LAUGHTER AND METAPHYSICS
INTERRUPTIONS OF LEVINAS AND NIETZSCHE

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One quickly learns caution when suggesting parallels between Nietzsche's and Levinas' thought. The possibility that Levinas might articulate a transformation toward which Nietzsche dimly groped is viewed sometimes with suspicion, usually with disbelief, and occasionally with non-Nietzschean laughter. The reason for such disbelief is obvious. On Nietzschean terms, Levinas' articulations of ethical diachrony and substitution appear as the epitome of *ressentiment*, slave morality, and the ascetic ideal. Similarly, Nietzsche's will to power can be seen by the reader of Levinas as the epitome of the *conatus essendi*, the prioritization of essence, and the antipathy of ethics. Moreover, partisans for both philosophers have good reason to suspect that any such "parallels" will follow a pattern of misappropriating one thinker into the other's "system" (or anti-system) of thought. That this issue is of particular concern for Levinas is obvious—given that the radical nature of Levinas' thought is such that it betrays itself by thematizing the very disruption of metaphysical themes that it is designed to carry out. But it is also true that this concern applies to Nietzsche's thought. Indeed, although Levinas does appear to consider the manner in which Nietzsche's thought has been adopted by Western culture as antithetical to his own (OTB 177), Levinas also locates at least one of his own thematics within the range of Nietzsche's thought—as one of the "flashes" within the history of philosophy wherein subjectivity breaks with essence. This break, which Levinas locates primarily in Nietzsche's poetic writings and in the "laughter which refuses language" (OTB 8), marks the possibility of another kind of temporality, a temporality wherein Levinas seems to catch a glimmer of what he names ethical or diachronic time. Levinas believes that this radical "exception" is immediately thematized and covered over—if not by Nietzsche, then at least by his faithful followers and interpreters.

This essay is an attempt to follow Levinas' clue—to be less "faithful" to Nietzsche, and more faithful to his laughter. In order to pursue this suggestion, we must first uncover Levinas' thematic by which subjectivity breaks with essence—a thematic which will also demonstrate the manner in which such thought betrays itself. We can then see how this betrayal correlates closely with Nietzsche's writings about laughter and the self-overcoming nature of his thought—leading in each case to a non-metaphysical reading of Nietzsche's texts. Finally, such a non-metaphysical reading will, I believe, demonstrate that the radical edge of each thinker is closer to the other than most would like to believe—while at the same time highlighting one of the more subtle differences between Levinas and Nietzsche.

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Levinas' thought betrays itself because Levinas is attempting to indicate that which is "otherwise" than thought, but which is nonetheless constitutive of human thought and discourse. The phenomenological evidence to which Levinas appeals—for exam-

ple, the inaccessibility of another's consciousness—is not so unusual. But where most Western thinkers have taken such evidence to mark merely the limits of "human" knowledge—and not as a limit to knowledge in general or to the mind of an unipotent being—Levinas examines the very structure of such limitations without recourse to such overarching metaphysical claims. For Levinas, the inaccessibility of the Other marks a singularity not thematizable in philosophical language—or by discourse in general. Western philosophy and culture, by focusing on questions of "what" and "why," neglects to recognize that there is always a "who" that asks such questions.

One result of failing to address this structure is the myth that humans are essentially autonomous judicial subjects rather than the recognition that subjectivity itself has an historical lineage. The structure of the "who," which for Levinas is prior to the question of the "what," is the origin of both ethics and of the possibilities articulated by contemporary philosophy. By failing to see the priority of the "who" over the "what," Western philosophers tend to interpret experience in terms of static essences (a "what") and to construe ethics in terms of an overriding set of norms or values "behind the scenes" of the human world (OTB 4). Human life, then, is usually thought to be teleological in nature—where the goal of the human person is to actualize these inscribed norms in some manner.

But for Levinas, the "who"—or better yet, the absence that is constitutive of the "who"—makes all the difference. Even in Levinas' early work, this Other who asks constitutes the very possibility of subjectivity. Without the Other, a human would be little more than an animal—vaguely aware of its difference from a tree or a rock but unaware of reason, self-consciousness, or ethics. It is only upon recognizing another as Other—as having needs and joys and pains

of its own, as having an inaccessible interiority not unlike one's own—that one can begin to separate oneself as truly human. In this experience, which Levinas calls the "face of the Other," the "who" is articulated as a call not to kill her/him. But this call is not simply a call to passive nonaggression. The Other, overflowing my possibilities in every approach, asks/demands also that I serve and mediate those needs with the needs of others.

My ability to respond—my responsibility—eventuates in the development of dialogical speech and reason. Because the Other is like me in interiority, I become aware of and deepen myself as interiority. This first approach of openness to the Other as Other—by which I am vulnerable to being wounded by the Other's needs—is later named proximity and is the primal form of language (OTB 5, 25). Vulnerability to being wounded by the Other, as the proximity of approach, is a function of the substitution of oneself for the needs of the Other, by being responsible. But such primordial language is sensible in nature and fundamentally prior to the level of cognitive thought. Discourse and reason find their source in the need to mediate between the singular awareness that another has needs and the multiplication of those needs by that fact that there are many others—of whom I am also one (OTB 161).[1] After all, how am I to mediate between the needs of others (and myself) unless I can learn or develop the means both to reach out to understand those needs and to decide between my needs and (between) the competing claims of others? Moreover, such a process implies an ability to weigh like terms; that is, to violate the irreducible singularity of each Other by treating them as instances of universal themes. The imposition of a theme between myself and my singular obligation to an Other is, in fact, Levinas' definition of

violence. But in many cases, it is a violence demanded by the requirements of justice.

