimits the sphere of subjectivity is through the distinction between the “phenomenal” or finite and the “noumenal” or infinite realms.30 Again, on this issue, it seems that Levinas is actually closer to Kant than to Descartes, who seems to regard both the idea of the Cogito and that of infinity (or God) as somehow “co-innate” in consciousness rather than as a difference which erupts out of subjectivity’s own reflexive processes.

(3) Both regard “metaphysics” (at least in

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one of the senses they share) as involving the transgression of the limits of subjectivity toward a “transcendent other” and both undertake a revision of the classical project of “metaphysics” in a way that would highlight the contours of this transgression.

Kant, in the course of his thought, begins by criticizing traditional notions of metaphysics and ends by affirming the systematic projects of a “metaphysics of nature” and of “morals,” thereby validating the “natural metaphysical impulse” while rejecting the traditional forms that it had previously taken. The result, as he presents it in the Preface to the second edition of KdR, is a new “system of metaphysics,” but one purged of the “dogmatism” implicit in “pre-critical” procedures.

It can be argued that Levinas makes a remarkably parallel gesture in his employment of the term “metaphysics.” Unlike Kant, Levinas views the relevant contrast to be between “ontology” and “metaphysics,” where Kant would have viewed “ontology” as one of the branches of (especially Wolffian versions of) “metaphysics.” Still, in speaking of “metaphysics” in the strict sense, Levinas does not wish to indicate all that has gone on under that title in the tradition (much of which would have to fall under “ontology,” the reduction of the “Other” to the “Same”); rather, he wants to highlight those points in the tradition where the characteristic directionality or impetus toward the transcendence of the sphere of subjectivity manifests itself. As in Kant, this more determinate and restricted notion of “metaphysics” is implicated in what both would acknowledge as a natural, fundamental, and pervasive movement of finite existence.

There are, of course, other convergences that one might cite, and one would doubtless also have to reiterate that Kant and Levinas remain different, even opposed, in many respects. My point here is only to indicate that there are enough concerns and attitudes shared by Kant and Levinas to warrant the attempt to bring them into proximity with one another in ways that have not yet been explored. More specifically, I am suggesting that Kant’s philosophy might well present a more fruitful opportunity for this than any of the figures whom Levinas himself invokes in articulating his own position.

**Autonomy, Heteronomy, and Alterity**

I now wish to confront head-on the major obstacle that might be invoked regarding the line of thought I am developing. Levinas himself suggests the most forceful objection to such a project in his “programmatic essay” for Totality and Infinity entitled “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite.” In the first section of this essay, he begins by posing an opposition which has very distinctive Kantian resonances, that between “autonomy” and “heteronomy.” For Levinas, this distinction concerns nothing less than the contrast between two opposed views of truth and thus of the telos as well as the praxis of philosophy. “Heteronomy,” as Levinas employs it here, involves a basic attitude or orientation in which “truth implies experience.” “In the truth, a thinker maintains a relationship with a reality distinct from him, other than him— ‘absolutely other.’” The essential element in Levinas’ exposition is a directionality of the thoughtful development of experience whereby “truth implies more than exteriority: transcendence.” From the point of view of “heteronomy,” “philosophy means metaphysics, and metaphysics inquires about the divine.”

By contrast, “autonomy” signifies “the free adherence to a proposition, the outcome of a free research.” From this orientation, “philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as other.” Levinas notes that this involves “a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit
thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, unlimited, would be free.” Rather than the metaphysical transcendence of heteronomy, the final outcome of philosophical autonomy “would thus be tantamount to the conquest of being by man over the course of history.” In this sense, the directionality of autonomy would be the reverse of that of heteronomy: the assimilation by the Ego or subjectivity of all that is other into its own order and discipline. He concludes that “Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every Other in the Same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy.”

Now, one might, given Levinas’ choice of terms, immediately think of Kant as one of the cardinal advocates of precisely the “autonomous” orientation that Levinas is condemning. After all, it might be urged, did not the “autonomy/heteronomy” distinction serve in Kant’s moral philosophy to mark the difference between a genuinely “moral imperative” and a merely “instrumental” or “technical” one? Did he not claim that the very “goodness” of the “good will” consisted of the determination of the “will” by a universal law categorically enjoined by our own immanent nature as “rational beings”? The point, of course, is that, if autonomy is such an explicit and emphatic element of Kant’s thought, would he not be diametrically opposed to the entire trajectory of Levinas’ project, thus vitiating from the beginning any attempt to bring them into proximity?

