

What is Ethics as First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context

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§1. Phenomenology and Continental Philosophy

I hope I may be forgiven for beginning on an autobiographical note. As an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz many years ago, I came to philosophy through the Greeks – more specifically, through an interest in myth and in a kind of thinking that seemed quite other than the physics and chemistry that mostly occupied me at the time. The Greeks were taught by Paul Lee, erstwhile associate of Timothy Leary, who was certainly not typical of mainstream philosophy. My initial exposure to the latter came in a course on the rationalists, and in the process of studying Leibniz's *Monadology* I had my first taste of what would soon become a familiar experience: I encountered assertions whose sense and rationale remained totally opaque to me. I read that trees and rocks are composed of “monads” – extensionless atoms, each of which is itself a consciousness. Somehow this had to do with God and was supposed to follow from Descartes' relatively straightforward idea that I can be certain of my own existence. Further, it was supposed to entail that ours is the best of all possible worlds. For none of this could I find the slightest convincing reason in my own experience. Fortunately, in the following term I was introduced to phenomenology, which enabled me, many years later, to read other philosophers with greater understanding.

I begin with this story not because philosophers such as Leibniz and Spinoza are very much in vogue in Continental philosophy these days – though they certainly are – but because it

hints at what motivates my remarks, remarks that evidence a kind of *fort-da* pathology of mine: the simultaneous attraction to, and repulsion from, big ideas. This pathology structures my feelings about the relation between phenomenology and Continental philosophy. Whatever else it is, Continental philosophy is the home of big ideas. Analytic philosophers chop away at every possible variation of belief-desire psychology, every version of token-type identity theory, every combination of internalism and externalism. In so doing, they keep the temperature very low, emulating the phlegmatic Hume in their distaste for anything that might transgress “common sense.” Continental philosophers, in contrast, delight in generating “monadologies”: the flesh of the world, *das Ereignis*, the plane of immanence, *differánce*, *Seinsgeschick*, gods beyond being – all of them very big ideas indeed. In so doing they turn up the heat and let it infuse our reptilian brain, as though we were lizards in the sun.

The peculiar thing about phenomenology – and here I come to the point – is that it fits neatly in neither camp. It is certainly responsible for its share of big ideas – indeed, the ones I’ve mentioned all have roots in phenomenology – but it is also informed by Husserl’s demand for *Kleingeld*, the small change that is assumed to lie, somehow, at the basis of all those bloated CDO’s and mortgage-backed securities. As heirs of the financial meltdown, we Continental philosophers must wonder, at times, whether our own big ideas are not ripe for the philosophical short-sellers. At any rate this is where I, conservative investor that I am, refuse to take the word of rating agencies like SPEP and make my own inquiries into what is being sold. *Fort-da*: the lure of wisdom versus the threat of ringing hollow when Nietzsche’s hammer comes a-knocking. If Hegel is right to say that in philosophy the fear of error is itself the error, Kierkegaard is equally right to point out that one looks rather silly sleeping in a doghouse next to one’s

conceptual castle. Is there any way to entertain a big idea without becoming its fool?

Levinas's idea of ethics as first philosophy is certainly a big idea, and it has had enormous impact on Continental philosophy over the past twenty five years. If Levinas is right, the idea that "ethics is an optics" – that my ethical response to the Other provides the ultimate perspective for addressing all other philosophical questions – has entirely eluded Western philosophy. I find this thought immensely fruitful, though at the same time it seems initially about as plausible as the claim that reality is composed of monads. Thus, I propose here to engage in a bit of due diligence with respect to Levinas's idea; to ask, more specifically, how it can be justified on *phenomenological grounds*. What is the philosophical "small change" that might make me comfortable investing in an idea as big as this one?

Now I readily admit that a comfortable investment is not the only possible goal of philosophical work – where would we be without the speculators, after all? – but in this case I am encouraged by Levinas himself, since he explicitly claims that his idea is phenomenologically defensible. As he says of *Totality and Infinity*, "the presentation and development of the notions employed owes everything to the phenomenological method."¹ Phenomenology unpacks the horizons in which "naive thought" and experience are embedded, horizons that "endow them with meaning;" it thematizes the "overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives" (TI 28). This forgotten experience is an horizon that conditions all intentional content and that ultimately demands a "reversal" (TI 47) of the traditional hierarchy between ontology and ethics. My aim, then, is to make explicit how, as

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press,

Levinas says, “Husserlian phenomenology has made possible this passage from ethics to metaphysical exteriority” (TI 29). It will not be possible to do this in all its dimensions, of course, so I will limit myself to one such line of horizon-unpacking, to one phenomenon that evidentially supports the idea that ethics is first philosophy – namely, the claim that the face of the Other is *originarily* an ethical experience; that the phenomenon of the “face” is not grounded in perception but grounds it (TI 50-51); that “the face is the evidence that makes evidence possible” (TI 204). Can such ideas be cashed in phenomenologically, that is, justified on the basis of what anyone capable of “naive thought” and experience can attest for themselves?