The upshot of Levinas' analysis is that subjectivity is a function of responsibility and not a metaphysical essence. From here it is a small step to see how the Other, on Levinas' terms, gifts me with freedom—both as the possibility of choosing needs other than one's own and as a radical increase in one's own possibilities. As the giver of such gifts, the claim of the Other upon me is increased. But equally intriguing is the fact that the requirement of justice, founded upon the multiplication of singular ethical relations, also founds the very possibility of metaphysics. After all, one normally judges a metaphysics in terms of its ability to provide meaningful accounts of human experience; specifically, by its ability to provide an all-inclusive thematic account of human reality. The gesture of metaphysics is thus essentially recuperative—in the best metaphysics nothing would be lost or meaningless, all aspects of reality and human experinece would fit without remainder. The demand of justice—that we thematize even the unthematizable—opens up the space of metaphysics (OTB 7). But it is the fragility of the ethical relation which allows metaphysics to become monstrous.[2]

The fact that the ethical call of the Other is essentially without content, multiplied by the fact that there are many such ethical Others, means that service is always fraught with the possibility of violation. Indeed, service to one person usually means to fail another, and one of the radical edges of Levinas' thought emphasizes the need to live within this discomfort.[3] Levinas' point is that some violence is inescapable, and that a truly ethical response is often to mediate rather than to eliminate violence.[4]

There are at least two general ways of covering over this discomfort, both of which involve gratuitous violence in an attempt to cover what is "Other" by the "same." The first is to reject the needs of the Other, to use the gifts of the Other only for one's own pleasure, and in an extreme case to murder the Other. The problem with murder, however, is that just as the face of the Other exceeds one's grasp in life, it continues to exceed that grasp in death.[5] Thus the very "transascendence" of the Other (*Totality and Infinity*), or the trace of the Other (*Otherwise than Being*), is not recuperated by such a gesture.

The second general approach to covering over the needs of the Other is to follow metaphysics to its logical extreme. That is, since it is already necessary to thematize the needs of others—a necessity that grows along with societies and cultures—Western culture has attempted instead to reduce ethics to the sorts of themes that justice itself demands. In creating ethical systems with which to definitively define and delimit our ethical obligations, we mistake a product of the ethical relation for the relation itself. One problem with such a solution is our own uneasiness—about whether we have made the best choice, whether we can ever really know the best choice, whether we have carried out an obligation in the best possible manner, and whether there is an obligation which we have missed or forgotten. Lyotard rightly calls such a system "terror" (D 103), since all experiences or people who do not fall within its parameters must be systematically ignored or suppressed.

Especially within the language of *Totality and Infinity*, it remains difficult to prevent such speech from recuperation by the language of metaphysics. After all, if discourse functions by themes, how does one write about that which is singular? Thus while the Other was thematized in Levinas' early works as always excessive, overflowing, and "transascendent," Levinas later abandoned such language as too easily recuperable by

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metaphysics.[6] In *Otherwise than Being*, he turned instead to the notions of diachrony and trace to interrupt metaphysics in a manner not so easily recuperated.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas distinguishes between living language (the saying) and written language (the said) (OTB 5, 45). Saying has its roots in the proximity of the approach that precedes all discourse. But as soon as the saying is said, or as soon as it is written down, language loses its vulnerability to the approach of the Other. Instead, it becomes part of a conceptual theme. Thus in writing his book Levinas was faced with a formidable performative contradiction—that is, how to write a book (the said) about that which cannot be said (saying)?

Levinas' answer was to engage in a strategy of interruption rather than a strategy of straight thematization. Levinas could not thematize the approach of saying, but he could point to the gaps, exclusions, incoherences, and inconsistencies in the systematic thinking of the said (OTB 44). This strategy of interruption uncovered, for Levinas, the "trace" of the saying in the said. Such a trace means that saying is not directly present in the said—after all, saying is a sensible approach to the singularity of the Other and not a theme or a universal—instead, it means that the trace of saying can be found in the breakdowns and exclusions of the said.

This describes how the ethical relation operates for Levinas. In this later work, the inaccessibility of the Other was no longer articulated in terms of excess, but in terms of a radical absence or trace. Thus inaccessibility is interpreted to suggest that when one reaches out to the space of the Other, one finds that the Other is always gone before one can arrive. In reaching out for the Other, I am always out of breath, says Levinas, because the Other is structurally absent—always unreachable. One implication of this metaphor seems to be that it is the breath of the Other

that revives one and that gives one life (freedom, subjectivity, etc), else this breathlessness would be one's demise. The ethical command or plea still functions on a sensible level (prior to cognition), but now it sounds only as the trace of a radical absence—of a past that was never present—and thus functions as a metaphor for that which is never finally recuperable (OTB 38). This is what Levinas means by the diachronic time of ethics—that ethics does not belong to the synchronous recuperative temporality of cognition and the ego, but that it is prior to (anarchical, constitutive, and other than) such systematic temporality (OTB 7).[7]

Thus for Levinas, the Other is the first truth, but not in a cognitive sense (OTB 26–28). Rather, this truth is the experience of the ethical call that eventuates prior to and is constitutive of reason, metaphysics, and discourse. Since this call is without specific content, it is, rather, a prescription that there be prescriptions.[8] Thus any system of meaning and value that one articulates to understand and to meet the needs of justice and the Other must be considered performatively meaningful. Metaphysics is thought of as a necessary betrayal at the command of justice; thus while this performance is not just a play (OTB 5), neither is it essentially meaningful. Essence names, for Levinas, the dominance of synchronous time, of systems of thought whereby the ego attempts to reduce the Other to one's (metaphysical) categories of control, of self-interest, and of self-preservation (the *conatus essendi*). Absolute metaphysical systems—a world behind the performances—serve this need by preserving all things in an illusion of seamless meaning. Thus the linkage of subjectivity and essence—the replacement of ethical responsiveness by cognition—covers over our prior ethical relatedness and is seen by Levinas as violent and oppressive in the extreme.