Without denying that this will remain a concern, I want to suggest that, despite their Kantian resonances, autonomy and heteronomy, as Levinas employs them, may after all be more consistent with their Kantian counterparts than might be suspected on a first reading. Although Levinas initially introduces these terms as presenting a rather dramatic contrast, his subsequent discussion makes clear that the real issue is not a choice of one orientation to the exclusion of the other, but rather of two different ways of understanding their relative priority. It is not a matter of deliberately choosing between autonomy and heteronomy (since that would, in any event, amount to a purely “autonomous” gesture), but rather of coming to recognize that, while autonomy and the freedom that it implies always maintains its sway over subjectivity and is inextricable from it, the very condition and presupposition of subjective autonomy is precisely the absolute limit posed by the encounter with that which is Other, heteronomous, which is, for Levinas, the notion of infinity concretely presented by the face of another human being. The force of Levinas’ point is that the egological or narcissistic “monologue” in which we come forcefully to assert our freedom is first set in motion only by the challenge by which the mere appearance of an other demands that we justify our freedom to begin with. It is only upon the condition of the disturbance of self-complacency by genuine alterity that, on the one hand, autonomy arises as a possibility and, simultaneously as it were, that heteronomy is confirmed as “always already” prior to autonomy. As Levinas puts it, “A new situation is created; consciousness’s presence to itself acquires a different modality (with the encounter with the Other); its positions collapse.” Thus, while autonomy and its freedom can be asserted and maintained by a Machtspruch, this itself will always still bear testimony to the precedence of the heteronomous encounter with the alterity that provoked it. The crucial issue for Levinas, then, is this realization of the centrality of alterity, the breaking into subjectivity of the Other, which serves to subordinate autonomy to heteronomy as conditioned to condition.33

To return to Kant, one can rather clearly trace the outlines of a similar movement if we leave aside for a moment his own more

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restricted usage of the terms “autonomy” and “heteronomy.” With regard to the general project of a Critical Philosophy, Kant’s thought inscribes a similar path not once but (at least) three times. In the *KdrV*, he claims to “deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith,” that is, to circumscribe the sphere of autonomy by delimiting it in relation to the infinity of transcendence or heteronomy, only within which knowledge can be meaningful as one restricted and finite mode of human orientation among others. In the *KdpV*, the *Grundlegung*, and *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, Kant argues that, while reason can “autonomously” (in the Levinasian sense) determine the formal structure of the “moral law” and hence the conditions of freedom, its concrete implementation within the broader spheres of society and history requires the “heteronomous” dimensions of human community and religious tradition. Finally, in the *KdU*, where Kant explicitly reintroduces the notion of Reflexion under the title “reflective judgment,” he is concerned to show how the structures of aesthetic and teleological judgment, though thoroughly rooted in the realm of subjectivity, nonetheless are possible only on the “heteronomous” appearance of beautiful and sublime objects and of nature viewed as a living organism.

It is within the second of these movements, that of his ethical thought, that Kant’s own use of the terms “autonomy” and “heteronomy” appears. Of course, in this limited context, Kant *does* privilege the “autonomy” of the will and its freedom over its “heteronomous” determination by inclination, but it should be clear by this point that neither is the “autonomy” in question here that of ontology, which is criticized by Levinas, nor is the “heteronomy” that of metaphysics, which, in Levinas’ sense, both would defend. At this “egological” level, Levinas would certainly agree with Kant that genuinely ethical obligation requires and presupposes the freedom of the subject to respond to that which commands categorically. For both, it is alterity, an “other” of thought or subjectivity, in the first instance another human being, that provokes the vindication of subjectivity’s own freedom or “autonomy.” For neither can a genuinely ethical discourse be regarded as a monologue, as a reduction of Other to Same.

Reformulating Kant’s “Transcendental Object”

If this proximity of Kant to Levinas is granted in a broad sense, then only one major adjustment in Kant’s view is required in order to begin considering them as parties to a common discourse. It is what Kant variously calls the Ding-an-sich, the “noumenal,” or the “transcendental object” must be reformulated as the Levinasian Other, presented in the first instance in the face-to-face encounter with another human being. While this adjustment clearly and dramatically diverges from Kant’s own philosophical intentions, I want to suggest that it is not so extreme as it might first appear when considered in relation to some of the most fundamental tenets of the Critical Philosophy.

In the sections dealing with “the Face” in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas calls explicit attention to several crucial features of his use of this expression, which go a considerable way toward answering some of the more predictable Kantian objections.

(1) Although the face of the Other has a “sensible appearance,” the manner of its appearance is entirely different than that of any other phenomenal object. According to Levinas, “the face is present in its refusal to be contained.” Although Levinas does not wish to deny that the face of the Other does have a visual aspect within the realm of “sensibility,” its mode of presentation is unique in its “overflowing the sphere of the same.”

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The mode of infinity that it presents cannot be assimilated to the phenomenological doctrine of an “infinity of possible perspectives,” the partial synthesis of which by egological intentionality constitutes the noema of the “sensible (or physical) object.” Rather, “it opens the very dimension of the infinite, of what puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the Same and the I. We call a face the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly, to an I.”

It follows from this that the face can neither be the object of knowledge nor can it be regarded as, strictly speaking, knowable. While we are, of course, able to “recognize” the face of another, our recognition of it is essentially bound up with its announcement of an incomprehensible infinity confronting me; otherwise, it would not be recognized as a human face. Since it is the givenness of infinity itself, any attempt to bring it under concepts or categories is rendered impossible in principle. While Kant would object to the notion of a phenomenal presentation of infinity, as Levinas himself admits in Totality and Infinity (p. 196), Levinas’ account of the face would at least not require that the Kantian strictures upon knowledge be violated since, for Levinas, “knowledge” of the face is not ever in question.