§2. Husserl: *The Other as Intentional Content*

If we wish to situate Levinas’s idea within a phenomenological context, not every source of his thinking will be equally relevant. His frequent appeal to Plato’s “good beyond being,” for instance, is a significant clue to what he means by “ethics as first philosophy,” but we could not explore such a clue without first reconstructing, in phenomenological terms, the framework of Plato’s thinking which defines it. An attempt to draw upon Levinas’s frequent reference to Descartes’ idea of God to characterize the Other’s “metaphysical” trans-ascendence encounters a similar problem: When Descartes breaks off his meditation to “marvel” at the idea of God in him, we may recognize an emblem of the “welcoming” which, according to Levinas, is our fundamental experience of the Other. However, such an emblem derives its aptness not from Descartes’ metaphysics but from elsewhere. Indeed, “it is our relations with men” – that is, the very terrain we are to explore phenomenologically – “that give to theological concepts the *sole*

1969), 28. Henceforth cited in the text as TI.

significance they admit of” (TI 79). Or again, while Levinas’s “ethics” no doubt takes issue with Hegel’s account of lordship and bondage, it does so not by locating flaws in Hegel’s dialectical argument but by offering an alternative phenomenology. It is phenomenology that shows how totality “lives from” infinity, that we are not reduced by history to “being bearers of forces that command [us] unbeknownst to [ourselves]” (TI 21). Altogether, then, we cannot begin with the way the problem of the Other is formulated in the philosophical tradition but must establish the precise sense it takes on in phenomenology. Which means that we must begin with Husserl, since all subsequent phenomenologists are heirs to Husserl’s reformulation of the problem, however much they may appear to differ on particulars. Indeed, with regard to our question there is – as I hope to suggest – genuine continuity and progress, just as Husserl desired.

Husserl’s reformulation of the problem of the Other consists in transposing an epistemological question into a question of the *constitution of meaning*. The traditional problem of “other minds,” for instance, is an epistemological one: How do we know that those stuffed shirts out there are not robots? How can we really know what someone else is thinking? Phenomenology operates at a certain remove from such questions. It is not concerned with constructing arguments to insure us against the skeptical suspicion that I alone might be “minded.” Skepticism aims at first-order knowledge claims, and it is the job of everyday and scientific inquiry to support such claims to the extent that they can be supported. Phenomenology, in contrast, possesses no special evidence that could decide matters of fact; rather, it brackets such claims in order to explore the evidential structure on which they depend. That is, it reflects on how our *experience* of “other minds” as *intentional content* is constituted. At most, such reflection could show that a skeptical position lacked motivating grounds, not that

it was *false*. Whatever one thinks of this project (it might, for instance, appear to be pretty thin compared to the ambitions of traditional philosophy), and whatever one thinks of Husserl's own estimation of its scope (namely, that it left "not a single meaningful philosophical question unanswered"), it is crucial to appreciate how it *differs* from the tradition. Thus, if Husserl approaches the problem of the Other by invoking the threat of solipsism, the solipsism in question must not be seen as a form of *skepticism*. Rather, it is the threat of "transcendental solipsism"² that forces Husserl to investigate the constitution of the Other.

What is this threat? According to Husserl, the phenomenological transposition of questions of fact into questions of meaning-constitution "is *eo ipso* 'transcendental idealism'," though neither in a psychological nor a Kantian sense (CM 86). Such idealism asserts that the world and its contents are *constituted unities* that depend for their sense on "transcendental subjectivity." As Husserl puts it, "if transcendental subjectivity is the universe of possible sense, then an outside is precisely – nonsense" (CM 84). This is not a metaphysical thesis; it does not assert that only transcendental subjectivity exists. Rather, it asserts that whatever can be meaningfully referred to (be it only to deny its existence) can be understood *in* its meaning only in terms of the constitutional syntheses of consciousness in which its "being and validity" is evidentially established. The threat of transcendental solipsism, then, is the suspicion that such idealism cannot do justice to what it nevertheless entails: "transcendental intersubjectivity" (CM 84). Transcendental idealism entails transcendental intersubjectivity because the meaning whose constitution it traces to the syntheses of *my* conscious experiences involves the sense of an

² Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, tr. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 89.

“objective” world, a transcendent “world for everyone” (CM 87), and thus refers to other subjects who are not just in the world with me but who co-constitute the sense of that world. To do justice to this entailment, then, one must show that the sense, *Other subject*, can be constituted entirely from within *my* first-person experience. Phenomenology must elucidate “the being for me of others, ... the nature of their being for me” (CM 87) – not insofar as they present themselves to me in this or that empirical guise but precisely as other *constituting subjectivities*; it must uncover the evidence, the originary givenness, of the Other *as other*.