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We have seen how Levinas' critique of the linkage between subjectivity and essence goes hand in hand with the betrayal of his thought in metaphysics. What this implies for our reading of Nietzsche is that Levinas saw Nietzsche as interrupting, at least momentarily, the dominance of metaphysical thought. This breakage can be construed in at least two complementary ways. The first is that Nietzsche broke with Western philosophy by recognizing the autonomous judicial subject as a myth with a specific historical lineage. The recognition of this myth opened a space for thinking of subjectivity in other ways—in Levinas' case, as responsibility and substitution. But the second construal is perhaps more fundamental. That is, the separation of subjectivity and essence is based upon a Nietzschean laughter[9] that eventuates an interruption of metaphysical and synchronic temporality—an interruption that hints at Levinas' own project. This interruption does not mean that Levinas—or Nietzsche—believes that one can dispense with metaphysical valuation. Rather, the impetus behind a strategy of interruption is to reveal the limits of one's metaphysics so as to create a space wherein the choice of which metaphysics becomes optional rather than assumed. This leads to our next question; namely, are there resources within Nietzsche's own writings to support such a reading?

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It turns out to be quite easy to locate such resources within Nietzsche's writings. In fact, one difficulty in interpreting Nietzsche is the fact that his choice to write in aphorisms lends itself to almost any interpretation—including a purely metaphysical one.[10] Additionally, Nietzsche polemicizes and argues both sides of many positions. That Nietzsche self-consciously chose this style is obvious (GM 22–23), but this does not make it any easier to follow his thought. Or does it? What does the style of Nietzsche's writing have to tell us about his thought? For example, when Zarathustra preaches and overturns position after position, until finally appearing to settle upon the doctrine of eternal recurrence,[11] do we then take that doctrine as asserting Nietzsche's final metaphysical position? Does the aphoristic style function as Christian parables have typically been interpreted, that is, by leading one through a journey of worldly illusions toward an ultimate higher truth? While this does appear to be one of the ways in which Nietzsche has been read, such a reading leaves the aphoristic style secondary to the content or "truth" that it communicates.

What would it mean to read the style of Nietzsche's writing as self-consciously necessary to his intent? Taking our cue from Levinas, it would seem that a style which is self-consciously contradictory and interruptive of all schemes of meaning, while at the same time remaining within those systems, could be an attempt to articulate or indicate something outside of, other than, or at the constitutive limit of such systems. If this were so, then we could expect to find aphorisms, arguments, and even polemics against contemporary Western systems of valuation, while at the same time finding aphorisms, arguments, and even praise for the particular worth and value of such systems. The point behind such a performance would not be to simply replace one metaphysical system with another, but would instead be to recognize the nature of all metaphysical systems as performative—and therefore provisional—even if they are also "valuable" and inescapable.

This apparently contradictory style is indeed the case with Nietzsche's writing. To provide just one example, Nietzsche engages in vicious polemics against the Christian re-

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ligion, priests (GM 33), and what he names the slave morality of the "ascetic ideal."[12] Likewise, Nietzsche praises as "healthy" the aristocratic morality which he viewed as the historical counterpart to slave morality.[13] If one were to emphasize only these passages in Nietzsche's text, one could then naturally assume that in arguing for a return to healthy spiritedness Nietzsche was arguing for a return to aristocratic mores. But a more careful reading shows clearly that Nietzsche is not arguing for such a reversion. In fact, Nietzsche argues that it is only with slave morality that humans first became "interesting animals" (GM 33–36), that the "slave revolt" was the greatest transformation and concentration of life force in the history of Western culture, and further that even Nietzsche's own ability to think originates in the creativity of that revolt. Given that Nietzsche valorizes the importance of transformation and life energy, such passages do not indicate a simple desire to return to the past. Instead, they indicate a desire on Nietzsche's part to continue the process of transformation that was started in the slave revolt but which has been truncated by its fear of the energy which drove it.

Like Levinas, one of the radical edges of Nietzsche's thought is the employment of a strategy of interruption to demonstrate the performative nature of all metaphysical systems of meaning and valuation. In fact, Nietzsche attempts to show both stylistically and argumentatively that performance is not just one element of valuation, but that meaning is "essentially" performative. For Nietzsche, life is not inherently meaningful, but meaning is instead a performance of life energy enacting itself. Humans engage creatively in myths—the power of naming—as expressions of the life energy which drives them, but these myths never constitute final answers to life's questions. Thus while the "sickly" create myths to insure their own

preservation (a very strong motivation for believing in an essential subject [GM 46]), the healthy minded live in the experience that the expression of life energy requires no reward.[14] Life energy seeks to expend itself without reserve, and for Nietzsche this will to life ("will to power") is itself more alive than any "will to preservation"—except insofar as the will to preserve oneself serves for a different or greater expenditure of the will to power.[15]

The importance of tragedy for the Greeks, according to Nietzsche, was that it expressed without recuperation the overwhelming of their myths by life energy. "Dionysus" mythologically named the force of this overwhelming, while "Apollo" served as the counter-mythology of beauty and individuation (BT 36). Nietzsche wanted to make it clear that Apollo was not a god of eternal essences, but was rather a god of the performance (the coming to appear) of meaning—and thus Nietzsche spoke of Apollo in terms of the plastic arts and of the immediate and beautiful illusion of dreams (BT 34–36).[16] For Nietzsche, the question of whether there was a reality to which the Greeks compared their Apollinean dreams was already to impose a modern conceptual scheme upon the Greeks—a conceptual scheme which developed much later than the life world which gave rise to Greek tragedy. In that culture, the performances themselves were the reality, but not in the sense of a seamless higher meaning behind the world. Rather, in a radically alive and creative gesture, the Greeks saw the play of Dionysus and Apollo as the play of life energy itself—transforming itself in the creation and destruction of those forms which gave it expression (BT 33ff.).

