Absolute Difference and Social Ontology: Levinas Face to Face with Buber and Fichte

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Abstract. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas presents the 'face to face' as an account of intersubjectivity, but one which maintains the absolute difference of the Other. This essay explores the genesis of the 'face to face' through a discussion of Levinas in relation to Buber. It is argued that Levinas' account of subjectivity shares much in common with Fichte's theory of subjectivity. It is further argued that while the 'face to face' clarifies and opposes traditional problems in social ontology, the 'face to face' is unable to avoid the traditional problems of social ontology that it seeks to avoid.

There is a traditional tension in social ontology between the philosophy of dialogue and transcendental conceptions of intersubjectivity. In the transcendental model the I is placed firmly at centre of any determination of meaningfulness. In dialogical philosophy there is no 'I' separate from the relation to things and others – there is no transcendental ego. The I is inseparable from the Thou and the It. I and other cannot be abstracted from their pure relation; they are indistinguishable from their relation to each other. Levinas argues that dialogical philosophy, because it cannot distinguish I from other, is unable to take difference seriously. While transcendental conceptions of intersubjectivity have the advantage of positing an I separate from the relation to another or a thing; the other's status is that of an 'alien I'. In emphasising the subjective constitution of the world, thinkers such as Kant and Husserl have, according to Levinas, annulled alterity under the rubric of transcendental subjectivity.

While Levinas makes no explicit attempt to solve this tension in social ontology, indeed it could be argued that he is not at all interested in ontology, this dichotomy does nevertheless frame his own unique attempt to overturn the philosophy of the subject and to rethink the relation of self and other. The question Levinas poses is how to think otherness so that it cannot be appropriated, in what he describes as the philosophical 'quest for comprehension'. Levinas posits the face as the alternate site of otherness that does not compromise alterity. The face to face challenges the 'project of comprehension' which he argues characterises the Western philosophical tradition. Levinas puts it like this: through theory ("the third term"), "the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened. . . . Then the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought" (Levinas[1], 1961, p. 12/42).

If Levinas can present the other in its immediacy, as Other[2], then it is possible to establish a site of absolute difference from which to challenge traditional conceptions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Levinas appeals to the 'face to face' as the phenomenological site of his challenge to philosophy. The 'face to face' is a relation between self and other which is at the same time an absolute separation. The Other by its very nature cannot be comprehended. The absolute immediacy of the Other is what Levinas terms "the infinite"; it presents itself only as 'revelation'. The Other considered as "epiphany" or "revelation" does not compromise its alterity. However, as will be argued in the course of this essay, the 'face to face', as an alternative account of intersubjectivity, is not able to extricate itself completely from the traditional problems of social ontology – the very problems which the 'face to face' tries to avoid.

1. The Face and the Philosophy of Dialogue

While Levinas is a great admirer of Buber, *Totality and Infinity* can, nevertheless, be regarded as a corrective to what Levinas regards as the adverse implications of reciprocity in the I-Thou relation. Our purpose here is merely to try and understand exactly how that which Levinas identifies as problematic in the I-Thou relation leads him to his unique formulation of the Other.[3] In this context, a brief account of Buber's I-Thou relation is required before we can move on to Levinas' interpretation of Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

The central claim of Buber's famous work *I and Thou* (Buber, 1958) is, as he puts it in the very first sentence: "To man the world is twofold in accordance with his twofold attitude" (Buber, 1958, p. 15). This twofold attitude corresponds to the primary words "I-Thou" and "I-It". The I-It is in essence the relation of an I to an object, or a relation that treats an other as an object. The I-It is essentially the world of experience and intentionality, as Buber writes: "The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter." In this case the experience is "in him and not between him and the world" (Buber, 1958, p. 18). The I-Thou, unlike the I-It we have just described, is the establishment of relation, not the internalisation of otherness.