Before going further, we must deal with a familiar objection to the thought that Levinas should be situated within the context of phenomenological idealism. Isn't it obvious that by calling the transcendence of the Other “metaphysics,” Levinas signals his rejection of Husserl's phenomenological neutrality? Husserl insists that it is “nonsense” to speak of an “outside” to transcendental subjectivity, but isn't such an outside *precisely* what Levinas asserts when he refers to the Other as “exteriority” (TI 24), as “signification without a context” (TI 23), as “revelation” (TI 66), as “meaning prior to any *Sinngebung*” (TI 51), and so on? Though complicated, the answer is finally *no*: the “exteriority” invoked here “does not lead to the acceptance of any dogmatic content” (TI 25); it “does not do violence to the I, is not imposed upon it brutally from the outside” (TI 47). It is, rather, “reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience” (TI 23). Indeed, the phenomenological bracketing of traditional metaphysics is what allows Levinas to appropriate the *term* “metaphysics” for what remains a phenomenological thesis. When Husserl says that his task is to find “a path from the immanency of the ego to the transcendency of the Other” (CM 89), he articulates the very ambition of Levinas's thought. This does not mean that Levinas accepts Husserl's doctrine of transcendental

constitution as *he* understands it – namely, as reducing the “metaphysical relation” to the Same (TI 38) – but it does mean that even for Levinas the Other’s exteriority, the ethical “height” from which the Other reaches me, is conceptually determinable *only* from *my* consciousness, that is, only by reflecting on the first-person evidence of “the separated being” (TI). Thus we must first identify where Husserl leaves the problem: in what sort of experience – on the basis of what sort of *evidence* – is the Other constituted for me?

To the great consternation of his commentators, Husserl addresses the threat of transcendental solipsism by radicalizing it – exercising, within the transcendental reduction, a second reduction to the so-called “sphere of ownness,” in which we “disregard all constitutional effects of intentionality relating immediately or mediately to other subjectivity” (CM 93). To perceive something as a “de Kooning,” for instance, makes intentional reference to Willem de Kooning, and to an artworld constituted by practices involving other subjects. Within the sphere of ownness, such intentional references are disregarded – as are, of course, those that constitute such an object as something “there for everyone.” Nevertheless, as Husserl writes, “when we thus abstract, we retain a unitary coherent stratum of the phenomenon world,” a *kind* of “nature” as the “correlate of continuously harmonious, continuing world-experience” (CM 96). This provides the basis upon which we are to locate the evidence that grounds my consciousness of the Other.

Why must Husserl engage in this questionable reduction? After all, couldn’t my consciousness of the Other be explored in a more direct way by reflecting on how I encounter others when I am sitting in a crowded baseball stadium, or when I converse with my wife about our travel plans? The answer is that such analyses, while certainly possible, do not get us to the

level of constitutional sense that Husserl is after. In such experiences, the Other is always present to me under a certain description – as fellow baseball fans, as my wife, etc. And Husserl argues that in order to have such experiences I must already have at my disposal the sense “other subject” as such – that is, *without* any further defining features. To illuminate the evidential basis of *that* sense, my analysis cannot trade on any feature of experience that presupposes it, as do descriptions in terms of social roles, personal relationships, and the like.

If the reduction to the sphere of ownness strikes you as dubious, then you should also be dubious of the way Levinas begins the systematic part of *Totality and Infinity* with an analysis of “separation as life” – with the “ipseity” of the I as enjoyment, the “existence at home with itself of an autochthonous I” (TI 115), an “existing without having a genus” (TI 118), interiority, secrecy, and so on. For Levinas, separation “is accomplished as a positive event” (TI 173), and Husserl’s claim that the sphere of ownness involves a “coherent stratum of the phenomenon world” – that is, a stratum that is neither mere sense-data nor the full-blown world of objects “there for everyone” – is echoed in Levinas’s idea that the separated being lives from an elemental world, “existence without the existent,” which possesses a “*mythical* format”(TI). Among other things, this means that it is a *silent* world – bereft of speech – and thus *equivocal*: what appears “is the inverse of language: the interlocutor has given a sign, but has declined every interpretation” (TI 91). As this reference to an “interlocutor” makes plain, Levinas, like Husserl, recognizes that separation is a kind of abstraction. Nevertheless, it is not abstract in the way that concepts are but is, rather, a living dimension of all experience, one that retains a certain *right*. In Levinas’s terms, “the idea of infinity ... requires separation, requires it unto atheism, so profoundly that the idea of infinity could be forgotten” (TI 181). Without that possibility there is

no way to characterize the kind of *phenomenological* exteriority possessed by the Other. It is a *fact* that ipseity is always already informed by alterity, but it is not *necessary*, and I “live” this contingency as the permanent possibility of *refusing* the Other: I and the Other do not form a pair, a “we,” *by nature* (TI 73). By beginning with separation, then, Levinas, like Husserl, seeks to identify an experience in which the Other breaks in upon a certain “self-sufficiency” or autarchy. Only so can alterity be established as that which radically transcends autarchy.

Let us return to Husserl’s analysis. Within the sphere of ownness I am no longer “I, this man,” no longer have the sense “human ego.” Nevertheless, I am *embodied*, and within the perceived world I “find my *animate organism* as *uniquely* singled out” as that thing in which “I ‘rule and govern’ immediately” (CM 97), by means of which all other things become accessible. Phenomenologically, however, these other things, though different from each other and from my animate organism, are not constituted as *other than me* in the transcendental sense. Whatever I experience remains “nothing more than a synthetic unity inseparable from this life and its potentialities” (CM 104). As constitutive achievements of my own consciousness, their sense includes nothing that transcends that consciousness. Thus the problem, as Husserl notes, is to show how this reduced ego can have “in himself ... intentionalities with an existence-sense whereby *he wholly transcends his own being*. How can something actually existent for me – and [...] not just somehow meant but undergoing harmonious verification in me – be anything else than, so to speak, a point of intersection belonging to my constitutive synthesis” (CM 105)? The reason for Husserl’s radical solipsism appears here: to identify the genesis of the “other than me” as such, *radical* alterity as opposed to the mere “differences” which I note within the first-person “continuing world-experience” of my constituting life. Hence Husserl can say, paradoxically,

that “the *intrinsically first other* (the first ‘non-Ego’) is the *Other ego*” (CM 107). Only subsequently can the differences that show up in my sphere of ownness lose their “mythical” and “equivocal” character to become genuinely *other* than me: real things, “the appearance ‘of’ a determinate ‘Objective’ world, as the identical world for everyone, myself included” (CM 107).