This power of transformation expresses the heart of Nietzsche's insight, the impetus of which comes from within the very life energy that energizes its forms. Thus self-

overcoming appears as one of the principle ideals around which Nietzsche's thought was organized—although in a highly peculiar manner. Self-overcoming named a transformative energy which came from within a constellation of values, forms, or powers—a transformative energy which caused a radical shift and revaluation of those forms. But the idea of self-overcoming is in fact one of those very forms, and thus is itself called into question and is subject to transformation. Like Levinas, Nietzsche was acutely aware of how his thought betrayed itself within its every presentation. This appears to be one reason why Nietzsche once counselled his followers to reject his teachings, even to the point of being ashamed of him,[17] and further why Nietzsche emphasized laughter as appropriate to the death of god. Unlike exposition, laughter might succeed in maintaining an interruption that ordinary discourse would recuperate.[18]

This appears to express the heart of Levinas' insight into Nietzschean laughter, although the "loosening" of metaphysical holds is subtly different from that of Levinas' thought. For Levinas, there is a non-thematic foundational experience—diachrony or ethics—which gives rise to the possibilities of subjectivity and metaphysics. Thus while the play of interpretation is never complete, there is an underlying experience that is prior to and constitutive of all such plays. This underlying experience accounts for the gravity of Levinas' thought—"Saying is not a game" (OTB 5–6). For Levinas, the discourse of ethics is privileged above all others.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, does not seem to privilege any single discourse. Certainly there are discourses that dominate our culture, and which dominate Nietzsche's thought. But instead of attempting to isolate a single "correct" discourse, or even the foundational experience for such a dis-

course, Nietzsche attempted to articulate such "foundational" experiences in terms of a series of metaphors and transformations, each continuing to interrupt the other, so that the play of dominance was always undercut in some manner. On Nietzschean terms, the foundational experience of Levinas would simply be one interpretation among many, albeit particularly interesting and useful within certain contexts.

Levinas' articulation of the source of subjectivity and ethics could be particularly interesting to Nietzsche because it might perform, at least in part, a transformation toward which Nietzsche was dimly groping. As noted earlier, these transformations of values (transvaluations) are energized in some way from within the values that precede the transformation, thus the term "self-overcoming." Just as the language of exposition in many ways denies the interruptions and transformations that Nietzsche was seeking, it is still from within a particular discourse that many of the resources for such a transformation arise. According to Nietzsche, it was belief in religion that killed tragedy, since the drive for seamless truth and meaning refused to admit that some experiences might not be recuperable. In this sense, the "will to truth"[19] is based upon a useful deception (BGE 9–10)—a point which is very close to Levinas' argument that the dominance of metaphysics involves the covering over (a deception) of a much more fundamental human experience.

But just as the ascetic ideal killed tragedy, the energy which drives the ascetic ideal also killed "god" as an organizing concept for human life. The "kernel" of the ascetic ideal was not the belief in god, but the desire for recuperation and preservation—or seamless universal meaning. Nietzsche thought that the very will to truth that rises out of the ascetic ideal would also eventually force us to reject the myth of god as a defining value

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in our lives[20]—but this does not yet mean the ascetic ideal has been overcome:

> in the most spiritual sphere, too, the ascetic ideal has at present only one kind of real enemy capable of *harming* it: the comedians of this ideal—for they arose mistrust of it. . . . Everywhere else that the spirit is strong, mighty, and at work without counterfeit today, it does so without ideals of any kind. . .—*except for its will to truth.* But this will, this *remnant* of an ideal, is, ... thus not so much its remnant as its *kernel.* Unconditional honest atheism . . . is therefore *not* the antithesis of that ideal, . . . it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution. . .—it is the awe inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God.* (GM 160)

Thus the heart of the ascetic ideal was, for Nietzsche, a metaphysical belief in the value of truth.[21] Moreover, we see again the importance that Nietzsche placed upon laughter as one of the few ways of challenging the dominance of that ideal. The claim that "god is dead" does not mean that Nietzsche killed the idea of god, nor that Nietzsche was a nihilist. In fact, Nietzsche argued against the nihilism of life energy turned destructively against itself, while at the same time seeing the weariness of that energy as part of the impetus for change (BGE 16; GM 19; WP 544). If we are to overturn the will to truth, the resources for such a turning will not come from outside of the ascetic ideal, but from the forces that energized it in the first place.

Nietzsche articulated one of those resources as genealogy, or as the project of providing lineages by which supposed "transcendental" or "objective" values came into being. In this case, by showing that such "ahistorical" systems of values have distinct histories, their power to dominate lives and thought is loosened and becomes optional.

Nietzsche did not argue that we can live without systems of value. Instead, he wanted us to become self-conscious about the nature of our valuations and open to possibilities for transvaluation—a transvaluation toward which he was groping in his own thought. In this case, the energy for this resource also lies within the will to truth—for if it can be shown that the transcendental values of the ascetic ideal were historically conditioned, then their transcendental status would be undercut.[22]

One such genealogical study was performed on the origins of morality, to demonstrate how the morality of good and evil arose out of the prior morality of good and bad (see note 13). Likewise, it was from this lineage that both the idea of the human subject and its functioning arose as an ordering value of human discourse. Since Nietzsche understood meaning as performative, Nietzsche accomplished Levinas' separation of subjectivity and essence by recognizing that both are constructs with lineages that arise out of specific historical forces. In other words, both are interpretations:

> "Everything is subjective," you say; but even this is interpretation. The "subject" is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.—Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis. In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. (WP 267)

Thus the organizing terms of Nietzsche's discourse—terms like subjectivity, self-overcoming, the ascetic ideal, the overman, and eternal recurrence—must be viewed with an eye to their transformative power. The overman, for example, functions as an ideal for the transvaluation of the two di-

chotomies of noble and slave morality (good/bad//good/evil). But although the overman functions somewhat beyond these particular dichotomies, she must also fight her own "overdragon" of values and ideals (Z 144). This means that the ideal of the "overman" must also be overturned, which happens when Zarathustra's animals declare that he is no longer the teacher of the overman, but of eternal recurrence (Z 220). Likewise, although eternal recurrence is never specifically overturned by Zarathustra, it is treated elsewhere as an historical "midpoint" (of transition) which carried the following consequences:

> 3. Means of *enduring it*: the revaluation of all values. No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer "cause and effect" but continually creative; no longer will to preservation but to power; no longer the humble expression, "everything is *merely* subjective," but "it is also *our* work!—Let us be proud of it!" (WP 545)

If eternal recurrence were a metaphysical position, rather than a performative one, the "revaluation of all values" would not be a means of enduring it, but would rather be a necessary effect of it. Moreover, if eternal recurrence were Nietzsche's equivalent to the will to truth, then we would take joy in its certainty rather than in its uncertainty, its implications would follow as effects rather than creations, and the will to preservation—since all things would be recuperated endlessly—would take priority over the will to power. Eternal recurrence serves, in part, as a counter-metaphor against the possibility of reading the "overman" as a carrier of final redemption. As a self-interrupting metaphor for the essential meaninglessness of life and for the possibility of joy in the performance of our creations, eternal recurrence functions quite well. But as a final metaphysical principle, it fails utterly to express the radical edge of Nietzsche's thought.