Buber's dialogicalism is an ontology of the I-Thou, of the "interhuman". In the I-Thou relation, the I is not ontologically prior to the intersubjective. The central concept in *I and Thou* is therefore not a single transcendental subject but the realm of meeting that is constitutive of subjectivity: "the between". What is primary in the I-Thou relation is the *reciprocal relation* between subjects, not their abstracted subjectivity. The between is the realm where I meet the Other. This relation is immediate: "no system of ideas, no foreknowledge,

and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*" (Buber, 1958, p. 16). There can only be a meeting between I and Other when "every means has collapsed". The I-Thou relation is one that is destroyed by meaning systems, symbols, and expectations (Theunissen, 1984, pp. 274–275). Levinas' central criticism of Buber concerns what he sees as the problematic nature of reciprocity in the I-Thou relation. Dialogue has as its precondition responsibility, as "only a being who is responsible for an other being can enter into dialogue with it. . . . only what is other can elicit an act of responsibility" (Levinas, 1989, p. 67). Responsibility is an important notion for Levinas, however, in this case he sees the responsibility for the Other in the I-Thou dialogue as a reciprocal relation: "the I in its relation with the Thou is further related to itself by means of the Thou, i.e., it is related to the Thou as to someone who in turn relates itself to the I, as though it had come into delicate contact with himself through the skin of the Thou" (Levinas, 1989, p. 68). Both the Thou and the I seem to constitute themselves in the reciprocity of the meeting. In this case the dialogue uses the Other to develop the self. Rather than stressing the Other's immediacy; the I comes into contact with "himself" only through the Thou. The reciprocal relation of the I-Thou does not allow for an I *or* an Other beyond the determining confines of the relation.

While Levinas does not to want to extol the virtue of the transcendental ego, he does nevertheless think that the subject "realizes his own separateness in a process of subjectification which is not explicable in terms of a recoil from the Thou"; that act "in which the I realizes itself without recourse to the other" (Levinas, 1989, p. 74). In *I and Thou* Buber says "There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and I of the basic word I-It" (Buber, 1958, p. 16). The I and the Thou do not exist separately of one another but constitute each other in and through 'the between'. The I cannot be discussed in separation from the Thou or the It. Levinas argues that Buber's 'over-emphasis' on relation does not allow any separation of I and Thou and consequently does not allow difference.

Levinas' second criticism of Buber is that the seeming mutuality of the I-Thou relation and the immediacy of the Thou are contradicted by the privileging of the I as the site of intentionality in this relation. The subject seems to 'create' the Other's and its own identity through its Thou saying. The separation of the I-Thou and the I-It thus becomes confused. The comportment of the I determines something's Thou or It status. As such the intentionality that is characteristic of the I-It relation can be transposed onto the I-Thou relation. This criticism of Buber is expressed succinctly by Theunissen:

> Thou and It are nothing other than the intentional "for which" of the comportment corresponding to them, in which beings in general are constituted *as* Thou or *as* It. *I,* this human being behaving in such and such

a way, am therefore the one who makes something into a Thou or an It. . . .In other words it depends on my project whether entities confront me as Thou or as It. . . .In this way, however, the Thou loses what Buber explicitly attributes to it: immediacy. (Theunissen, 1984, pp. 292–293)

Totality and Infinity attempts to reclaim the immediacy of the Thou.

To ensure that the I-It cannot "corrode the I-Thou" (Levinas, 1989, p. 73) Levinas emphasises the face as the site of the subject's encounter with the infinite. *Totality and Infinity* tries to establish the immediacy of the Other independent of dialogue. In starting with the idea of the essential infinity of the Other Levinas attempts to avoid the symmetry and the intentionality of Buber's I-Thou relation (Levinas, 1961, pp. 40–41/69). Through this absolute separation of I and Other Levinas treads the line between a transcendental conception of subjectivity and a reciprocal I-Thou relation. The face to face maintains the Other's immediacy and its separation. Nevertheless, to give the face to face its power as an intersubjective theory, Levinas has to do more than assert the immediacy of the Other. He has to guarantee that the immediacy of the Other is also the 'ground' of the I-Other relation. The obligation of self to Other is determined and constituted in the face to face without resorting to a conception of this obligation in terms of rights, as with Fichte and Kant. How well he is able to avoid the traditional pitfalls in conceptions of intersubjectivity through his account of the face to face is the focus of the last section of this essay.

2. Fichte and Alterity

> Self-consciousness is not a dialectical rejoinder of the metaphysical consciousness that I have of the other. Nor is its relations with itself a *representation* of itself. Prior to every vision of self it is accomplished by holding *oneself up*; it is *implanted in itself* as a body and it keeps itself in its interiority, in its home. It thus accomplishes separation positively, without being reducible to a negation of the being from which it separates. But thus precisely it can welcome that Being. The subject is host. (Levinas, 1961, p. 276/299).