Having gotten somewhat clearer about the sense in which the Other is a phenomenological problem, we will consider only one aspect of Husserl’s solution to it – an aspect that highlights both the importance, and the difficulty, of the transcendental distinction between difference and otherness. As is well-known, Husserl traces my experience of the Other’s subjectivity to what he calls an “analogizing apperception” in which the similarity of the Other’s body (*Körper*) to my own allows me to constitute *it too* as an “animate organism” (*Leib*) in which another ego “holds sway” (CM 112). But, Husserl asks, what makes “this organism another’s, rather than a second organism of my own” (CM 113)? The second organism certainly behaves *differently* than does my *Leib*, but for all that it need not be transcendently *other* than me. Husserl’s answer draws on the peculiar “style of verification” that takes place in the appresentation of the other organism’s consciousness, which is constituted as the locus of appearance-systems that *cannot* be mine since they are of the same thing seen from *there* that I am *now* seeing from *here*. For this reason, “each of these contents excludes the other; they cannot both exist <in my sphere of ownness> at the same time” (CM 119). Hence “an ego is *appresented as other* than mine. That which is *primordially incompatible*, in simultaneous coexistence, becomes compatible because my primordial ego constitutes the ego who is other for it by an appresentative apperception, which, according to its intrinsic nature, never demands and never is open to fulfillment by presentation” (CM 119).

Thus the radical alterity of the Other consists in the constitution, in *my* consciousness, of something whose very sense can “never become actualized in my primordial sphere” (CM 113), namely, another consciousness. This system of appearances cannot belong to me in the transcendental sense because it cannot *in principle* be given to me in first-person presence. It is excluded by the impossibility of my being simultaneously here and there. Unfortunately, this way of establishing the difference between difference and alterity does not work. The Other’s radical alterity is traced to the fact that what is appresented in my experience of the second animate organism is something which, *unlike* the hidden side of a physical thing, can *never* be given to me “in person.” But if this distinction is established by the claim that the Other’s appearance-systems cannot be mine because they present the thing from *there* which my appearance-systems present from *here*, the Other’s supposedly radical “absence” is really no different from the absence that characterizes a physical thing, which nevertheless remains part of *my* essence. The absence of the hidden side of a physical thing – the systems of appearance that would pertain to it, were I to see it from *there* – is just as *permanently* out of my reach as is the consciousness of the Other. For if I go around the perceived thing to get a look at what was absent from *here*, I will still see nothing but what pertains to it from “here,” from the position I newly occupy. Thus, the fact that the Other’s subjectivity or interiority is constituted through a kind of analogizing apperception may explain how a particular sort of noematic unity is available to me, but it does not explain how it can be said to *radically transcend* my essence in the intentional sense. For that, an entirely new approach is needed.

To anticipate: it is simply not the case that what we mean when we attribute a radical absence or out-of-reach quality to the Other is the other’s *consciousness*; after all, other animals

are conscious too. Rather, what is *radically* out of reach, for me, is the Other's *responsibility* for his or her own life. This sort of "singularity" cannot be captured in generic terms like "consciousness," since it is a kind of *performative* that depends on *responsiveness to norms*. The significance of Levinas's attempt to "reverse the terms" lies in his recognition that to attribute this performative responsibility to the Other, through analogy with my own *self-responsibility*, cannot be the *first* form that my encounter with the Other takes. Rather, my own being-responsible (normative responsiveness) implies that I have already *acknowledged a claim* made upon me, one that can derive from *nothing* beyond itself – for instance, from the property of being conscious, which I share with human and non-human animals. In Levinasian terms, the Other's "exteriority" does not consist in the difference between my appearance-systems and his or hers, but in the Other's ability to call me into *question* (TI 86, 95, 101). Before I can constitute the Other as "singular," as performatively responsible, through an analogizing apperception from my own singularity and responsibility, I must *receive* this sense of myself *from* the Other.

Levinas was not the first phenomenologist to recognize that normativity plays the essential role in the constitution of alterity, however. To understand the phenomenological significance of his way of "reversing the terms," we must turn to *Sartre*, who took the problem of the Other as far as one can go without such a reversal.

§3. *Sartre: Experiencing the Other as Subject*

For Husserl, constitution of the Other does not merely add an item to the world; it informs the sense of everything I experience. The analogizing apperception that transforms *Körper* into *Leib* simultaneously transforms my sphere of ownness into an adumbration of

“nature” – that is, an “objective world common to us all” (CM 84). In this way *I too* first become objective, an instance of the natural kind, “human being.” As Husserl puts it, “the Other’s animate bodily organism [...] is, so to speak, the intrinsically first Object, just as the other man is constitutionally the intrinsically first <Objective> man” (CM 124). Thus, it is the Other who constitutes *me* as “man,” as belonging to the common world.