(2) Levinas wants equally to emphasize that the primary mode in which the face presents itself is not visual but linguistic. “The incomprehensible nature of the presence of the Other, which we spoke of above, is not to be described negatively. Better than comprehension, discourse relates with what remains essentially transcendent...Speech cuts across vision.” Just as Kant comes to view the Ding-an-sich as a “limit concept” and hence as, in this specific sense, discursive, so Levinas emphasizes that the face presents itself as addressing me, as speaking, and hence as demanding my own discursive response. The face thus appears not as the mute intentional correlate of my vision, but rather as verbal address, as a speaking which demands my own response, in a way parallel to which Kant’s own critical speech was provoked by the philosophical assumption of alleged knowledge of “things-in-themselves.”

(3) Levinas tends to move from the face as the presentation of infinity demanding my “response,” to the face-to-face relation as one of “responsibility” in an ethical sense.

The ethical relationship which sub tendency discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the other. . . . The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons.

In viewing the face of the Other as the privileged locus of subjectivity’s transcendence, Levinas, in a manner harmonious with the spirit if not the letter of Kant’s philosophy, unites at the most fundamental level, the theoretical and practical projects of the Critical Philosophy. For, in a sense, Kant also sees theoretical philosophy as “ethical” inasmuch as it is an attempt to “say the truth,” to disclose truthfully to others that which is true, and to prepare the ground for the more specific ethical responsibility to the Other which is the Sache of the moral philosophy. As Levinas puts it, “If the essence of philosophy consists in going back from all certainties toward a principle, if it lives from critique, the face of the Other would be the starting point of philosophy.”

(4) Levinas wishes to emphasize the initial and ineradicable “asymmetry,” the “difference of identity and difference” or of “same and other” implicit in the infinity presented in the face of the Other.

The Other does not only appear in his face, as a phenomenon subject to the action and

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domination of a freedom; infinitely distant from the very relation he enters, he presents himself there from the first as an absolute. The I disengages itself from the relationship, but does so within relationship with a being absolutely separated. The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face. 44

Like the "noumenal," the face is never exhausted merely by the fact that it can be represented in thought. Rather, just as the "noumenal," even when represented in the form of "regulative ideas," overflows the very concept with which we attempt to determine it, so the encounter with the face has, according to Levinas, "a structure analogous to the ontological argument" whereby "the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence." 45 But, as he later points out, "The idea of infinity is not for me an object. The ontological argument lies in the mutation of this "object" into being, into independence with regard to me," 46 a claim perhaps echoing Kant's own critique of the ontological argument. Again, Levinas' insistence on the essentially "asymmetrical" character of the relation between the I and the Other closely parallels the manner in which Kant distinguishes the delimited "phenomenal" comprehension of finite objects of experience from the infinity present in the thought of the "noumenal." Parallel to Levinas, Kant would hold that the "transcendental object," while we are not lacking a concept or (in the KdU and Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone) perhaps even a "symbolic representation" of it, nonetheless must always transcend and render inadequate, incomplete, and incompletatable any finite attempt to comprehend or grasp it within the sphere of subjectivity.

(5) One final aspect of the face of the Other as Levinas discusses it must be noted. For Levinas, every face and every face-to-face relationship is irreducibly unique.

The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus—excluding one another by their definition, but calling for one another by this exclusion, across the community of their genus. The alterity of the other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity. 47

If the infinity presented by the face of the Other trans-cends all of subjectivity's concepts and finite representations, it must equally be insisted that it sub-tends them as well. Every face presents an absolutely and irreducibly unique epiphany of the infinite, and its ethical pro-vocation, its calling forth to responsibility can be directed only to me as its unique "accusative." Thus, in a sense, the infinity of alterity is both, at the same time, too much "beyond," too "overflowing" of the finitude of subjectivity to be comprehended by any "universal" and too specific, too uniquely personal to attain the threshold of even description in spatio-temporal terms. Put in a Kantian mode, the appearance of the Other involves an irreducible "receptivity" (what Levinas will in later works call a "passivty") prior to any "spontaneity" or "syntheses" of the perceptual or conceptual orders. Indeed, it is the epiphany of the Other in opening the domain of discourse that first makes possible or meaningful a critique which could only "subsequently" distinguish a "sensible" from an "intelligible" order. If, for Kant, the "judgment" (which Levinas would regard as a "Said") is the morphemic unit of all logical/discursive analysis, then the apriori of the apriori would have to be the original opening of the linguistic field in the "pre-judgmental" encounter with a "Saying" which comes in the irreducibly unique

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encounter with the Other.

“**The Otherness of the Other**: Levinas

In the last three sections, I have tried to establish the plausibility and potential fruitfulness of a constructive project involving a “bi-directional reading” of Kant and Levinas. I want now to return to my earlier discussion of Kant’s “Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection” in light of some of these themes. Where I have, thus far, been suggesting how some of the crucial insights of Levinas might be mobilized to enrich Kant’s philosophical project, I now want to show how the Kantian schema discussed earlier might be employed to make more determinate and, in a sense, less “excessive” some of Levinas’ central ideas.

In this final section, I will discuss some of the central insights of Levinas under four headings, suggested by the fourfold Kantian distinctions suggested above. I will formulate them as (1) the epistemological transcendence of the Other, (2) the abjection of the “subject” in the face of the Other’s absolute command, (3) the transcendence of desire, and (4) the incursion of the “infinite” into the finitude of the asymmetrical relation with the Other. My overarching concern here will be with the more concrete implications of each of these themes for an ethical standpoint which would combine a Kantian sense of structured reflection upon articulable moral principles and their conditions with the Levinasian emphasis upon the transcendent priority of the Other and its irreducibly linguistic and communicative dimensions. However, it is not my intention here to articulate any specific ethical principles, which might be inappropriate in any event. Rather, I offer the discussion in each case as elucidating a necessary dimension of any further discourse that could legitimately claim to be “ethical.” Perhaps, taken together, they might fairly be regarded as the outline of a new Grundlegung.

