Socrates Reconsidered: A Levinasian Reading

Michael Stanley Barton (Student no. 199328026)

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School of Historical and Philosophical Studies (University of Melbourne)

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Abstract:

My intention is to focus a Levinasian gaze on Socrates/Plato, in order to see what it might uncover. Of course Levinas himself has done this to an extent, the notable example here being his referrals to Plato’s notion of the good beyond being, but I aim to give a more sustained treatment of certain Platonic texts, using Levinas’s vision as a guide to the detection of his mooted underlying ethical relation. My specific aim is to take hold of this ethical relation which Levinas has brought into its own in the post-metaphysical present, and, in returning to Socrates/Plato, utilize it in seeing beneath the surface of the theories and ideas, in some cases seeing how the surface theory can be seen to come out of and be based upon such a relation, and in some cases seeing how the surface theory might be understood as obscuring, even being in denial of such a relation, albeit with the text supplying sufficient clues of its presence. My particular strategy will be to focus in detail on Socrates’ life, his words and attitudes in dialogue, his conduct in public life, and his responses to his friends.
Declaration

The thesis is entirely my own work.

Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used.

The thesis is 88,300 words in length (including footnotes), and within the maximum word limit.

[Signature]
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# Socrates Reconsidered: A Levinasian Reading

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## Introduction
In ‘Sincerity and the end of theodicy: three remarks on Levinas and Kant’, Paul Davies observes an asymmetry in Kant’s moral philosophy. Referring to Kant’s denunciation of a kind of voyeuristic moralizing, he says: ‘There is a sense of my being prevented from enquiring into others in the way in which I am elsewhere obliged to enquire into myself’. He points out that this prohibition is not a product of any empirical or psychological limitation; rather the asymmetry is imposed morally.¹ The context of Davies’ observation is that of the possibility of a Levinasian retrieval of the trace or trait of the ethical relation from the history of philosophy. He goes on:

> With a Levinasian eye one might detect many others; and is it not such an eye and such a means of re-encountering the history of philosophy that Levinas, on at least one reading, might be said to provide?²

I take my cue from Davies. My intention is to apply this Levinasian eye to the history of philosophy, or at least to one significant selection from it, in order to see what it might uncover. Of course Levinas himself has done this to an extent, notable examples here being his referrals to Plato’s notion of the good beyond being, and Descartes’ conception of the infinite, but I aim to give a more sustained treatment of certain texts, using his vision as a guide in the detection of the mooted underlying ethical relation.³ Now Levinas was constructing the ‘guide’ itself, continually referring to the history of philosophy, but essentially producing an original vision, virtually unique in moral philosophy: ‘It is Levinas’ unique place to suggest, no, to insist, that ethics only comes into its own with the collapse of onto-theo-logy’.⁴ My aim is to take hold of that ethical relation which Levinas

²Ibid.
³Others too have looked at least briefly at ancient philosophy with a Levinasian approach in mind, e.g. Levinas and the Ancients, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 2008.
has brought ‘into its own’ in the post-metaphysical present, and, in returning to the world of so-called metaphysically grounded ethics, to utilize it in seeing beneath the surface of the chosen texts. In some cases this will involve seeing how the surface account can be seen to come out of and be based upon such a relation, and in other cases the surface account might be understood as obscuring, even being in denial of such a relation, albeit with the text supplying sufficient clues to its presence.