What Husserl does *not* note – though it will be crucial for what follows – is that without this transformation, no genuine *intentional content* is possible at all. Husserl’s reference to an “objective world” does not, in the first instance, designate scientifically objective nature; rather, it points to the fact that the constitution of the Other supplies the necessary condition for any genuine *reidentification* of things in *my own* experience, and only if *that* is possible can I experience something *as* something. In the sphere of ownness I might experience regularities and associations, but there can be no genuine reidentification – which is why Husserl speaks of a “nature” (in quotes) and Levinas underscores the “equivocal” or “mythical” character of such experience. For the “separated” being, there is no *reason* why a tree cannot turn into a maiden, or a butterfly, or anything else; and this means that such a being *cannot* experience anything *as* a tree. What is lacking is precisely a norm according to which some subsequent experience could be said to “refute” my current experience, and without the possibility of getting it wrong in this sense, no experience can genuinely be *of* anything in particular.

This means that the constitution of the Other must bring with it not merely the idea of another consciousness, but, crucially, the notion of the *normative*, of standards according to which my experiences can be judged as veridical or not. In Levinasian terms, in recognizing the Other “the world ... is no longer what it is in separation.” Such recognition (which he calls

“speech”) “makes the world common, creates commonplaces” (TI 76). The world’s “generality” – its conceptual, and thus *normative*, articulability – arises from my encounter with the Other, and not the reverse. I am not first of all rational and responsive to norms; I *become* so through my encounter with the Other. Thus, as I suggested at the conclusion of the previous section, a phenomenological account of the Other must elucidate how *my own* orientation toward normativity arises. And just here we find Sartre’s advance over Husserl.

Husserl’s approach to the constitution of the Other has been criticized from many angles. The one most favored by Levinasians seems to be the idea that because Husserl appeals to an analogy with *my own* ego, the Other cannot be *radically* other but only a version of the Same. Whatever the merits of this criticism, it is not Sartre’s objection to Husserl, and it is *Sartre’s* handling of the issue which provides the proximal point of departure for Levinas. Sartre criticizes Husserl not for failing to account for the *alterity* of the other subject, but for failing to account for the Other’s *subjectivity*, where “subjectivity” is not equivalent to “consciousness.” What Sartre recognizes – thus clearing the way for Levinas to reverse the terms of the traditional priority of ontology over ethics – is that the phenomenological analysis of experiencing the Other as *subject* cannot begin with our experience of some particular thing in the world. It must begin with how I experience *myself* as an *object*.

Such an experience will be a complicated one, since in experiencing myself as an object for the Other I must *also* in *some* sense “experience the Other” – that is, the Other must be an intentional content of mine. Otherwise it would not be explicable phenomenologically. But it cannot be *contained* by that content. What Sartre calls “the look” is independent of what is

usually associated with it – “the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction;”³ or, as Levinas puts the same point, the face of the Other “destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves with me” (TI 51), is not a property of the animal countenance with its racial, gendered, and other particularities. There is tremendous temptation to insist – against both Levinas and Sartre – that phenomena such as the face or the look must be founded in nature (to make room for an ethics of animals, for instance, or to allow for genetic explanation). But this is to misconstrue the entire *direction* – and with it the contribution – of their analyses, which show how we come to inhabit a space of normative distinctions, and so a “nature,” in the first place. Let us consider this point more carefully.

To motivate his modification of Husserl’s analysis, Sartre first describes how the Other shows up as an object in the natural attitude: to come upon a man on a bench as I ramble through the park is to experience *my* world as having been “stolen from me,” a kind of “drain hole” through which it escapes me (BN 343). Thus, as with Husserl, the Other is present as an alien set of appearance-systems that transform the character of my world. But on Sartre’s account this transformation has a distinctly *threatening* character. The kind of absence involved in experiencing the Other-as-object is not merely, as it was for Husserl, the absence of another “stream of consciousness” with whom I subsequently *share* the world, but rather the absence of something that *threatens* my world. For Sartre, the difference between consciousness and subjectivity is signified in this threat: “If the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992),

subject ... [is] my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other” (BN 344).

To elucidate this point, Sartre follows Husserl’s phenomenological regress to the sphere of ownness, to the solipsistic world of the “for-itself” (consciousness as “freedom”).⁴ But Sartre’s analysis re-styles Husserl’s sphere of ownness as a scene of seduction played out before a voyeur at a keyhole. Absorbed in its revelation of the world, consciousness is pre-reflectively aware of being conscious of the scene before it, but it is not *self*-conscious; that is, it is not “I, this man.” This entails that neither its “project” – what it is doing – nor its motives can be named. Sartre makes this point by distinguishing between existential “possibilities” and objective “probabilities.” To the peering for-itself, the world is present entirely in terms of a set of possibilities in the sense of *affordances*: the shadow is *my cover*; the stairs *my escape*; the keyhole *my access*; the scene beyond *my satisfaction*, and so on. Such possibilities do not take the form of *conditionals*: I *could* get away by the stairs; I *might* be able to hide in the shadows; the keyhole *potentially* reveals something, and so on. To formulate possibilities as conditionals is already to conceive the for-itself as occupying a world of which it is not the sole source of meaning, whereas Sartre requires that we conceive our voyeur as solipsistic consciousness. For such a consciousness the world’s facticity can be experienced as *resistance* but never as something that is open to objective modalization. This is because the for-itself, as that whereby any objectivity is revealed, cannot experience *itself* as an object in the world.