(1) In our earlier discussion, “quantitative reflection” served to mark an irreducible and asymmetrical difference between certain of our concepts and an implied “object” that can never be adequately presented in or by them. Following Levinas, the infinity sensibly presented to me in the face of the Other, addressing me in demanding my response and thus provoking my responsibility, is the paradigmatic case of an “object” which necessarily transcends its concept. The “emptiness” of this “quantitative” concept, however, is not a nullity or void, but rather an enduring incomensurability between the “too little” of the concept and the “always more” of its “object.”

Any concrete ethical relation necessarily involves a certain “epistemic” lack or indeterminacy from my own side as “addressee.” This is true in at least three respects. First, from an ethical standpoint, the Other cannot constitute in any ordinary sense merely an “object of knowledge” to begin with, as we have seen above. This could be the case only if the Other were regarded, as Kant says, “as a means only.” To regard the Other as an object of knowledge is to have reduced the infinity which the Other presents to a finite set of “qualities” which I can “calculate” and use for my own ends. Such an attitude would be “the reduction of the Other to the Same,” the obliteration of the “difference of identity and difference” and hence of the ethical relation entirely. From the present standpoint, such a view (whether, for example, in the form of “ethical egoism,” utilitarianism, or a theory of justice involving some “balancing of interests”) could not be regarded as genuinely ethical, since it would violate the very “epistemic” condition in which genuine ethical discourse first becomes possible.

Second, “quantitative reflection” maintains that any general concept of “human being” or “human nature” under which all

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“Others” might be comprehended must remain inadequate as a basis for genuinely ethical discourse. The epiphany of the Other cannot be measured by any a priori or naturalistic conception of the “human.” The truth of all the notorious “anti-humanist” postures, from Nietzsche’s Zarathustra through Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism,” Derrida’s “The Ends of Man,” and beyond, lies in the fact that the concrete epiphany of the face of the “saying” Other is presupposed by any subsequent discursive fixation of “humanity” and, in its infinity, transcends any attempt so to limit it. In Levinasian terms, “quantitative reflection” marks the topos where that which is “beyond Being,” that which cannot be subjected to intentional thematization, first opens up the possibility of raising the Seinsfrage itself. It goes without saying that no more determinate “naturalistic” conceptions of “humanity” will fare any better.

Third, in a very concrete sense, “quantitative reflection” warns us that we can never merely assume that what we regard as “goods” or “ends” will form part of “the good for the Other.” However, since the face of the Other is to be primarily understood as a “saying,” we can attend to what is “said” after we have responded to the ethical command that the “saying” represents. From the standpoint of the ethical relation, “the Said” of the Other can legitimately be taken as a starting-point for framing a concept of “the good of the Other,” though it will remain valid only so long as we continue to be responsible to the continued renewal of the Other’s “Sayings.” Clearly, however, the “Said” of the Other will never be couched in terms of a general concept of “human nature,” but rather in determinate commands, requests, entreaties, and narratives. In more traditional terms, “quantitative reflection” enjoins an attitude toward our ethical constructs which is focused upon the Other’s conception of its own “good,” which is open and responsive to further “Sayings” of the Other, and which regards its constructs as, for the “addressee,” always “defeasible” though no less “categorical” for that reason.48

(2) “Qualitative reflection” was seen to mark a difference or asymmetry between a determinate concept and an object “reduced to zero-degree.” Here, it is not that the “object” always overflows or transcends any determinate concept which we might construct for it, but that the concept intends an “object” which is reduced to nothingness. While other alternatives suggest themselves, I will employ “qualitative reflection” as a way of elucidating what might well be regarded as one of the most excessive or overstated claims of Levinas’ texts: the assertion that the originary and primary ethical imperative is “You shall not kill” or “Do not murder me.”49

While many grounds and arguments might be invoked for the almost universally recognized prohibitions against the murder of another person (with the usual qualifications, of course), even the notion of tragedy fails to capture what is at stake here. It is not just that murder is an immoral or unethical act, an “exceptional” violation of a “moral order” that itself remains, intact, to judge it. Rather, it is that the murder of an Other annuls the very grounds upon which there can be a “moral order” to begin with. As Levinas points out in Totality and Infinity (pp. 198–99), the actual termination of the “life-processes” of another organism is as banal an act as choosing what tie to wear on Thursday, and, if one can successfully avoid the face of the Other, need be no more unsettling. The absoluteness of murder does not even reside in the fact that something totally unique and irreplaceable has been lost. Its ethical force lies, rather, in the fact that the murder of another is the absolute negation of that which itself makes possible any ethical

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standpoint or moral order to begin with. "You shall not kill" is the first ethical command because the ethical dimension opens for subjectivity only by the interruption of self-complacency by the Other. Murder is thus the ultimate reduction of the Other to the Same, the absolute bringing to identification of identity and difference. It is thus misleading to call murder "immoral." Rather, it is "amoral," not in the sense of being indifferent to morality but of destroying the entire asymmetrical structure from which the distinction between what is moral and immoral emerges in the first place. Murder is the very establishment of the reign of silence, the emptiness of which will necessarily provoke monologous chatter to fill its void.