In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas briefly discusses the concept of Kantian space,\(^5\) and expounds even this apparently ethically neutral term in the context of terms other than those of traditional philosophy. Levinas links space to other ‘significations’, those of ‘the trace of a departure’, ‘an irrecuperable past’, human significations which he claims cannot be interpreted on the basis of disclosure, and by this he means the type of disclosure of traditional philosophical transparency. According to this transparency space is a ‘non-concept’, a negative ‘space’ in which entities appear, are represented; it is ‘neither an attribute of entities nor a relationship between entities’.\(^6\) For Levinas, ‘transparency’ here means something like ‘nothing more to see here, move along’! By contrast ‘Levinasian space’ is ‘outside where nothing covers anything’, ‘non-protection’, ‘the reverse of retreat’, ‘homelessness’,\(^7\) in general - *exposure*. While Kantian space is ‘the condition for the representation of an entity’\(^8\) (a condition that we ‘see’ clearly through standard philosophical reasoning: ‘if an entity has material extension, then without space this becomes a nonsense, therefore space clearly must exist etc.’), it says nothing in relation to our position in the world as


\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.
being exposed, vulnerable, or ‘homeless’. It is a purely scientific term, neutral in regard to any ethical relation.\textsuperscript{10}

That example is just a very small taste of Levinas in direct contrast to traditional philosophy, and I use it purely to give some sense of the kind of retrieval that might be possible. It is an entirely different question as to just how convincing one might find this kind of approach. How good are the various arguments in relation to certain texts? Are the clues, the traces, really saying or signifying what Levinas would be committed to thinking they are? Is there a better interpretation of what is going on? (And even the question of what overall ethical impact this kind of re-reading has might be relevant here.) However, hopefully just those very few connotations taken from Levinas in relation to the term \textit{space} have a certain immediate plausibility about them, enough to at least begin to open up the question of primacy. In this regard Levinas commonly treats concepts in their ‘human’ sense, invoking more or less common meanings and connotations, and then using these in a quasi-philosophical way himself to question traditional philosophies with their systematizing methods, their construction of ‘onto-theo-ologies’. A strength of this approach is that it is inclusive, in that it utilizes the very terms used by traditional philosophy to critique it, as it were turning things on their head rather than turning them out. It is also potentially accessible to non-philosophers, while at the same time exposing the ‘violence’ that traditional philosophy does to language. Levinas sees traditional philosophy as stripping many concepts of their primal (ethical) connotations, and this

\textsuperscript{9} As early as the 1930s Levinas was commenting on the contrast between the phenomenological method and traditional approaches: ‘Geometric space is in fact an abstraction; the \textit{concrete} situation that reveals to us its extent is \textit{our presence in space}’ (‘Freiburg, Husserl, and Phenomenology’, \textit{Unforseen History}, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2004, p.61). His later more full-blown ethical approach (\textit{Totality and Infinity} and \textit{Otherwise than Being}) takes its departure from phenomenology whilst acknowledging the latter’s crucial role in leading to that point. This ethical approach emphasizing ‘our presence in space’ goes so far as to see our initial sense of space being born out of the response to the other; designated by Levinas’s favoured formulation: \textit{Voici!} (‘Here I am!’), it is the actual foundation of spatial relations (more on this in section 3.ii).

\textsuperscript{10} It is well known that Kant was a ‘good scientist’, in that he kept his realm of freedom (and morality) completely separate from the realm of nature, thereby leaving the work of science to proceed undisturbed by non-empirical issues.
stripping can be understood as a kind of violence, especially as it potentially robs one of the very means to think ethically.

I am aware that I have not yet said anything directly regarding the nature of Levinas’s ethical relation, except for the allusion to asymmetry. This nature will come to the fore in the course of this work, the expounding of which will emerge together with the retrieval process. Hopefully this approach is consistent with (and better, even conducive to) a process of progressively-engaged discovery by the reader.

If Levinas is right about ethics being first philosophy, ‘first’ meaning prior to ontology, then in reality the ethical relation lies at the base of all philosophy. This means that whatever else is going on, whether it be discussions of an epistemological, metaphysical, or directly moral nature, and whether these topics are addressed at a personal or political level, this ethical relation is ever present, and – historically – was ever present, potentially at the base of whatever philosophical text we might care to examine. In this regard Levinas says:

The rights of man are ... one of the law’s latent principles, whose voice – sometimes loud, sometimes muffled by reality’s necessities, sometimes interrupting and shattering them – can be heard throughout history, ever since the first stirrings of consciousness, ever since Mankind.