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By now it should be obvious that the relationship between Nietzsche's and Levinas' thought is complicated and subtle; the two thinkers arrive at startlingly similar conclusions from radically different points of view. Both separate subjectivity and essence, both hold that meaning is performative, and both argue that metaphysics, when absolute, is highly inimical to human life. Further, it should also be clear that both thinkers understand the energy behind this destructive aspect of metaphysics as coming from some aspect of a life giving impulse—whether we call that impulse life energy or the call of justice. What remains for this project is to thematize some of the more subtle tensions and similarities in their thought.

We have already noted how Levinas and Nietzsche differ in the priority each gives to a "foundational" relation. On Levinas' terms, Nietzsche's failure to acknowledge this relation marks where his thought closes in upon the space which was opened by the separation of subjectivity and essence. Nietzsche can be said to have glimpsed the possibility of ethical time because—if Levinas is correct—it is only in terms of such time that subjectivity and essence can truly be separated. But in emphasizing only the play of transformations, Levinas would argue that Nietzsche missed the ethical "gravity" upon which that play ultimately depended.

Such a reading of Nietzsche can be supported in a number of ways.[23] In the first place, Nietzsche seemed always to emphasize self-overcoming, failing to recognize or disagreeing with the claim that the self is constituted and overcome (interrupted) by the Other, and not by its own energy. While such a reading of Nietzsche does not precisely match up with the synchrony of the

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conatus essendi, it also stops short of the move to diachronic temporality. Secondly, Nietzsche's language, while not inherently teleological,[24] does articulate life energy primarily in terms of excess. As we noted earlier, Levinas eventually rejected this language as too easily recuperable by a metaphysical teleology, and can reject Nietzsche's language on similar grounds. Thirdly, but by no means finally, Nietzsche himself expresses great suspicion and distaste for any ethics that emphasizes feelings of being "for others" and not "for myself" (BGE 45).

Yet there is also a reading of Nietzsche that does not necessarily interpret his thought as antithetical to ethics. After all, it is clear that the will to power is not the will to preservation, which is the ultimate role of the *conatus essendi* for Levinas. Nor is Nietzsche against ethics *per se*, but only against a morality which gets stuck in *ressentiment*, revenge, and pity:[25]

> But if you have a suffering friend, be a resting place for his suffering, but a hard bed as it were, a field cot: thus you will profit him best. And if a friend does you evil, then say, "I forgive you what you did to me; but that you have done it to *yourself*—how could I forgive that?" Thus speaks all great love: it overcomes even forgiveness and pity. (Z 90)

Such a morality is based on joy, strength, and respect—in whatever measure one can achieve—and a generosity which has no room for pity and *ressentiment* to gnaw away at either the giver or the recipient. Levinas also articulates an ethical relation which is not dependent upon *ressentiment* or pity, since the "for the Other" of which Levinas speaks is not a matter of subjective feeling, but of perception.[26] Moreover, Nietzsche clearly argues that a morality based on joy

and strength would truly free one to serve another:

> Verily, I may have done this and that for sufferers; but always I seemed to have done better when I learned to feel better joys. As long as there have been men, man has felt too little joy: that alone, my brothers, is our original sin. And learning better to feel joy, we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them. (Z 88)

Finally, it would be overly simplistic to say that Nietzsche wanted only healthy spirited morality and rejected slave morality. As we saw before, Nietzsche viewed the *ressentiment* of slave morality as creating/gathering the greatest concentration of life energy in Western history. Far from wanting to dispel that force, Nietzsche wants to continue the transformation into a new valuation which will both keep some of the fruits of slave morality (reflective self-consciousness, memory, greater creativity, etc) while at the same time overcoming the *ressentiment* which originally energized the slave revolt.[27] The fear of death—which is also a fear of the expenditure of energy that is life—expressed in the obsessive desire for self-preservation (GM 120) resists the continuing movement of self-transformation contained within the energies of the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche thinks—or hopes—that the buildup of life energy behind the damn of the ascetic ideal will result in its breaking forth rather than in its final decay (BGE 211).

Nietzsche's positive emphasis upon the excess of life energy and its expenditure without reserve can also be partly reconciled with Levinas' thought. While both thinkers hold that language betrays its object, the fact that Levinas may have found a "better" language than Nietzsche does not mean that Nietzsche's thematizations and interruptions are "wrong." After all, Levinas discarded the language of excess from his earlier work not

because it was wrong, but because it was too easily interpreted in ways to which he objected. As we noted earlier, even Levinas' later language is still subject to similar abuses (see note 7). Moreover, there is a sense in which Levinas also thinks of life in terms of an expenditure without reserve—but in this case, expenditure is thought in terms of service to the Other. This remains true within to the terminology of either of Levinas' works; in the language where the Other exceeds me, I can never give enough to recuperate that excess, while in the language of radical absence, I can never adequately respond to the claim. Finally, both thinkers characterize the constitution of humans as "interesting," interior, and free precisely by virtue of some sort of "moral" relation—in Levinas' case of the relation to the Other, Nietzsche could argue that to serve the Other in Levinas' sense is indeed to serve myself—or more accurately, to enact a self-articulation of an expenditure of life energy.