The model of subjectivity presented in this passage is not intersubjectively mediated as for example it is with Hegel and Fichte. For Levinas the I is always prior to any relation to another. It is through the self-identity of the I, its interiority, that it can go out of itself and engage with an other. Before there can be an acknowledgment of the Other, the I must have a site from which to engage with the Other as a separate entity. For the moment it is necessary to leave aside the question of the self-identity of the I; the point that needs to be

emphasised is that Levinas 'reserves' a place for the I 'outside' the dialogue. In so doing he wants to distinguish his I and Other from a conception of subjectivity that relies on a recognitive relation, which would, in his terms, unite I and Other under a common rubric such as 'We'. Recognition, according to Levinas, is a means of grounding the I and the Other in knowing, and as such is 'totalising' philosophy. Recognition asserts the way in which the Other is like me; in the case of the recognition of difference it is still a process of knowing the Other *as* something, and this knowing circumscribes the Other into the domain of the Same.

Levinas makes no serious study of Fichte, but there are a few references to him in *Otherwise than Being*. There Fichte is presented as the pinnacle of the philosophy of the Same; a philosophy that reduces the Other to something merely posited by consciousness. Levinas positions his view of otherness in opposition to what he takes as Fichte's view. He remarks: "Not everything that is in consciousness would be posited by consciousness – contrary to the proposition that seemed to Fichte to be fundamental" (Levinas, 1981, 101).[4] What Levinas is looking for is an acknowledgment of the other that does not treat the other, in Buber's terms, *as* It, but as Other. The approach that Levinas takes to the problem is to claim that before I am free the Other imposes demands on me – 'the call of the other limits the I'. He is not alone in this claim: Fichte makes such a point in the *Science of Rights*. Fichte and Levinas arrive, from this similar premise, at very different conceptions of the nature of the obligation that the call of the other evokes. Fichte did argue that the essential requirement for self-consciousness is that it exists in the context of a we.[5] This is by no means a landmark claim, but what is distinctive about Fichte is that it is the *other's demands addressed to me* that is the condition and the ground for self-consciousness. Fichte's argument is complex, but I will give a brief outline, as its similarity to and difference from Levinas' line of argument is instructive.

The subject, argues Fichte, cannot ascribe causality to itself and hence attain self-consciousness, without *positing* an object toward which that causality is directed (Fichte, 1966, pp. 340–341/49–50). The problem is that for consciousness to have some sense of its own determinacy, and thus its self-identity, it must have previously posited an object towards which it had some causal connection. Moreover, this object must in some way limit it. Here limiting has the sense of a subject being imposed upon by something other; by virtue of its imposition the object is causally connected to the subject as something perceived. The result is that to connect the moment of self-consciousness to a specific moment or thing we have to keep going further and further back in the attempt to account for incipient self-consciousness. This attempt to describe the moment of self-consciousness becomes an infinite regress (Fichte, 1966, pp. 341–342/51). Fichte's answer to this circularity is to argue that the ground

An object is required that checks the activity of the subject but allows the subject to be free and self-determined. This seems, on the face of it, to be contradictory. Fichte's answer is that the subject is "determined to determine itself" or that there is a demand placed on the subject to manifest its causality. To quote Fichte: "But that object is not differently comprehended, and can not be differently comprehended, other than as the bare request of the subject to act" (Fichte, 1966, pp. 342/52–53 my translation). So the object of self-consciousness must be an object which can *appeal* to the subject to act. Thus this object must have its *own freedom and self activity*. The subject takes the opportunity "to determine itself" to act (Fichte, 1966, p. 345/57). To do this it must understand the demand; therefore the requirement addressed to the subject assumes the subject's ability to act and to understand. The ground of this activity "must, therefore necessarily have the conception to Reason and freedom, it must be a free and hence a rational being, and must be posited as such" (Fichte, 1966, p. 345/57).