Suddenly, I hear footsteps and everything changes. In particular, a *real* dimension of my

346. Henceforth cited in the text as BN.

⁴ When Levinas refers to the “murderous freedom” of the “psychism,” he has the for-itself primarily in mind.

being emerges for which, however, I am not *responsible*: a Self comes to “haunt” consciousness already at the *pre-reflective level* (BN 349). As Sartre puts it, I have an “outside,” I am somebody. My project now has a name: I am a voyeur who is “caught in the act,” my motives become determinable as “curiosity or vice,” and my pure possibilities become objective *probabilities*: the shadows *may or may not* be a good hiding place, the stairs are *probably* cut off as an escape route, the keyhole is *most likely* incriminating evidence against me, the scene beyond is now *sure to be interpreted* as off-limits, and so on. This explains why, in the natural attitude, experiencing the Other-as-object involved something *threatening*. To say that the Other modalizes my possibilities into objective probabilities is to say that they become open to *normative assessment* and so potentially contestable. But what is it about the experience of the Other as subject that allows this to occur?

In order that “footsteps” can be the bearer of the Look – that is, of an original experience of the Other as subject – the for-itself cannot register them perceptually as footsteps; for then they would be just another part of its world. Thus, to experience the Other as subject cannot be to experience some entity in the world as possessing a peculiar property (say, the property of being conscious); it can only be to experience *myself as object* at the *pre-reflective level*. It is not I who objectify myself, but nor is it something I merely imagine taking place in the consciousness of another; rather, it is something I *undergo* – that is, experience *affectively* – in the intimacy of my freedom. In Levinasian terms, it is the moment at which the Other “invests” my freedom – establishes freedom as something that belongs to “me,” something for which I am *responsible* – whereas for Sartre it is merely the moment at which the Other *contests* my freedom, not in a normative way (not by “calling it into question”) but in a pure *agon* of power. Nevertheless, to

undergo such an experience is, even on Sartre's account, to respond to norms, since I experience myself as object in *shame*.

Sartre's appeal to "shame" is by no means incidental; shame is the original experience of the Other as other subject (BN 302). But this idea can appear phenomenologically questionable. First, it is not clear how shame leads beyond solipsism at all. If Husserl's argument that the Other's alterity is a function of the peculiar "absence" of consciousness fails to distinguish such absence radically from that which pertains to any physical thing, how does Sartre's claim that the Other's look is registered in shame fare any better? Is it not the case that the for-itself must in some way *constitute* the Other as subject in order, subsequently, to be ashamed before that very subject? The question makes a good point, but it is not an objection to Sartre: my experience of shame *does* constitute the Other as Other, but the *structure* of shame entails that such constitution is always a *response* to experiencing a dimension of myself – being an object – of which I cannot be the origin. I cannot give rise to shame in myself, cannot be "ashamed before myself," since without the Other *I am nothing objective*, I have no "outside," am not somebody. I cannot "realize" my behavior under any description, since for *myself* I am not what I am and am what I am not. There simply *is* no identity, no Self, to be ashamed *about*. Thus if I *do* experience shame, I have *already* acknowledged the Other as *other subject*. And if I subsequently constitute some special kind of object – for instance, by taking the Other as another "mind" which holds a "distorted and misleading" image of me as a "voyeur" – this can be nothing but a defensive reaction. "My shame is a confession" (BN 350).

If the first question can be answered this way, it nevertheless gives rise to a second. *Why* should the original experience of the Other as subject be experienced precisely as shame? This

question does not ask why human beings are such that they can be ashamed of themselves. Nor does it ask why it is shame – rather than, say, pride – that reveals the Other as subject. The question is phenomenological: what is it in Sartre’s description that allows us to understand why the original experience of being looked at takes the form of being *ashamed*? Sartre’s example of the voyeur makes the answer appear more obvious than it is: peering through a keyhole is something of which, in everyday life, people are frequently ashamed. But the example is meant to be quite general, and the response cannot be limited to those situations in which we might normally feel ashamed of ourselves. When properly generalized, the question really asks why it is that our experience of being an *object* for another subject is one of being *judged* by that subject. After all, when *I* perceive the Other I need not judge her – I need neither praise nor blame her, nor even treat her as the potential bearer of such evaluations. But shame is nothing if not a response to a moral judgment. How then does Sartre account for this aspect of our experience of the Other as subject?