Yet while provocative, this interpretation of Nietzsche as conforming to Levinas stretches the similarities between the two thinkers beyond the breaking point. At best, this reading shows Nietzsche as an interesting but inadequate attempt to reach what Levinas has grasped in a fundamental way—the non-metaphysical foundation of metaphysics found in an affective ethical relation. But to be fair to both thinkers, it seems only appropriate to reverse their positions. What would it be like to conform Levinas' thought to a Nietzschean point of view?

Nietzsche was looking for a valuation which develops anew a sort of healthy spiritedness—one that focuses on the performative truth of action[28] rather than the *ressentiment* behind the will to truth—and further suspected that the energy for such a transformation would, in some new way, continue to develop the interiority or "soul" that first made us interesting animals. It is clear that

Nietzsche had little idea as to what form this transformation would take—for if it could be predicted, then it would lack the radical creativity that interrupts metaphysics. Does Levinas' thought suggest a manner of thinking such a transformation? Is Levinas' thought itself articulating such a process of transvaluation?

Certainly Levinas escapes many of the central tenants of the ascetic ideal. Levinas does not postulate a big brother—and his use of the term "god" is arguably intended to name a structure of human experience rather than metaphysical entity (OTB 149). More importantly, Levinas provides a powerful account of the performative nature of meaning, thus cutting through the heart of the will to truth. Levinas, like Nietzsche, is not inherently teleological his thought—both thinkers hold to a radical creativity and non-recuperability. But Levinas also provides an account of interiority and ethics which, at least in theory, moves radically beyond the motivations of *ressentiment*, revenge, and pity.[29] The obligation to the Other gifts me with my very self, even though that obligation is founded on the poverty and the destitution of the Other and not in the joy and strength of myself. Thus I do not respond to that destitution with "pity"—understood as the active response of a subject. The "passivity beyond passivity," by which I experience the Other, names both the fact that I experience the other sensibly and that fact that my call to service is also the gift of life and of my very self. Such energy recoils upon itself in a manner not far from the self-overcoming of Nietzsche's thought—and perhaps names a way in which self-overcoming overcomes itself!

Thus from a Nietzschean point of view, Levinas could be seen as articulating and giving form to a transvaluation that moves beyond both noble and slave morality. In this sense, Levinas is the herald of the over-

man—but that overman is reinterpreted as the Other. As Other, Levinas' overman functions thematically[30] in ways remarkably similar to Nietzsche's metaphor—as an inaccessible event (unreachable ideal) that nonetheless draws us both to and beyond ourselves. Yet there is at least one major issue in which Levinas can still be seen as conforming to a transformed sense of the will to truth.

Just as the breaking point for a Levinasean interpretation of Nietzsche was found in Nietzsche's refusal to give any discourse or experience priority over all others—except within a particular historical lineage—the breaking point of a Nietzschean reading of Levinas is Levinas' insistence that the ethical relation has a special and ongoing priority over all other discourses. It seems that from Levinas' point of view, what changes is our articulation of this singular ethical relation, but the structure of this relationship holds some sort of ahistorical sway over human discourse. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, this interpretation is simply one among many—powerful and life intensifying in some respects, degenerative in others. It is precisely within the desire that ethical discourse rule all others that Nietzsche would locate Levinas' *ressentiment* as a will to truth—in fact, in Levinas' insistence that the "Other" is always the first truth—which at its heart reinscribes a modified metaphysical foundationalism. This point, then, seems to mark a fundamental difference in their thought.

* * *

Thus far, we have marked three different ways in which to read the relationship between Levinas and Nietzsche. The first is to read Nietzsche as an early but somewhat inadequate precursor whose thought is corrected by Levinas. The second is to read Levinas as articulating a transformation toward which Nietzsche dimly groped—a

transformation so radical as to express a self-overcoming of Nietzsche's very idea of self-overcoming. This reading essentially aligns the two thinkers together, with Levinas continuing Nietzsche's project on a more radical level. Finally, we can read Nietzsche as differing from Levinas in that while Nietzsche might accept Levinas' discourse as one discourse among many, he would reject any sort of ahistorical regency of an ethical relation. In this case, and if Nietzsche were correct in his assessment, Levinas could be seen as articulating part of a transformation which Nietzsche sought, but would still be somewhat caught up in the *ressentiment* of the will to truth.[31] I suspect that Nietzsche would then want to continue this transformation via a genealogical account of Levinas' values. Further, I suspect that this transvaluation would take us in directions similar to those taken by thinkers like Derrida and Lyotard.[32]

It may well be undecidable which version, if any, is the most viable description of the relationship between Levinas and Nietzsche. Indeed, even these possibilities have only been sketched out in the most preliminary of fashions. Yet there are other resources for dealing with this issue. One might, for example, ask how one can recognize a distinctly "human" alterity from the alterity of the elemental or of the *il y a*. Does not this very recognition commit Levinas to acknowledge some sort of equiprimordiality between the ontological difference and diachronic time?[33] One might also question whether the temporality of enjoyment is truly synchronic in structure, and whether the regency of this particular diachronic structure privileges a white, masculine, Western cultural world view—suppressing, for example, the possibility of uniquely ethical relations generated in erotic alterity.[34] These considerations, if efficacious, support a play of discourses over the priority of a single discourse.

But while such considerations do not actually decide the issue—if indeed such an issue is decidable—the very fact that both thinkers are attempting to interrupt metaphysics limits the use of facile distinctions between them. My own suspicion is that the third option will prove the most viable, and that this reading will be supported by the emergence of competing ethical discourses with a radicality inspired by Levinas' own thought. But that is the topic of another essay.

What this essay has accomplished, on the other hand, is to show that both thinkers engaged in startlingly similar projects—suggesting the performative nature of meaning and the necessity of interrupting metaphysical thinking—and thus that the radical edge of Levinas' and Nietzsche's thought have far more in common than is generally accepted. Nonetheless, there remain important differences between the thinkers, one of which centers on the regency of an ethical discourse.

Nietzsche wrote that "the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*" (BGE 10). Both Levinas and Nietzsche attempt to interrupt such oppositions of values. In a similar spirit, one initiated by Levinas' comment on Nietzschean laughter, this essay has attempted to interrupt the facile drawing of such oppositions between Nietzsche and Levinas.