Recognition thereby becomes the foundation of the I and from this Fichte goes on to establish the relation of I to other in terms of a contractual conception of rights. Both he and Levinas assert that the other appeals to the I to act. They diverge in two significant respects; firstly Fichte establishes the normative relation to the other logically and Levinas phenomenologically and as revelation. Although it might be said that while Levinas is appealing to the reader to 'feel' the truth of the face to face encounter, the phenomenological method involves a certain logic which invites the reader to act on their acknowledgment of the ethical relation to the Other. Nevertheless, Levinas does resist formal or logical conceptions of the I-Other relation, and this is why one's responsibility to the Other gains 'normative force' in *Totality and Infinity*. That is, not through a logic of rights as Fichte pursues it, but in the phenomenological account of the face to face.

The second point of divergence, and that which would be Levinas' main problem found in Fichte's conception, is that the subject appears to posit the rationality of the other, thereby uniting the I and other under a common concept, and hence is typical of "totalising" philosophy. The appeal to act, which, as it were, draws the other out of itself, relies on an appeal to a common rationality. Any appeal to reason is problematic for Levinas. Reason cannot "be I or an Other" since by its very nature it renounces singularity: it is not *communication but unification*. "Reason speaking in the first person is not addressed to the other, conducts a monologue" (Levinas, 1961, p. 44/72). Rationality inscribes the other as the Same not as Other.

Levinas is, however, unable to completely avoid discussion of recognition. Recognition seems to have something of a dual role in *Totality and Infinity*. Recognition when conceived as affirming a sense of self through engagement with another, through a negated separation from another is, for Levinas, an 'accomplice of knowledge', in that it attempts to *overcome the limits* the Other

with another, through a negated separation from another is, for Levinas, an 'accomplice of knowledge', in that it attempts to *overcome the limits* the Other imposes on me by virtue of his or her otherness. In seeing the Other as the transcendental ego or by knowing in what way the Other is like or unlike me the Other is subsumed, via recognition, by the power of reason. The second sense of recognition is that it is necessary before I can accede to the demands of the Other, but the important point for Levinas is that this relation to the Other ensures that ethics ensues from recognition, and *not* knowledge, moreover, there is in any recognitive relation always a surplus. The *revelation* of the infinite in the Other is the source from which the dominance of the Same can be shown its limits. At the same time, the lesson of the face is also to distance the I from the Other. Levinas remarks that, "the identity of the I comes to it from its egoism whose insular sufficiency is accomplished by enjoyment, and to which the face teaches the infinity from which this insular sufficiency is separated" (Levinas, 1961, p. 191/216). But is this self-identity disclosed in the intersubjective *relation* to the Other?

Any discussion of the self-identity of the subject is problematic because we cannot discuss the development of the I in relation to the Other, as the I is not defined in the encounter. The I and the Other are radically separated, in fact "subjective existence derives its features from separation" (Levinas, 1961, p. 276/299). Any attempt to thematise this relation between the same and other renounces the radical alterity of the Other and the I.

> A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a *face to face*, as delineating a distance in depth – that of conversation, of goodness of desire – irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of the understanding establishes between the diverse terms, other with respect to one another, that lend themselves to its synoptic operation. (Levinas, 1961, p. 9/39).

The face of the Other is an 'infinity' which announces the subject. Even the mere distinguishing of the Other from the I, is a positing of the Other as a *thing* to be known; to distinguish the I from the other is to unite the two "under one gaze" (Levinas, 1961, p. 6/36). It is not sufficient to say that the Other is different from the I as this begs the question, 'in what way', and is thereby epistemologically circumscribed. What this 'difference' has to establish from the outset is the immediacy of the Other in a manner that does not allow any "third term" to thematise its otherness.

3. The Face, Self-Identity and Intersubjectivity

The philosophy of dialogue, "if it is directed against anything at all, then it is