In this sense, "Do not kill me" is the primal ethical command, not as if ethics were already established as a discourse and had "rationally" decided that this is the first principle that should be adopted, but rather that its recognition as an absolute command issuing from the Other first opens the field of ethics as a possibility. Even the Categorical Imperative itself can function as an imperative, a command, only if there is an Other who can provoke me to respond from duty to the moral law, whether or not I subsequently regard that law as arising from myself or from elsewhere. Even the extremity of autonomy, the apex of my self-legislation, bears the trace of the Other as the heteronomous source of a unique ethical demand which is left to me, to Willkur, to "universalize" or not.

As an absolute command, "Do not kill me" does signify an extremity. But, as Kant explains in the "Anticipations of Perception" with regard to "quality," these categorical determinations presuppose a continuum of "intensity." Concerned with "mathematical" (as opposed to "dynamical") notions, "qualitative reflection" (like "quantitative") is articulable in terms of a "more or less." While the extremity, the ethical nihil privatium, can be expressed as "Do not kill me," "qualitative reflection" implies that the murder of the Other can, in fact, be regarded as a matter of degree. Actual physical murder of the Other is the extreme terminus of a process (or range of "stages") by which the Other is murdered "little by little," or "by degrees." I need not physically murder the Other in order to tread a "murderous path." Rather, beginning with a simple turn away from the face of the Other, I may come, "by degrees," simply to ignore the appellations of the Other, later to discredit the Other's discourse, then to deprive the Other of any "right" to discourse, and finally to regard the Other as unworthy of its very existence since, deprived of discourse, "it" can no longer appear to me as an "ethically relevant" Other.}

(3) "Relational reflection" marks an asymmetrical difference between "intuition" and its "object," the result of which Kant expresses as an ens imaginarium. In a sense, this bears an analogy with "quantitative reflection," in that it concerns a "fixed" determination of subjectivity which is infinitely transcended by that which it, always deficiently, intends. However, here it is not the case of my concept or representation of the Other being overrun and defied by the infinity presented by the face of the Other, something amenable to discursive exchange provoked by the "Saying" of the Other, but an "Other-directed" intentionality on my part that forever remains unfulfilled.

Levinas remains insistent, throughout his writings, upon the difference between "desire," "need," and "love." Need is sporadic and satiable, measuring its "time" by the interval between its onset and its satisfaction. Need is self-directed: emanating from the self, it refers to the Other only as the circuit which returns it to the sameness of satisfaction. The circuit completed, the need is satisfied and the Other "is" no longer. If "need" falls short of the Other by reducing it to the

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Same, thus terminating itself, "love" overshoots the Other by supposing that it can reach and dwell with the Other on the Other's terms. If need sporadically cancels the "of identity and difference" in favor of identity, then "love" does likewise, but in favor of the original "difference." But no more can the Other be reduced to the Same, to me, than can I be reduced (or reduce myself to) the Other, to difference. Subjectivity remains: between need and love there is desire.

The time of need is always its time: begun with its onset, ended with its satisfaction. The time of love is always eternal: the infinite transcendence of the Other, identified with, participated in, your time as including, annihilating, and raising mine to an infinite present. Ultimately, for need and love there is no time. If, like animals, we had only need, or as angelic spirits, we knew only love, we would be atemporal, ahistorical, timeless. But, the presupposition of both need and love is desire. Need is desire intending its own termination in its self; love is desire that affectively cancels itself in identification with an Other.

"Relational reflection" thus concerns desire, the true "difference of identity and difference," the recognition of the Other which knows that it can neither abandon the Same nor complacently abide within it. As such, desire plays a crucial role in Levinas' overall argument. Sometimes likening it to Spinoza's conatus, Levinas claims that our dynamic movement toward the infinite cannot be one of cognition, since (as we have already seen) the infinite cannot be known. As he puts it,

The idea of the infinite is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks.
A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire 'measures' the infinity of the infinite.

While Levinas does not wish to make desire a form of cognition, neither does he want to characterize it as a simple "urge," "instinct," or "inclination," all of which would be comprised under "need." Three features stand out in Levinas' various discussions of desire.

(a) Desire, as it were, "spatializes" and "temporalizes" our relation to the Other as infinite. Levinas seems to view the two "primordial" notions of spatiality as "beyond" and "height":

To manifest oneself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation . . . without the intermediary of any image. . . . In Desire are conjoined the movements unto the Height and unto the Humility of the Other.

Further, "prior to" and "beyond" the "temporalizing" of self-consciousness:

time can designate a 'not yet' that nevertheless would not be a "lesser being" . . . only as the inexhaustible future of infinity, that is, as what is produced in the very relationship of language.

This signification of time more fundamental than "temporality" ultimately stems from "the Desire which does not arise from a lack or a limitation but from a surplus, from the idea of Infinity."

(b) The "spatiality" and "temporality" arising from Desire precede any theoretical or cognitive senses of space and time: they are both bound up with what Levinas calls the "investiture of freedom." For Levinas, freedom is at best an empty reflex or potency of subjectivity which is activated only with the encounter with the Other.

Existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom. Freedom could not present itself all naked. The investiture of freedom constitutes moral

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life itself, which is through and through a heteronomy.  

In this process of “investiture,” freedom is not established as some factum, but exists in the very mode of “an infinite movement . . . putting itself ever more into question,” precisely because the Other calls into question the justice of one’s own subjective claims to freedom.

(c) It follows from the infinity of Desire that I can never rest satisfied with having “fulfilled my duty” or “manifested my freedom.” Rather, the infinite responsibility to the Other implied by Desire intensifies its own sense of injustice, of never having done enough.

The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished.

To “fulfil” one’s duty is to assume others that follow from it in an infinite chain of responsibility. Freedom can therefore not be conceived as a particulate “breaking of the ‘noumenal’ into the ‘phenomenal,’” but of a continual, infinite, and expanding process of questioning whether, in my freedom, I have ever done enough. Doing my “moral duty” thus makes sense, not in itself, but only in the context of a whole interrelated series of ethical acts, each of which implies yet more: in the context, that is, of a life oriented toward the ethical service of the Other.

(4) As I developed it in the first section, “modal reflection” must articulate a “double-asymmetry” which plays over the other three dimensions of reflection discussed above. On the one hand, any given finite discourse will always be incommensurate with the infinity presented by the face of the Other and the ethical task which this poses; on the other, however, the resources of discourse are such that a further “saying” is always possible which is able to overturn or “unsay” the “said” of all prior discourse, thus once more clearing the way for a new responsiveness to the absolutely Other. As Levinas writes in “God and philosophy”: Language then has over signification only the hold a form has, clothing matter....An alternating rhythm of the said and the unsaid, and the unsaid being unsaid in its turn, will have to be substituted for the unity of discourse.

Reminiscent of Kant’s famous invocation of “the moral law within and the starry skies without,” Levinas, in such later writings as that just cited, adds an “immanent” dimension to his strong emphasis on the “transcendence” of infinity:

It is as though the psyche in subjectivity were equivalent to the negation of the finite by the Infinite, as though—without wanting to play on words—the in of the Infinite were to signify both the non and the within.

That is, Levinas wants to call attention not just to the “transcendence” of the finitude of subjectivity by the infinite manifested by the Other, but also to its indwelling at the heart of subjectivity. Infinity is thus not just “beyond” but also “within.” And just as the “transcendence” of the Other is disclosed first and foremost in the linguistic “saying” addressed to me by the Other, so is the “immanence” of infinity connected with my own abilities to “respond” and signify to the Other. This, I think, is the key to any attempt to develop the theological implications of Levinas’ view as well as to ascertain the relations between theology and ethics.

(a) Despite some of his statements which might, especially if taken out of context, seem to imply something different, Levinas, in an interview in 1984, provided an unambiguous and uncompromising answer to the

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following question put to him: “But how can one be for God or go toward God as the absolutely other? Is it by going toward the human other?” His reply:

Yes, and it is essential to point out that the relation implied in the preposition towards (à) is ultimately a relation derived from time. Time fashions man’s relation to the other, and to the absolutely other or God, as a diachronic relation irreducible to correlation. . . . “Going towards God” is meaningless unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person. I can only go towards God by being ethically concerned by and for the other person.61

Thus, like Kant, Levinas views any legitimate theological reflection, any theology that is not merely “onto-theology,” as essentially ethical in significance. A theology that is not founded in the ethical relation would be “ontological,” another expression of the Other in terms of the Same: ultimately, it would literally be “a-theism.”

(b) However, as Kant also argues in Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, theology is a legitimate mode of discourse, but only to the degree to which it remains in the service of the ethical relation as its articulation. Kant’s attempt to sanction a sort of “post-critical” religious discourse as a “symbolics” of a fundamentally ethical view of the world mediating human finitude and infinity is echoed by Levinas in Totality and Infinity:

For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation—we reserve the term religion. . . . Religion, where relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole—the idea of infinity—is the ultimate structure. . . . Religion subords this formal totality.62

It should be noted that implied in both Kant and Levinas is a distinction between theology and religion. For both, religion continues to carry with it its etymological significance of “being bound” (reliagare) and in both cases this is not a matter of doctrinal adherence but of ethical responsibility to the Other. Theology thus appears as the constructed and systematized “Saids” of a more fundamental religious “Saying” which binds us to the infinity presented in the face of the Other. Despite Kant’s commitment to Christianity and Levinas’ to Judaism as religious stances, they would agree that, contrary to many current views, it is not so much religions that divide us as it is the theological doctrines in which the ethical impulse at the heart of religion is expressed. However, theology can nonetheless not be regarded as a mere “supplement” to religion, but as a particular concealing of the ethical “Saying” of religion into a structure of “Saids.”

(c) In this sense, just as Kant demythologizes traditional theology in favor of its rehabilitation in the service of an ethically based interpretation of religion, so Levinas, in “God and Philosophy,” grants to deconstructive projects directed against all “transcendent signifiers” a legitimate function. But, as he tries to show in that essay, there must first be something to deconstruct, and that is precisely the concealed “Saids” which arise only on the recognition of an ethico-religious “Saying” as a response to the infinity of the Other, which itself defies all demythologizing or deconstructive strategies.