These rights are, in a sense, a priori: independent of any power that would be the original share of each human being in the blind distribution of nature’s energy and society’s influence, but also independent of the merits the human individual may have acquired by his or her efforts and even virtues. Prior to all entitlement: to all tradition, all jurisprudence, all granting of privileges, awards or titles, all consecration by a will abusively claiming the name of reason.  

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(Regarding the *a priori*, the meaning of Levinas’s qualifying phrase ‘in a sense’ should become evident in the course of this work. Suffice it to say for now that the traditional, philosophically elucidated sense is one that Levinas by and large resists.)

Following this, the ethical relation that these rights point to will not only be ever present (even if latent), but hopefully also not entirely muted, for it will also be potentially present in the particular text, detectable either via a positive, identifiable influence, or via evidence of denial or negation (attempted muting). (For Levinas entitlement *itself* is an ethical pejorative; hence the muting role that it plays even where connected to the ‘prior’ rights that he endorses.) Therefore one might be warranted in hoping to find clues, traces of this relation, even in philosophical accounts that on the surface might not at all look to contain or be based upon such a relation. However, it does not seem inevitable that this hope will be met, for – in general - does it not appear perfectly possible to read philosophical discussions and accounts without a clue as to the underlying ethical relation? Notwithstanding the above example of Kantian ‘space’, is it not the case that certain, indeed many, philosophical topics need not even get close to generating clues of this type?

Therefore, to give myself a good chance of retrieving the Levinasian ethical relation, and to combine this objective with results that are anchored *substantially back in time*, I am choosing Platonic texts, particularly those dealing with ethics. This will potentially involve virtually all of those texts featuring Socrates, for, as we know, the topic of virtue was his supreme concern.\(^\text{12}\) These texts will take up the whole of the work, but hopefully my treatment of them will inspire a level of confidence that further Levinasian re-readings from the tradition are worth undertaking.

\(^{12}\) While the two concepts are not synonymous I see Socrates’ concern with virtue to be a concern with ethics broadly conceived.
The confirmation of possible clues in Platonic texts pointing towards the Levinasian ethical relation\textsuperscript{13} will establish two worthwhile things: its plausible existence, and, as referred to above, its ‘ancient’ aspect. (Regarding the first, the process of plausibly establishing these clues regarding the relation will be accompanied by – is virtually synonymous with - an expounding of the relation.) Its ‘ancient’ aspect, by virtue of being located at or near the beginning of philosophy, should immediately bring into question progressive-type ethical theories; those that speak of expanding circles of rationality and sympathies and the like.\textsuperscript{14} This is because Levinas’s ethical relation – as will become evident – has plausible claims to priority, to being that relation which is prior to all of the main ethical theories. For Levinas, it may be the case that ethics can only ‘come into its own with the collapse of onto-theo-logy’, but this does not mean that in some chronological sense the ethical relation itself was born or developed out of this collapse, merely that its existence can only be clearly seen then. Is there anything to say that this collapse could not be foreseen, or imagined, or perhaps more plausibly simply by-passed, by individuals (such as Socrates)? That is, as a discipline, a practice, with a canon of texts, the onto-theo-logical aspect of philosophy might have needed to collapse before a Levinasian-type vision could be viewed in a ‘legitimate’ light, with its accompanying additions to syllabuses, revisions of previous theories and so on,\textsuperscript{15} but this says nothing about the possibility of individuals ‘uncorrupted’ by philosophy (or even corrupted by it!) seeing their way clear of the various onto-theo-logical structures that potentially block the view. And indeed, if Levinas is right, then all humans, as individuals with a face and with speech,\textsuperscript{16} are engaged in an ethical relation with

\textsuperscript{13} A word about ‘confirmation’ might be useful, just to put forward the kind of standard that I am attempting to meet. When I say ‘confirmation of possible clues pointing towards the Levinasian ethical relation’, I mean merely that a Levinasian reading of a text is rendered intelligible; it can make sense read in this way. But additionally with some texts, or at least portions thereof, hopefully a higher standard than this will be reached, with this correspondingly strengthening the overall project.