solely against the claim to absoluteness that transcendental social ontology raises precisely insofar as it thinks it can comprehend the entire social sphere and comprehend this sphere entirely, thanks to an identification of its model of the Other with the Other itself" (Theunissen, 1984, p. 362). The dialogical model of social ontology is unable to account for an I separate from the meeting, which is, for transcendental philosophy, the precondition for there being a meeting in the first place. Fichte argues that the between is the ground where the 'potential I' is drawn from an unsophisticated beginning, barely an I, by the demand or call of the other and it develops in the ensuing reciprocal relation. The assumption is, nevertheless, that there must be an I separate from the between. The problem as Theunissen sees it is that transcendental philosophy is able to account for the beginning and the philosophy of dialogue "the completed end. The beginning would be my individual I, the goal the self that proceeds from the meeting" (Theunissen, 1984, p. 367). Levinas' pheno-menological analysis of the face to face attempts to escape from this dichotomy. Self and other cannot be contained in the fashion of a transcendental conception of subjecthood; they evade constitution in these terms, primarily because I and other cannot be posited as transcendental subjects or as an intersubjectively primordial 'We' without negating their immediacy. But the presentation of the absolute immediacy of the I-Thou relation, is not entirely able to evade the problems bound up with earlier models of intersubjectivity.

The examination of absolute difference in *Totality and Infinity* is unusual in that that which Levinas is trying to express must exceed the expression of it: "The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face" (Levinas, 1961, p. 21/50 my emphasis). Language can only deal with the face as mediated immediacy. The face, however, is primary, "a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses" (Levinas, 1961, p. 37/66). Language always reflects the *as* structure of comprehension: the immediate *as* face, *as* stranger, and even *as* Other. In Levinas' terms language can only be "disclosure" not "revelation" (Levinas, 1961, p. 37/66). The essentially mediated nature of language is not inherently a problem for Levinas, as the Other construed as face will always exceed its expression, indeed its inadequacy in describing the immediacy of the Other instantiates that very immediacy. That which exceeds language is precisely that which he wants the reader to explore. The actual ethical counter-point to ontology he wants to present *proceeds* phenomenologically through the *lived experience* of the face to face; something to which he can appeal to exemplify the infinite. Thus Levinas throughout *Totality and Infinity* appeals to experience as evidence for his conception of the face as revelation. He says, for example: "[The infinite] is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (Levinas, 1961, p. xi/23). The immediacy of the Other exceeds any merely conceptual contextualisation.

Similarly, the intersubjective relation as Levinas defines it, is a sort of non-relation in practice, but a relation nevertheless in the saying. The face to face encounter is unable to be subsumed as a single relation: "The face to face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I" (Levinas, 1961, p. 39/68). The infinite status of the Other disrupts its containment in a concept that could possibly unite I and Other. He insists that the third party that any thematisation necessarily involves cannot contain the Other as face. The actual experience of the face demonstrates, to the I or to the reader, that any thematisation of it cannot undermine its 'non-conceptual truth': the immediacy that transcends what can be said of it. The self-Other relation must be considered thereby as a plurality of infinite subjects, *not* a 'We'. Before there is a 'We', there is a plurality. It is important to note however that these subjects so conceived are not complete and self-identical, they are rather characterised by the type of insufficiency of the Fichtean subject. They are incomplete and as we shall see exceed themselves in the necessity of their responsibility for the Other.

The meeting of I and Other can be articulated in thematic terms; of meeting, "of conversation, of goodness, of desire" but the relation cannot be *reduced* to this. For Buber, both the meeting and distance between I and Thou can be thematised as 'the between'; the subjects in the dialogue maintain, theoretically, their immediacy to each other, an immediacy maintained through the meeting. Levinas, however, denies any concept of 'the between' which unites I and Thou. But how then, in the context of the absolute separation of I and other, are we to conceive of the self-identity of the subject and its development?

Levinas, as has already been remarked, sees the I-Other relation as capable of being announced in its immediacy. To do this he has to establish the identity of the I (albeit an insufficient or incomplete I) outside the dialogical relation and maintain the immediacy of the Other in the I-Other relation: "The interiority which ensures separation must produce a being absolutely closed over upon itself, not deriving its isolation dialectically from its opposition to the other" (Levinas, 1961, p. 122/148). This appeal to interiority is also an appeal to the I's own infinitude. "To be I is, over and beyond any individuation that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one's content" (Levinas, 1961, p. 6/36). Levinas has to posit a space for the I outside of the meeting with the Other to avoid the problems inherent in Buber's position. At the same time, if he is not to give this I a transcendental status this I cannot be "an equality with itself" (Levinas, 1981, 115). The I is not completely accessible to itself, it cannot straightforwardly reflect on itself and find itself complete.