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ENDNOTES

1. This "third" is also structurally present in but subordinate to the Other (TO 169).

2. The term "metaphysics" is used in several different senses within this essay. In its most general sense, any discursive language, any manner of thematizing or gathering together possibilities for action or relation, is either metaphysics or on the way to metaphysics. Yet by the very breadth of this definition, it should be clear that some sort of "metaphysical" thinking is inescapable—nor would any final escape be desirable. A metaphysics of presence, on the other hand, is a system or thematic which presupposes some sort of absolute underlying unity—whether or not that unity is graspable by human understanding, and even if that unity expresses itself as a plurality. This assumption of a final underlying unity, or of a plurality which is assumed to allow all differences without violence or oppression, is the "monstrous" side of metaphysics. As Dr. John Caputo once

remarked, "How much blood was spilled for *this* essence to have become an eternal truth?"

3. Levinas also acknowledges a need to withdraw from that discomfort, and indeed that such withdrawal is also necessary for ethical responsiveness (see "The Dwelling," TI 152).

4. One violence which Levinas calls "good" is the interruption of essence by saying (OTB 43). See also Derrida's discussion of an "Economy of Violence" (WD 117).

5. I wonder what Levinas would say about psychopaths or sociopaths, since they seem constitutionally incapable of feeling an ethical call. Certainly such people can still learn reason and discourse, but it seems that Levinas would have to maintain that language and culture could not originate with such people.

6. Levinas is aware that the language of excess, of overflow, and of transcendence still carries with it the implication of a goal that might be reached, a reason that could be sufficient, and an *otherness* that could be reconciled and thematized—if not by us, then by a being greater than us. This language tends toward a teleological conception of the human; that is, toward an implication that while the complete recuperability of the excess of the *Other* is impossible on a practical level, it might be theoretically possible. This allows one to postulate metaphysical systems that "approach" this recuperation, or to postulate a god whose greater than human abilities allow for a complete recuperation.

7. This is not to say that other thinkers do not attempt to systematize even this articulation of Levinas' thought—but it is to say that such attempts depend upon a failure to follow that thought. One example of this sort of failure can be found in Aertsen's article, "The Convertability of Being and Good," *The New Scholasticism*, (Autumn 1985). In this article, Aertsen follows the predictable pattern of reducing Levinas' diachrony to a "merely" human level, while arguing that the scholastic convertability thesis between being and the good allows for an ultimate recuperation on the divine level.

8. Lyotard arrives at this point by arguing that while it its necessary for phrases to link, how they (ought to) link is not determined (D 116).

9. While we are following Levinas' clue of Nietzschean laughter, this does not mean that laughter exhausts the performative dimensions of Nietzsche's thought. In fact, laughter must be seen within the context of Nietzsche's genealogical work (see note 13).

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

10. One of the most obvious misuses of Nietzsche's writing was to support anti-semitism by the National Socialist Party, a view which Nietzsche himself found repugnant. For example, see (GM 124; BGE xiii), Kaufmann's *Nietzsche* (pp 42–46; 291–92), or George Bataille's *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p 184.

11. Eternal recurrence is the doctrine that all things repeat—endlessly. The intention of this doctrine seems to be to raise the issue of whether there is eternal value in any thought, virtue, or action. The question before us, however, is whether eternal return is intended as a final metaphysical belief or as a metaphor for the performative nature of meaning and value.

12. The ascetic ideal functions for Nietzsche in a manner similar to how I have been using a metaphysics of presence—as the assumption of a seamless universal meaning or valuation (GM 160).

13. Nietzsche distinguishes the morality of the nobility as distinguishing between good and bad rather than good and evil. In this first case, what was "bad" meant merely base, coarse, unworthy of a noble (GM 26). Noble morality was considered "healthy" because it emphasized the spontaneous expression and expenditure of life force in the performance of naming and valuation (GM 37). The noble, for example, was not self-effacing and did not humiliate others through pity—noble generosity was given from a sense of excessive abundance and not from an obligation to be charitable (BGE 205).

The morality of good and evil, on the other hand, had its origins in the priestly and the slave castes. These peoples, though weaker than the nobility, also felt the pressure of life force expanding and seeking expression, and resented lacking the power of valuation (naming) and expression. One way in which the transformation of values from good/bad to good/evil came about was through the priests—who convinced the nobles that the power of the nobility would become more secure if they, as priests, taught that the aristocracy had been ordained to their roles by god. But while the nobility enjoyed a short term advantage from this ordination, the power of naming—and thus of valuation itself—passed from the nobles to the priests. Thus priestly values, which were at the time centered around hygiene, became more important than the aristocratic values of action and truth.

Since priestly values were not centered around action—which means that "truth" could no longer refer to the straight forward expression or performance of valu-

ation—another means of expression (and another meaning of truth) had to be found for these values. Unable to express itself outwardly, life energy was turned back upon itself to become interiority:

> All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward*—this is what I call the *internalization* of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his "soul." The entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was *inhibited*. (GM 84)

But when the "purity" of hygiene is internalized, it becomes "correct thinking" or thought control. On the other hand, Nietzsche also argues that "only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil* . . . the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts!" (GM 33). Indeed, it is from the turning back of life energy against itself that self-reflection and the human soul developed.