Conclusion

This discussion admittedly leaves many issues unresolved. In particular, in emphasizing the places where Kant and Levinas most converge, I have suppressed certain crucial differences between them. I do hope to have shown three things, however. First, many problems raised against Kant’s critical pro-

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ject, especially with regard to ethical questions, can be suggestively answered by employing some of Levinas’ central ideas to enrich Kant’s own ubiquitous sense for the transcendent without violating his equally strong sense of limits. Second, the oft-cited “excessiveness” of Levinas’ way of presenting his own views can be considerably reduced by ordering them along the lines of Kant’s notion of reflection without losing their characteristic force. Finally, as Levinas himself is acutely aware, there are still important resources in the philosophical tradition which can be brought together with the concerns of our “post-modern” era in ways which can move philosophical discourse toward a broader view of both its past accomplishments and its present responsibilities.

ENDNOTES

4. Ibid., p. 82.
6. In this essay, I will remain within the general scope of Levinas’ philosophical and ethical thought as expressed in Totality and Infinity and several of the essays closely related to it. While not dismissing their importance, I will leave aside his further development in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence as well as his more religious or “prophetic” writings, since what I am seeking is a starting-point for dialogue, not a full reading of the Levinasian corpus.
7. As with any such project, I realize that I run the risk of offending more doctrinaire followers of both parties to the discussion. More traditional Kantians will undoubtedly find the directions in which I want to take Kant somewhat unusual, if not far-fetched, and I am aware that my reading runs the risk of violating some of Kant’s own critical strictures. To them, I can only respond that, while my reading of Kant does exceed the “letter” of the Critical Philosophy, it nonetheless remains true to its “spirit” (though not in the same ways that Fichte intended when he first used this distinction). To some more doctrinaire Levinasians, my interpretation will probably appear to reabsorb Levinas into the very tradition of “ontology” which he so deeply opposes. My apology to them is that the real force and profundity of his position will continue to be buried under charges of “excess” unless his views can be articulately or reformulated in ways which bring them into some proximity with more familiar forms of ethical and philosophical discourse. Finally, to both I would say that, if I am on the right track, there already is more proximity between Kant’s and Levinas’ concerns than has yet been recognized.
8. Of course, this fundamental problem posed by the project of a critical philosophy tended to create its own historical division. On the one side were those who, beginning with Kant himself in the second edition of the KdV, believed that the problem could be successfully addressed without discarding either the general project of a critical philosophy or the notion of limit operative within it. On the other were those who, like Fichte and Hegel, held that either Kant’s notion of philosophical system or his notion of limit (or both) would have to be given up. In this essay, I am in effect agreeing with both sides: on the one hand, I want to affirm Kant’s original insight which sought to preserve an “other” of experience as not only valid but necessary; on the other hand, I want to claim that Kant’s notions of philosophical method and of limit must be violated precisely in order to preserve his original insight about the “other” of experience.
9. I leave aside in this paper whether Fichte, who is the main object of Hegel’s invective, could fairly be tarred with the same brush, though, for the record, I think not. See, e.g., my essay, “German Idealism under Fire: Fichte, Hegel, and Metacriticism,” forthcoming in Hegel on the Modern World, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).
10. AA A260/B316, p. 276. [In this and subsequently, I will follow the convention of citing the page numbers of the A and B versions of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft (KdV) as contained in the Akademische Ausgabe of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, followed by the page number of the English translation by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1933).]

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12. I will henceforth use the English equivalent “reflection” for Kant’s *Reflexion*; the reader should understand that I intend this equivalent to be taken in the narrower technical sense of Kant’s term, not in the much broader (and generally vaguer) sense that it ordinarily carries in English.

13. One can conjecture that it was exactly this “abiding within the nexus of difference” implied in Kant’s notion of reflection that attracted Heidegger’s attention as expressed in the first quotation at the beginning of my essay.

14. This, perhaps, is where Hegel went wrong in the *Differenzschrift*, for he tended to view *Reflexion* merely as the activity of *Verstand* in assuming a conceptual unity or identity and then making its distinctions on that basis. I do not think this Hegelian reading can easily be squared with Kant’s discussion of *Reflexion* in the “Amphiboly” section of the *KdV*.


16. “We must add some remarks which, although in themselves not of special importance, might nevertheless be regarded as requisite for the completeness of the system.” AA A290/B346, p. 294.

17. It is important to note that, on Kant’s analysis, *Nichts* is never univocal in meaning, but neither is it unrestrictedly equivocal. Rather, Kant’s view is that it is equivocal but only within a given range of meanings, which are determinable by reference to the general structure of our human abilities to think and experience. Kant’s view thus avoids the indeterminacy of existential “nothingness” as well as the logical reduction to the “tilde” of modern formal-logical methodology.

18. I think there are some very interesting “asymmetries” among the four inflections of *Nichts* when compared to the “Table of Categories” from which they are derived, but I will leave this point aside in the present discussion.

19. Here and elsewhere in what follows, I am trying to insist upon remaining true to the notion of *Reflexion* presented in the “Amphiboly.” That I do not think Kant always did so, especially in his schematization of *Nichts*, should be clear from my discussion.


21. One is tempted at this point to resort to Heidegger’s notion of temporality (and, correspondingly, spatiality), but, for reasons which I hope will become clear, I want to resist such a reading.