It seems to me that Sartre does not properly answer this question, adopting instead a certain theological vocabulary to mask the lacuna. Having an “outside” is likened to the Fall, to discovering that we are “naked” (but why should we be ashamed of *that*?); God is the Other writ large (BN). But this only defers the problem. If the Other is another for-itself, another consciousness, there is no clear reason why its subjectivity *must* manifest itself as judgment, no reason why the encounter between two “ontological freedoms” *must* take the form of moral evaluation. Yet without such a normative moment there is no explanation of radical alterity and no escape from transcendental solipsism. For only if the Look bears *normative* significance can it give rise, phenomenologically, to a world of reidentifiable, objective things, a world of

modalized possibilities and so of meanings or intentional content. Only by affectively acknowledging the Other's judgment – shame as my “confession” – do I become responsive to the further normative distinctions that determine an objective world. I may subsequently *contest* the Other's judgment, but this too is possible only if I have already acknowledged the Other as a source of normative assessment, since contestation itself – if it is other than simple violence – takes place within the space of reasons and meaning.

The lacuna in Sartre's account becomes most glaring – and the phenomenological significance of Levinas's idea comes into focus – when Sartre concludes that because the original experience of the Other is shame, social encounter is essentially *conflict*. For the argument that social reality is a permanent contest between me and the Other over who is to occupy the subject-position – i.e., *pass judgment* – overlooks the fact that I enter the space in which such conflict is possible at all only by *acknowledging* the Other's normative claim on me. Sartre's ontology lacks the resources to clarify this acknowledgement, but the phenomenological significance of Levinas's idea of “welcoming” the Other is found precisely here. Only if we “reverse the terms” and take ethics as an “optics” can we see that *whatever* I subsequently do on the basis of it, my experience of shame is *already* a “welcoming” of judgment, an opening onto the normative. The phenomenological basis for the idea of ethics as first philosophy derives from the fact that the normativity within experience cannot be clarified ontologically. The purely *agonistic* character of Sartre's social world reflects the fact that, ontologically considered, subjects or freedoms are essentially *symmetrical* with respect to normative claims. But the very experience of shame shows that the Other is originally “there” for me in an asymmetrical way,

from a “height.” This, its *radical alterity*, is thus only *intelligible* in an ethical register.⁵ This does not mean that the Other is “morally superior” to me in having a better character, or in having a rational justification which I lack, or in other familiar ways, since in all of these ways I might equally be superior to the Other. Instead, the asymmetry in question is irrevocable, since it is a phenomenologically necessary feature of how the Other is constituted in *my* experience.

§4. *From the Look to the Face*

By locating Levinas’s idea of ethics as first philosophy in its phenomenological context, two essential features of that idea become salient. First, it becomes clear that the philosophical stakes have as much to do with the transcendental ground of intentionality or meaning as they do with anything “ethical,” since the Other’s radical alterity is simultaneously the source of that normativity which distinguishes the possession of intentional content from the mere “having” of sensations or “perceptions,” mere “consciousness.” And second, it becomes clear *why*, however paradoxical it may sound, the fundamental experience in which the Other is given to me *cannot* be a perceptual one, no matter how broadly perception is construed. The face “is neither seen nor touched” (TI 194) but *obeyed* or “welcomed,” precisely because all perception – that is, all grasp of objects *as* anything in particular – depends on the normative orientation that first arises through that very welcome. The face, Levinas writes, is “expression” as command – “thou shalt not kill.” But such expression is not “language” in the semiotic sense; it is prior to all signs since it is that through which signs (perceivable things) and meanings (commonplaces) first become

⁵ Note on the so-called “second-person perspective,” and “the accusative.”

possible.

On the basis of these phenomenological features of Levinas's idea, one could develop a complete reconstruction of *Totality and Infinity*. Here, however, I would like to conclude by considering how this approach allows us to address two rather widely held objections to Levinas's position – mirror images of one another – which fail to grasp the phenomenological stakes in “reversing the terms” between ontology and ethics. The first objection holds that Levinas's insistence that the face is not perceived is parochial and has the effect of dogmatically limiting the scope of ethics to human beings. The second objection does not dispute that the scope of unconditional obligation is limited to human beings, but it argues that Levinas cannot explain the *basis* for this limitation because of his hyperbolic insistence on ethical *asymmetry*.

The first objection is neatly expressed by Simon Glendinning in his recent book, *In the Name of Phenomenology*. Recognizing that Levinas “totally refuses to accept that the face of the Other might be something that one could be said perceptually to see,” Glendinning argues that this does an injustice to our actual perceptual experience.⁶ To be sure, the face as “expression” is not there in the way that “objectively present sensible qualities and properties” are, but to limit our understanding of perception in this way is to fall victim to the “prejudice” that “seeing” is “*exclusively* a matter of the visual enjoyment of present sensory contents.” Were we to reject this prejudice consistently, we would have no trouble admitting that the “expression” of the Other – and that means, the Other's moral authority – could be “seen on her face,” just as, for Wittgenstein, the “human body is the *adequate* picture of the human soul.” And were we to

⁶ Simon Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 176.

recognize this, we could also see “our way to acknowledging something else too: namely, that we can see the expression of the other animal.”⁷

Now, many questions remain open about what is being claimed here. For instance, does this entail that the “expression” of the other animal is the *same* as that which reaches us from the face of the Other – namely, “thou shalt not kill” – or is it different, and why? Do trees and other organisms “express” claims in this sense? And if only animals have faces, are we not in fact substituting for Levinas’s idea of expression as *command* the idea of *consciousness that can suffer* as the basis for ethics? We cannot take up these issues here, however. Instead, let us merely note that the objection itself reveals a failure to recognize the phenomenological sense of the idea that “ethics is an optics.” The objection understands this to mean that we are now entitled to admit that we perceive the moral and expressive properties of things, just as we do their “sensible properties and qualities” – since the latter, no less than the former, involve a “presence” that is not “fully present in the present.”⁸ However, as we have seen, Levinas’s claim that the face is not perceived is not based on the idea that the face is “enigmatic” or somehow transgresses the phenomenology of perception. Rather, the face is not perceived because, as expression, it is not *any kind* of property of an entity (perceptual, sensible, or otherwise); rather, it is a *command*.