\textsuperscript{14} Two names that immediately come to mind are Hume and Singer.

\textsuperscript{15} Arguably this is what has happened in philosophy regarding Levinas, with his writings increasingly coming to the fore over the last thirty years or so.

\textsuperscript{16} There is of course much more here to be explicated, some of which will emerge throughout the work; the place of language in Levinas’s thought, what he means by it, the concept of ‘face’, its relation to transcendence, ‘who’ might qualifies as having one (animals?), and so on.
the other that is prior to and primary over any onto-theo-logical structure. I take Socrates to be an
individual who at least in aspects of his practice of philosophy did somehow ‘see his way clear’, and I
take him to be a particularly fascinating example given his position at the beginning of philosophy,
being implicated in Plato’s metaphysics and all that has followed.

1. Socrates: A Positive Levinasian Re-reading

I will attempt to weave together a patchwork of clues from various Platonic dialogues into a picture
that plausibly accords with Levinas’s account of the nature of the ethical relation that obtains
between humans. With whichever text I examine the process will be similar; a collecting of
intimations, hints, clues, with a view to piecing them together into a successful retrieval operation.
Hopefully this will not become repetitive, or at least not in a monotonous manner, with the
intention being – along the way – to shed fresh light from fresh angles on the various texts and their
ideas. (I leave as an open question whether this might additionally open up non-Levinasian re-
readings of Plato.)

(i) Socrates and the Face of Athens

I first wish to put forward a general consideration regarding Socrates and his relationship with the
citizens of Athens. Arguably no other philosopher has had a more remarkable connection with his or
her community. What I take to be his (radical) sense of responsibility to, and for, this community is I
think amply attested to in the writings of Plato, but it is interesting to note that the descriptions that
tend to dominate when dealing with his life are generally not ones that refer to responsibility. What
do they refer to then? They talk about his search for knowledge, his search for virtue and his
preoccupation with living an honorable life, his quest to prove the Delphi oracle wrong (or to
establish in what sense it might be right), and his obedience to his *daemon*.17 My contention is that, contrary to these prevalent descriptions, Socrates’ relationship with his community is best understood in terms of responsibility, and responsibility of the ultimate, Levinasian kind.

Pertinent to this issue of the general nature of Socrates’ relationship with the citizens of Athens is the dialogue *Crito*, where Socrates sets out his reasons for refusing to escape execution when presented with this possibility. One prevalent interpretation of *Crito* is that Plato defends Socrates for the sake of posterity. Charged with *not* being a good citizen during his lifetime (a charge repeated at times in later ages), in *Crito* Plato presents us with the exemplary citizen, appreciative of his state, submissive to the point of death. Various possibilities emerge here. One is that Plato indeed wished to restore and shore up Socrates’ reputation as ultimately being a loyal and good citizen of Athens, this being in keeping with his adoration of him and with his own attachment to Athens. This possibility is supported by the view that Socrates bore some responsibility for the excesses of his pupils Alcibiades, Charmides, and Critias, when the ‘Thirty’ ruled before the restoration of democracy. Another possibility, closely related, is that Plato genuinely believed in the ideals of citizenship expressed in *Crito*, and so the upholding of Socrates’ reputation coincided with that of his own views. It may be that these views were essentially Socrates’ as well,18 rendering *Crito* a faithful account of Socrates’ conversation with Crito.

17 There are as well more cynical accounts (for example, his life interpreted as an upholding of the vested interests of his aristocratic friends). Perhaps the most interesting of these is Nietzsche’s take on Socrates as being ‘the last man’, the symptom *par excellence* of a kind of decadence or sickness which traced back to what Nietzsche took to be the Sophoclean/Euripidean move away from the tragic toward the rational (see particularly *The Birth of Tragedy and Twilight of the Idols*). At least some of these accounts can as it were ‘run alongside’, or perhaps better, sit above my Levinasian account. If fully accepted some of them may at some points make it problematic, but in general I do not see them as directly competing with it.