This subject while separate is not self-sufficient prior to the responsibility that presents itself in the face of the Other. For Levinas, the subject's existence is subordinate to the Other. Responsibility for the Other is the "essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" (Levinas, 1985, p. 95). In

Otherwise than Being Levinas argues that this responsibility in its various guises, such as vulnerability and sensibility, demonstrates the insufficiency of the self-identical ego (Levinas, 1981, p. 106). As such, the place Levinas reserves for the I outside the relation to the Other is open; indeed openness to the Other is the very core of subjectivity.

In *Totality and Infinity* the insufficiency of this I is repeatedly affirmed by Levinas, and in order to stress the incompleteness of the I he asserts that the I continually re-assesses its own identity, "recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it" (Levinas, 1961, p. 6/36). The I is as infinite as the Other, though for Levinas absolutely separate, as such any concept of my own self must equally be "overflowed" by the *experience* of myself. The immediacy of myself cannot be adequately conceptualised and this surplus self-relation evolves through the relation to the Other.

Levinas' use of the phrase "recovering its identity" is somewhat curious as it implies that there is some sort of enduring self which remains constant throughout the life of the subject. Such an account of subjectivity is in tension with the radical character of alterity and the insufficiency of the I that he is concerned to present. "Recovery" seems to give the Levinasian I something of the character of the transcendental ego, indeed it would appear to bring Levinas' account of subjectivity much closer to Fichte's view of the matter, as though there is a type of transcendental subjectivity that expresses itself only through reciprocal intersubjective engagement.

This 'recovery of identity' is a process of self-identification; it is the "primordial work of identification". This process must be conceived, as the above quote indicates, as evolving throughout the course of one's life. As we saw previously, the Other as face also illustrates to us the infinite character of our own subjectivity. The immediacy of our subjectivity is not available to us in the reflective form of the Cartesian cogito. It is, in *Totality and Infinity*, present to us in enjoyment, in isolation from the Other.[6] This identity is distinct from the reciprocal form, characteristic of Buber's I-Thou relation, which defines the I by virtue of its reciprocal relation to the other. Levinas, in his criticisms of Buber, had argued that self-identity could not be understood as explicable in terms of a "recoil" from the other. The determining confines of the relationship are transcended by the infinite nature of the Other which defies knowledge. Nevertheless, our understanding of our own immediacy is, for Levinas, realised throughout the course of one's life.

If, however, this self-identification is not to be understood in a quasi-transcendental sense, then this "recovery of the I's identity" must be considered as evolving through determinate relations with others. This identity is not simply available to the I independent of interaction with others; it is an identity that must be contextualised. As such, the understanding of this self-identity would seem to presuppose a pre-existing intersubjective context. Klemm concludes from this that: "Levinas himself does not and cannot overcome that reciprocity

in his own account of the face to face. Thus he cannot claim to discover a primary fact free from intentional world constitution" (Klemm, 1989, p. 420). As Levinas himself indicates, we must consider this self-identity in terms of a mediated relation to the Other. In trying to understand the separated character of the subject, the discussion is increasingly drawn into an intersubjective context.

While such a conclusion does conflict with Levinas' professed strategy of avoiding conceiving the self and other relation as reciprocal, Klemm's conclusion downplays the way in which Levinas accounts for the primacy of the ethical relation to the Other. The responsibility for the Other that he establishes in *Totality and Infinity* through the experience of the infinite in the face of the Other is not intended as a recognitive response to the face; the face cannot be conceptually recognised *as* infinite. The face of the Other calls upon me in a manner which is outside any system of meaning. Nevertheless, in that work there is still, as we have seen, a reciprocity in the self-other relation and we have to recognise, in some sense, the call to responsibility even if it is only at the level of sensibility. There has to be some grounds for contact with the Other beyond its mere immediacy.

The character of the contact with the Other and responsibility for the Other is more explicitly dealt with in Levinas' later work, *Otherwise than Being* (1981). Here, rather than conceiving of the subject as external to the intersubjective relation in its own enjoyment and sensibility, or as capable of anything like self-recovery, responsibility is presented as the fundamental structure of subjectivity. In that work the openness of the subject to the Other is the defining character of subjectivity. The openness to the Other which takes place in responsibility is expressly positioned as sensible and corporeal; the 'ground' of contact with the Other is, because it is nothing cognised, not positioned as within a system of mediation that could unite I and Other.