23. Indeed, Kant himself seems aware of problems with modal categories when he writes: “The modality of judgments is a quite peculiar function” (AA A74/B99–100, p. 109). As he presents it, the problem concerns the fact that modality is at the same time both a category and a “meta-category,” in that it applies to judgments in which other categories are themselves “nested,” i.e., it ranges over all other categorial determinations within judgments. I mention this to, in a sense, excuse my speculations on this point, since I don’t think that Kant himself satisfactorily worked out the problems that the modal categories raise. My reading here may seem “un-Kantian” but, on the basis of Kant’s own texts, I’m not entirely sure what a “Kantian” view on this point might amount to.

24. I realize there are long-standing problems here, but I will not pursue them in this essay.

25. Note that this is not the same as either the “quantitative,” “qualitative,” or “relational” dimensions of reflection, since none of them require that a concept or representation of the infinite be involved. They do not exclude this (hence the “iterability” of the modal categories), but, by the same token, they also do not require it.

26. See, for example, his interview with Philippe Nemo, published under the title *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985). Kant also appears to have become more central to Levinas’ thinking in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* than he was in *Totality and Infinity*, although some of Kant’s most potentially fruitful views tend to get assimilated to Husserl’s rather different project. Levinas is hardly alone in this, however.


30. Kant, of course, would not claim that subjectivity was “founded in the idea of the infinite,” but he would claim, I

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think, that the concept of the trans-subjective infinite or noumenal cannot be dispensed with in articulating his version of Idealism, as he makes clear in his final repudiation of Fichte’s version of this view.

31. This essay appears in English in Collected Philosophical Papers, tr. A. Lingis, and in both French and English in To The Other, ed. A. Peperzak. It was originally published in Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale 62 (1957): 241–53.


33. It is, I think, a credit to Levinas’ way of reading the philosophical tradition that he refuses to amalgamate its many complex strands into a universal narrative, whether of “forgetting” or of “deferent,” but instead sees the possibilities of autonomy and heteronomy always alive and vying with one another in the very graphically portraying what might be regarded as the most radical point of opposition between Kant and Levinas, so I will retain them here.

34. KdP = Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, KdU = Kritik der Urteilskraft.

35. Peperzak offers some important insights about this in his earlier essay cited above.

36. While I realize the interpretive issues surrounding the term “transcendental object,” I use it here as a sort of “generic term” comprising all of the various ways in which Kant signifies that which lies “beyond” the critically delimited realm of experience (“Ding-an-sich,” “noumenon,” “God,” “Ideal of Pure Reason,” etc.)

37. Cf. Section III. Exteriority and the Face, especially subsections A and B (pp. 187-219 of the English translation).

38. For a more detailed discussion of these sections, see Peperzak, To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, pp. 161–92.


40. Or would he? I suppose one’s answer here depends upon how one reads, in particular, the KdU.

41. Totality and Infinity, p. 194.

42. Ibid., pp. 195–96.


44. Ibid., p. 119.

45. Ibid., p. 215.

46. Ibid., p. 196.

47. Ibid., p. 194.

48. This development of the notion of “quantitative reflection” allows a difficult problem in Kant’s “end-in-itself” formulation of the Categorical Imperative to be addressed. Although this version was supposed to provide a more “affirmative” or “material” determination of the originally “purely formal” statement, it will not succeed so long as some more determinate conception of what an “end-in-itself” is can be framed. However, to provide this would seem to amount to falling back into the very “naturalism” or “eudaemonism” that Kant has rejected from the beginning of the Grundlegung. Here, the freedom of the Other is respected in allowing the meaning of being an “end-in-itself” first to be determined by the discourse of the Other.


50. AA A166/B207, pp. 201ff.

51. The histories of the legal devices mobilized by “dominant societies” to condemn various groups first to “irrelevance,” then to “marginality,” and ultimately to death bears solemn testimony to this. Again, this resolves a certain sort of casuistic ratiocination to which Kantian ethical theory has been susceptible. Clearly for “imperfect duties,” but even for such “perfect duties” as truth-telling or keeping promises, casuistic objections can be generated regarding “how much” truth I am required to tell or “how far” I must go in keeping my promises. On the present view, while it would make no sense to admit certain duties as prima facie on the basis of which such deviations might be justified (or not), we should be able to respond that, if truth-telling or promise-keeping is demanded by the Other, then complying “in degrees” is merely a stage on the way to ultimate violation of the Other and is, in fact, part of its “intentional trajectory.”

52. This, at least, is one possible reading of Levinas’ treatment of these issues. Cf. “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite” (pp. 113–14); “The term we have chosen to mark the propulsion, the inflation, of this going beyond is opposed to the affectivity of love and the indignation of need.” Also, Totality and Infinity, “The Ambiguity of Love,” pp. 254–55.


54. Totality and Infinity, p. 200.


57. Totality and Infinity, p. 244.

58. Once again, a consideration of Levinas allows us to begin

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to link Kant's Sittenlehre with his Tugendlehre and Rechtslehre, his moral theory with his theories of 'virtue' and of 'right.' As Levinas develops the notion of Desire, moral action, founded in Desire of the infinity of the Other, entails both the 'subjective virtue' of a life responsible throughout to the just claims of others and the 'objective' justice that commands us to maintain conditions in which responsible action can, everywhere and at all times, remain possible.

62. Totality and Infinity, pp. 80-81.

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