18 Richard Kraut’s *Socrates and the State* is a very thorough discussion of these issues relating to *Crito*, and a good reference point for other Platonic commentators (Adkins, Burnet, Grote, Vlastos, Woolley, and many others), most of whom he disagrees with. His main criticism is that they crucially undervalue or misunderstand the ‘obey or persuade’ principle put forward by the Laws, with this leading them to conclude that *Crito* gives us a Socrates inconsistent with other dialogues. (See Kraut’s *Socrates and the State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.)
Whatever one thinks of these alternatives, there is however a more important point to be made. When one first reads *Crito* there is an understandable feeling of being at least somewhat misled, let down by the *pitch* of the argument. Contrasts with the *Apology* immediately come to mind. Where is the spirit of defiance, the properly self-righteous stance, the sarcastic bite and wit so characteristic of Socrates in that account? It might well seem as if Socrates in *Crito* has been reduced to an apologist for his state and its unjust treatment of him. To our ears the arguments put forward by Socrates on behalf of the Laws of Athens in *Crito* seem overbearing, perhaps even bordering on draconian. The general conclusion is that the charges were trumped up, that Socrates’ defense in the *Apology* conclusively refuted these charges, that this defense should clearly have won the day, and the fact that it did not points towards either an unjust or corrupt legal system, or, failing this, at the very least to an example of a system (on this occasion) thoroughly bent to the unjust purposes of Socrates’ enemies. *Crito* contains almost no allusion to this sense of injustice. Rather, the Socrates portrayed there defends a system that his contemporary and subsequent followers alike regard as virtually indefensible. Surely any system that could execute its wisest, most noble citizen, must be indefensible?

My aim is not to rule out the above-mentioned alternatives from *Crito* as being rhetorical or even genuine moves by Plato which might indeed partly obscure the real Socrates, or in fact reveal him (Kraut’s version, see n.18), but rather to view the text of *Crito* in a different, Levinasian light. This light allows space for the motivations involved in the above alternatives to stand, albeit in relation to a ‘deeper’ Socrates than perhaps even Plato could see. Additionally, the Socrates revealed by the light of Levinas will still be an apologist for his state and its treatment of him, but the ‘apologetics’

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19 This does not exhaust the possibilities. For example, a prime motivation of Socrates could have been to soothe Crito’s anxieties by convincing him of his duty to stay in prison and accept the sentence of Athens; that is, a more personally psychological response to another, and one which even goes beyond what he might actually have thought just himself. Knowing what we do about Socrates, the latter part of this thought seems highly doubtful.
involved will not be of the pejorative kind referred to above, and in this respect need not necessarily jar with other dialogues such as the Apology.

In a Levinasian spirit, my first bold move is to embrace the claim of the ‘laws’ of Athens upon Socrates. This claim is expressed variously: ‘you are our child and slave...’20, and ‘if this is true you are not on equal terms with us; nor can you think that you have a right to do to us what we are doing to you’.21 According to this interpretation, the acceptance by Socrates of the claim of Athens in this matter is one that embraces asymmetry. However, this asymmetry is not of the kind that first comes to mind when reading Crito - that of Athens asserting its authority over the individual, with accompanying contract and (in)gratitude type arguments. Considered critically, the arguments Socrates puts forward on behalf of Athens look rather weak, and run counter to the rigor displayed elsewhere. For when did Socrates ever voice the view that it was ungrateful to expose the injustice of another’s beliefs or deeds?22 Or to escape the unjust consequences of them? Perhaps we could grant some, even much, weight to the considerations expressed in Crito of a more personal nature to Socrates; his age, his readiness for death, his publicly stated acceptance of the verdict at the trial and the potential inconsistency of this with escape, but none of this I think explains the lengths to which he goes in defending Athens. Could this defense represent a kind of patriotism coming to the fore at the end of his life, somewhat akin to someone ‘finding religion’ when near death? With the philosopher finding that in the end he needed attachment to something more solid, more earthly and ‘real’ than his professed belief in the possibility of continuing his lifestyle with heroes in the afterlife (or indeed continuing his lifestyle in Thessaly or elsewhere)? Surely not? Or at least surely not if we are to preserve the Socrates of the Apology (and I would argue the Socrates of the bulk of