What remains unhealthy in such a morality is that it is driven by *ressentiment*—so that the same *ressentiment* which carves out the space of the human soul also eats away at that soul and prevents the "healthy" expenditure of life force. In fact, the loss of the power of naming—of responsibility for the performance of our own values—coincides with the absolute regency of a belief in god. After all, if both the priests and the "lower classes" are afraid that those stronger than they will control valuation, then it becomes expedient to believe in a "big brother" to fight their battles for them. Such valuation is essentially reactive, but its very impotence makes one clever (GM 33, 37–38). As Nietzsche expressed it, this was also the origin of the belief in an independent subject:

> When the oppressed, downtrodden, outraged exhort one another with the vengeful cunning of impotence: "let us be different from evil, namely good! And he is good who does not outrage, who harms nobody, who does not attack, who does not requite, who leaves revenge to God, who keeps himself hidden as we do, who avoids evil and desires little from life, like us, the patient, humble, the just"—this, listened to calmly and without previous bias, really amounts to no more than: "we weak ones are, after all, weak; it would be good if we did nothing *for which we are not strong enough*"; but this matter of dry fact, this prudence of the lowest order which even insects possess (posing as dead, when in great danger, so as not to do "too much"), has . . . clad itself in the ostentatious garb of the virtue of quiet, calm resignation, just as if the weakness of the weak—that is to say, their essence . . . —were a voluntary achievement, willed, chosen, a *deed*, a *meritorious* act. This type of man

needs to believe in a neutral independent "subject" . . . (or) *soul*. . . (GM 46).

14. In one constellation of values, the expenditure of life energy can be thought of as its own reward. But I avoid such language because this valuation exists within a lineage of language regarding things as goods in themselves, while Nietzsche seeks to articulate an event at the boundaries of such a lineage.

15. "A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*" (BGE 21).

16. "For the more clearly I perceive in nature those omnipotent art impulses, and in them an ardent longing for illusion, for redemption through illusion, the more I feel myself impelled to the metaphysical assumption that the truly existent primal unity, eternally suffering and contradictory, also needs the rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion, for its continuous redemption" (BT 44–45).

17. Occurring as it does before the exposition on eternal recurrence, the following passage could be read as a denial of those beliefs which are only preparatory to the "truth." But such a reading would again limit the performative element in Nietzsche's thought to a secondary role, a reading which appears inconsistent with the dominant movement of Nietzsche's discourse:

> Verily, I counsel you: go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he has deceived you. (Z 78)

18. "But one thing do I know; it was from you yourself that I learned it once, O Zarathustra: whoever would kill most thoroughly, *laughs*" (Z 315). This thesis on laughter is picked up by many post-Nietzschean writers. For example, Lyotard emphasizes the interruptive nature of laughter when he writes that:

> the law should always be respected with humor because it cannot be completely respected, except at the price of giving credence to the idea that it is the very mode of linking heterogeneities together, that is has the necessity of total Being. This humor aims at the heterogeneity which persists beneath and despite legitimation. (D 144)

19. Taken as the assertion that everything must be inherently meaningful and that our task is to discern the "correct" meanings.

20. "After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing its *most striking inference*, its inference *against* itself; this will happen, however, when it poses the question 'what is the meaning of all will to truth?' . . . As the will to truth thus gains

self-consciousness . . . morality will gradually perish now . . . —the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles" (GM 161).

21. "That which constrains these men, however, this unconditional will to truth, is *faith in the ascetic ideal itself*, even if as an unconscious imperative—don't be deceived about that—it is the faith in a *metaphysical* value, the absolute value of *truth*" (GM 151).

22. But this does not necessarily mean that such values would cease entirely to function. Instead, Nietzsche sought to move into a transitional and transvaluative state.

23. Many other critiques are ultimately trivial. For example, when Nietzsche polemicizes against justice, he is often referring to justice in terms of an equity which fails to recognize that all people are not equal (Z 101). This resonates with Levinas' notion that justice as equity is never successful, and indeed that the reduction of justice to mere equity is one way of violating the singularity of the Other.

24. In fact, Nietzsche's thought is that goals are products of willing, and not inherent in reality. For example:

> If the world had a goal, it must have been reached. If there were for it some unintended final state, this also must have been reached. If it were in any way capable of pausing and becoming fixed, of "being," if in the whole course of its becoming it possessed even for a moment this capability of "being," then all becoming would long since have come to an end, along with all thinking, all "spirit." The fact of "spirit" as a form of becoming proves that the world has no goal, no final state, and is incapable of being. (WP 546)

25. And of course, Nietzsche sees life affirmation even in the morality of *ressentiment*. But it is important to note that these values, or even their correlative values of the good and self-giving, all remain subject to transvaluation. Even the upcoming references from Zarathustra need to be read not as fixed goods, but as goods within a particular lineage or transvaluations.

26. Slave morality leads to an interpretation of feelings as belonging to a subject. But while feelings are involved in any perceptual act, the recognition of the Other is a condition for rather than the eventuation of the sorts of feelings to which Nietzsche refers.

27. I refer to "some" of the fruits because Nietzsche expects that there will be radical differences between slave morality its transvaluation. Thus it is probable that some of the fruits which we now consider "goods" will be lost, and even those fruits which are "retained" may be transformed beyond any pre-recognition. Nor does it seem that there is any "best" transvaluation, but only different transformations which are incommensurably more or less energizing.

28. Truth understood in terms of the power of naming/valuation.

29. A more common Nietzschean interpretation would be that Levinas intensifies this *ressentiment*. But while there is some basis for this interpretation, it functions on a much more subtle level than is usually articulated.

30. Of course, the Other functions primarily as a concrete affective singularity which disrupts thematic ideals even as it founds their possibility.

31. There are two ways to read the regency of the ethical relation in Levinas' thought. The first way is that an affective relation of obligation founds reason, discourse, and language in a manner that gives it priority over all other discourses. The second way is to argue that Levinas' articulation of the structure of that discourse is "the best" articulation of an ultimately unthematizable relation. While I find both of these forms of "regency" evident within Levinas' thought, it also appears that there are resources from within Levinas' own work for overturning both of these forms. If so, then it might be possible to generate "ethical" discourses which twist free of this last vestige of *ressentiment*.

32. And in the direction of Charles Scott's project of thinking within the radical "questionability" of all ethics—whose comments and critique were invaluable to this project.

33. This could be done without reducing one to the other; for example, each could function as a different sort of past while being "equally" constitutive of human experience. See also (OTB 74) for the apparent equiprimordiality of enjoyment.

34. I have in mind certain feminist literature, in particular, Irigaray's "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" in *Re-Reading Levinas*.

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