To “see” the face of the Other is to *respond* in a certain way, to act toward something in light of an interdiction, that is, to “respect” a certain kind of limit, to act in light of a *norm*. But to

⁷ Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology*, 177.

⁸ Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology*,

act in light of a norm – in this case, the interdiction not to kill – is not the same as acting merely in *accord* with one. For instance, if I cohabit peacefully with human beings and other animals, I act in accord with the interdict not to kill. But for this I need not have acknowledged any norm at all, and I can do so entirely solipsistically, as it were. What situating Levinas in a phenomenological context has shown, however, is that only with the possibility of acting in *light* of norms – i.e., only “after” I have recognized, in welcome, the normative claim of the Other on me – is it possible to inhabit a “common” world, a world of genuinely perceivable objects (whether animal, vegetable, or mineral) *at all*. And for Levinas, the *sign* of welcome is “generosity,” that is, dialogue: the offering of my “world” to the Other in the form of speech (TI). Thus, it is not because I can “see” the suffering on the face of the human or non-human animal that I am commanded by them; rather, it is because I speak to the (human) Other that I am able to recognize their suffering (and that of animals) *as* “suffering,” i.e., as normatively significant in some way. What my ethical obligations to animals (in the normal sense of “ethical”) *are* become available to me only through my discourse with human beings. Or to put it differently, my concrete obligations to animals, *like my concrete obligations to my fellow human beings*, are topics *within* that conversation, not its ground.

The second objection – which has recently been set forth by John Drummond – does not take Levinas to task for having too narrow a moral “optics,” but for the opposite failing, namely, a failure to *account* for *why* the phenomenology of the Other human being is different from the phenomenology of the other animal – i.e., why it is that the Other human being is experienced as the source of unconditional obligations, “commands” that we must respect. Drummond’s basic point is that Levinas fails to recognize that I can have an obligation only if what I am obliged to

do is *good*, that is, if there is a reason why I *should* obey. A command can have the force of a norm – i.e., an authority I can and must acknowledge – only if it is grounded in something for which *respect* is an appropriate response. But in denying that I and the Other occupy the same moral plane – that is, by denying that the Other’s authority to oblige me stems from any ground beyond itself, such as the Other’s status as sufferer or as rational being – Levinas robs himself of any means for showing why I *should respect* such a claim on me. I am left with a norm that is really not one: whether I respond to the command of the Other by killing him or by talking to him, I can neither be praised nor blamed.

Against this, Drummond argues that the Other human being is the source of an unconditional obligation – one that in certain circumstances trumps and limits my own projects in pursuit of the good – only because I recognize the Other *as another world-constituting rational agent*. In the Other I recognize an “absolute” value, since I see that being such an agent is that whereby a certain *kind* of value – *rational* value – is made possible in the world, and that this is the basis for the “best possible” life for human beings. In other words, since rationality is the capacity to respond to *normative assessment* of things in the world (myself included), it is the condition for there *being* a world and thus I have an “absolute” obligation to respect those Others who evince that capacity.

This is a significant objection, and it certainly tracks a dimension of moral life that can be attested phenomenologically – namely, the dimension of moral life in which the symmetrical relations of dialogue, deliberation, and the “creation of a world in common” take place and in which we seek to ground our obligations. But here too the strictly transcendental-phenomenological significance of the experience that Levinas thematizes is overlooked. For

Drummond's analysis assumes that the Other has, so to speak, already been *constituted* as an entity with objective properties – in this case, a rational, world-constituting consciousness. But again, as we have seen, such constitution on the basis of an analogy with my own rational self-responsibility presupposes that the Other has already been “welcomed” in Levinas's sense. Respect for the world-constituting capacities of rational agency is not the *ground* of the normative claim the Other makes on me but a consequence of the fact that *I* have *experienced myself* as the “object” of normative assessment. Put another way: it is only because I have welcomed the Other – interdicted my behavior “before” understanding why – that I *attribute* world-constituting rationality to the Other. And I do so by performatively “avowing” it – i.e., by acting in light of this very conception of the Other – not by “perceiving” it or by transferring to the Other a sense of myself that I already possessed. Had I not welcomed the Other, I would never attribute “mind” or (normative) *subjectivity* in the sense of *radical alterity* to *any* worldly thing, including myself. At most, I would attribute consciousness to it, as we do with animals (and sometimes trees).

What these two objections show is that the idea of ethics as first philosophy is difficult to understand phenomenologically. But what the responses to the objections show is that if such a big idea is to be worth thinking about, it *must* be understood phenomenologically. Otherwise, there will be no way to adjudicate its apparent oscillation between speciesism and irrationalism. Whether these responses can be sufficiently fleshed out to do the job, however, must remain a question for another time.