21 Ibid.
22 In the Euthyphro Socrates does query Euthyphro regarding the latter’s intention to prosecute his father. While this may be interpreted as a questioning of whether Euthyphro shows proper gratitude (honour) towards his father, it is of course a separate consideration whether someone should prosecute him.
the other dialogues). Not discounting the possibility of strong patriotic sentiments in the soul of Socrates, the kind of attachment mooted in this work is that of Levinasian radical responsibility. This kind of responsibility is not necessarily at odds with strong partial sentiments, but it will shape the form taken by them. So it might be possible to understand Socrates as manifesting a kind of radically responsible patriotism, a kind that prioritizes the citizens of Athens above all else (although it does so in a manner incongruent with more normal patriotic emphases on physical embodiment).

Accordingly, Socrates’ attachment to Athens (again, a term not often used in relation to Socrates’ relationship with the city-state) is not something he reverts to as some kind of comfort near the end of life. Nor is it (more realistically) something he feels all his life but only really gives full expression to near the end. The attachment is instead better captured by the Levinasian term ‘substitution’.

In ‘Substitution’ Levinas contests the traditional philosophical approach whereby an ethical relation is attempted to be rendered in a theme proceeding from the assumption of an ego present at the creation of the world, along with its accompanying free will. From this assumption flows our notions of individual autonomy and freedom-based responsibility, notions which support decision and contract-type ethical themes in their claims to capture our ethical relation with others. Accordingly we can only be truly held responsible for what we have chosen to do (or believe). For example, Hobbes in *Leviathan* builds his scheme up from individuals autonomously choosing to enter into arrangements and agreements with others. As a consequence of this, if they choose to break an aspect of this contract they reap the sanction of the sovereign, whom they chose in the first place to do exactly that - to impose sanctions when the contract is breached. The sanction is a direct consequence of their free choice; they are responsible for both the breach and the sanction.

The ethical relation (or at least this ‘political’ aspect of it) with others may be thematically captured entirely in these Hobbesian terms of autonomous choice. It is interesting to note also that the Jews,

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from whom Levinas drew much inspiration and imagery, tended, perhaps in a quite modernistic rational way, to blame their ‘misfortunes’ on their own disobedience to the demands of pious purity. Having entered into a covenant with their god, any subsequent misfortunes or calamities were interpreted as being a consequence of their having broken this pact. So even where it could not be seen where this breach had occurred, the assumption was that it must nevertheless have taken place.

Levinas uses the book of Job to illustrate his position in opposition to this rationalist, Hobbesian one. In this vein god accuses Job of being presumptuous, of failing to fully appreciate the significance of not having been present at the creation of the world, of taking himself to be the mere sum of all his experiences, of assuming that responsibility must be attached only to these experiences, of failing to realize that he is ‘better for not being a mere effect of this world’. 24 The latter part of that sentence is couched in the language of Levinas, and perhaps goes beyond the biblical text, yet it is not inconsistent with its spirit, with the terms used steering towards an engagement with the philosophical approach being opposed. So, minus the Jewish propensity to assume that calamities must flow from a breach of covenant, we can consider Job as an autonomous member of a community of contract-making individuals (of which god is included, but who also acts as sovereign), and indeed consider him to be ‘blameless’, undeserving of all his misfortunes and sufferings. By contrast, Job conceived in terms of what Levinas calls an ‘accused Ego’ - an ego arising ‘outside of being’ 25 - is ‘responsible before having done anything’. 26 Understandably this conception at first glance looks radical, unjust even, and so will take some explanation. My intention is to go about this at least somewhat gradually, with my aim here merely to set out the framework from within which Socrates’ sense of responsibility towards Athens can be potentially and plausibly situated (and