Responsibility is not cognitive but is rather affective. There is no communicative and intersubjective *We* that underwrites our relation to others, hence our responsibility to the Other is not pre-established as a discursively derived value which would make the responsibility socially mediated rather than primary and immediate. Responsibility "commits me, and does so before any truth or certainty, making the question of trust and norms an *idle* question" (Levinas, 1981, p. 120). This commitment to the Other is nevertheless a response. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas places this response firmly at the level of the body: the body is the condition for the "susceptibility" to the Other (Levinas, 1981, p. 195). Responsibility is something felt in the first instance not something cognised. As this susceptibility to the Other is the primary structure of subjectivity, self-identity is dislocated from the centre of meaning determination that it had achieved in the transcendental tradition. The relation to the Other rather than being intentional or reciprocally intersubjective is *asymmetrical*. I am responsible for the Other through its proximity to me, and

the responsibility that this proximity elicits is not able to be grasped as concept, and is not a responsibility that is contingent upon me recognising that the Other is also responsible for me.

Levinas argues that 'We' cannot be a *unifying* concept. There cannot be a determined synthesis of I and other: I cannot be linked "to the stranger" (Levinas, 1961, p. 9/39). There is rather a multiplicity of absolutely separate and infinitely constituted subjects, not a 'We'. We have however seen that Levinas does allow the subject to be considered as developing through an interplay with other subjects, but what is important for Levinas is that this intersubjective relation is "irreducible to the distance of the synthetic activity of the understanding.. . . I, who have no common concept with the stranger, am, like him, without genus" (Levinas, 1961, p. 9/39). In this case the relation to the Other that occurs in a notion like empathy is just another example of the operation of the synthetic understanding, reducing difference to sameness.

Heidegger suggests that empathy [*Einfühlung*] is a "projection of one's own Being-towards-oneself 'into something else'" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 162). Levinas agrees with this assessment, arguing that it is simply another form of egocentricism that stresses *my* understanding of the Other, and as such undermines alterity. Rather than being a relation to the Other, empathy, as a *reflective* response to the Other, is self-relation and as such relates to the Other as merely a posit of consciousness. He prefers Heidegger's alternative term, *Fürsorge*.[7] Nevertheless, at the level of sensibility, Levinas still argues for something like an empathetic relation to the Other. We are summonsed by the Other, but the response to this summons is not one which is mediated through an empathetic cognition of what it would be like for me to be that person, rather for Levinas the response occurs at the level of the body. He remarks that: "[substitution] describes the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as *the other in me*. The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification" (Levinas, 1981, p. 125). This sentient vulnerability provides the context for our affective responsiveness to the Other.

In *Totality and Infinity* the face cannot be considered as mediated *through* the world. Experience would, in this case, imply that the Other is 'received' by virtue of some horizon, the revelation would as such be mediated and presented by virtue of this horizon, thereby undermining the immediacy of the face. The relation to the Other cannot "be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it. Its very infinition is produced precisely in this overflowing" (Levinas, 1961, p. xiii/25). The only sense in which Levinas is willing to discuss the face to face as experience is if "experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other" (Levinas, 1961, p. xiii/25). However, his discussion of the immediacy of the face is not contextless. The notion of the immediacy of the other is sustained through the various concepts he introduces: face, hostage, lover, stranger and neighbour. The Other is brought in, as it were, astride these various notions.

Levinas argues that these notions do not contain the Other because it always exceeds them. Nevertheless, its excess presents itself only in a context that is mediated, for example, in the recognition of the face. The immediacy of the Other can only announce itself in such a mediated context, because it is this it has to exceed.

At a more general level, Levinas' assertion of the absolute immediacy of the Other manifests the type of problems that Hegel expresses in his famous account of beginning in the opening chapter of the *Science of Logic* (Hegel, 1969, p. 67–80). If the immediacy of the other is, as we have seen, outside any system of reference or determination it could not be responded to in any sense. Even as revelation the Other has to address us. The problem with the Other is precisely its absoluteness, if we cannot understand this subjectivity as mediated and determinate, a mediation that must at the least co-exist with the immediate, then we cannot respond to it. This is not to dispute the immediacy of the Other, but simply to assert that such a conception of immediacy cannot, as it were, stand alone exterior to the mediated practices of intersubjective relations. Levinas in tying the Other to the face implicitly recognises this. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas continues along these lines by revising his position such that he much more explicitly presents the body as a site that has, at a non-cognitive level, a pre-existing and hence mediated relation to the Other which enables the body to respond to the plea of the Other.

The body is for Levinas intersubjective in its sentience. The identity of the Other as a subject is denied to reflective thinking, but the body is intersubjectively responsive. It is with the body that one meets the Other. Levinas is unable to consistently maintain the immediacy and the absolute separation of I and Other. In his assessment of Buber, as we have seen, he dismisses any conception of the "between", and yet Levinas reinscribes such a notion at the corporeal level. "The other is in me" as a "*feeling*" of responsibility for the other (Levinas, 1981, p. 125). He qualifies this by asserting this feeling "nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object. . . .Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the Other is known to me" (Levinas, 1985, pp. 96–97). Nevertheless, the Other is not completely exterior to me, the Other is in me as felt. This feeling is the condition for my response to the other, and as such I am *with* the Other, even though this being-with does not contain the Other as a knowledge of the Other.

Levinas has set out to depose the I, the 'We' and 'the Between'. To achieve this he argues that the constitutive moments in the intersubjective relation cannot be held under a common rubric. The transcendental ego reduces the Other to an assignation of the ego. 'We' and 'the Between' dissipate alterity by uniting I and Other. Levinas' fear is that once we posit I as 'We' and not a plurality of subjects the singularity and immediacy which underwrites the ethical relation collapses. It is in these terms that he refuses to consider the

relation of self and Other as reciprocal. The recognition of someone as the Other on this model subsumes the Other as a moment to the knowledge of the recognisor. In trying to displace this reciprocal relation by importing the immediacy of the Other on the back of a mediated notion such as face or neighbour he does not establish the immediacy of the other outside of existing recognitive relations. In *Otherwise than Being* the response to the immediacy of the Other is inscribed on the body of the subject, because Levinas has to present the immediate to the subject in a manner that can in fact be responded to; presented in its absolute immediacy it is unable to be conceived as something for which one could be responsible. He tries to evade the traditional problems associated with social ontology by placing the ground of the mediation and response at a non-conceptual level.

Levinas tries to conceive of the relata in the intersubjective relation as always exceeding the relation to each other. Positing the immediacy of the Other has to appeal to an existing relationship at the level of the body or at the level of existing reciprocal sociality as face or as neighbour. The relata are not at this level absolutely separate. Levinas has to present this separation through pre-existing contexts in which I and other are in the first instance connected. In this sense the immediacy is bound to mediation. Conceived in this way the face to face relation is not able to escape from the tension between immediacy and mediation to which earlier considerations of social ontology try to respond, particularly the German idealist tradition against which Levinas directly positions his entire project.[8]

The face to face emerges as a possible solution to traditional problems in social ontology while at the same time challenging the philosophical tradition as a whole to acknowledge the Other and respect its immediacy. In the course of his presentation of absolute difference Levinas has been unable to avoid some of the traditional problems which the face to face tries to avoid. Even though Levinas is unable to make a clean break from traditional conceptions of intersubjectivity with the face to face, his attempt to present the face as a command to be responsible for the Other, to open oneself to the Other, has, since the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, seen the question of the Other and ethics rise to pre-eminence.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. The page numbering of the English translation (Levinas 1969) follows the French. I have used the translation throughout the essay.
2. The distinction between other (autre) and Other (Autrui) is that *Autrui* is the absolutely other.
3. cf. Robert Bernasconi's discussion of the relation between Buber and Levinas, (Bernasconi, 1988).
4. For alternative accounts of recognitive intersubjectivity in German idealism see Robert R. Williams (1992) and Paul Redding (1996).
5. The page number after the slash refers to the English translation. *The Science of Rights*, Fichte (1970).
6. See 'Enjoyment and Separation', Levinas (1961, p. 147–152).
7. Levinas describes *Fürsorge* as: "a response to the essential misery of the other [but which] does give us access to the other". Levinas (1989, p. 73).
8. See the discussion of these issues in Robert R. Williams (1992) and Paul Redding (1996).

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