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24 Ibid.  
25 Ibid.  
26 Ibid., p.94.
understood\textsuperscript{27} in asymmetrical terms, terms radically other than those of the gratitude or contract-type. My exegesis of various passages in the Socratic dialogues will further explanation and argument in support of Levinas’s alternative conception.\textsuperscript{28}

Before this exegesis it might be worth briefly indicating what might be termed a ‘strategic consideration’\textsuperscript{29} in favor of Levinas’s sense of responsibility. Accepting some version of either virtue ethics or Utilitarianism, or indeed duty ethics, may leave one with a (sometimes profound) sense of dissatisfaction, elicited by a mismatch of theory and moral experience. In respect of virtue ethics, the role that the other plays in moral matters tends to be reduced to a mere supplement to one’s own \textit{Eudaimonia}. There is something ultimately too insular about virtue ethics, no matter how it is tweaked. With utilitarian theory, even taken in its most acceptable ‘preference’ sense, a whole realm of inner moral experience is consigned to the category of ‘emotion’, only relevant if it impacts on utility. In principle relevance is assessed in terms of measurable preferences; otherwise this realm of inner moral experience is laid to one side as either practically morally inconsequential, or even irrational. So while utilitarian ethics can certainly be seen as less self-centered than virtue ethics – it being directly and impartially concerned with the preferences of \textit{all} sentient beings – its wider concern is at the same time ethically impoverished. Utilitarianism alternately diminishes and ignores the richness of inner experience common to all human societies. Duty ethics better approximates Levinas, but there are two aspects of this ethic that remain unsatisfactory. One aspect is perhaps somewhat redundant now, that being Kant’s emphasis on strict rationality. I will not rehearse the

\textsuperscript{27} Perhaps ‘accepted’ is the better term given reservations about whether the sense of responsibility at issue can ever be philosophically understood.

\textsuperscript{28} A note in leaving the \textit{Job} example. In addition to illustrating Levinas’s position, it further alludes to something of the twin-source aspect of Levinas’s vision; Greek and Hebrew springs both being fundamental to its development.

\textsuperscript{29} Parentheses here because of course one doesn’t realize Levinas’s ethical relation via strategic considerations; to do so would be antithetical to the actual ethical relation with the other. However, if ‘strategic’ is understood here as philosophically considering which theory best fits the ‘phenomenology’ of the ethical relation with the other, then the term can be seen as appropriate. (And ‘phenomenology’ in parentheses here because – as will be seen – Levinas’s ethical relation is only really described in terms of transcendence.)
standard counterfactual arguments put forward against him in this regard, but will rather take it as
granted that the problematic nature of this emphasis on rationality has been sufficiently
demonstrated elsewhere (although the first formulation of the categorical imperative still has its
defenders here and there). The other unsatisfactory aspect of duty ethics is the logical connection of
duty with rights. For example, my duty to respect another’s right to liberty is straightforward
enough, liberty being a moral good. However, respect for rights only takes us so far in moral
matters. Consider the responsibility that is typically experienced by a parent for their children. This
experience far exceeds respect for the children’s rights, important as this undoubtedly remains. Even
when we add other rights – the right to a certain standard of health, education, work conditions etc.
– and we dutifully respect all these additions, we still end up well short of the whole picture of what
it is to have a complete sense of attachment, or responsibility, to another. The language of love and
goodness is conspicuous here by its absence, and a criticism equally applicable to the above-
mentioned three types of ethical theory – virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and duty ethics – is that they
all lack the proper space for it. For example, Aristotle tends to talk of ‘heroic’ virtue as something
beyond the scope of the typical human, and indeed in regard to certain forms of goodness it looks
as if he would not even recognize them as such; utilitarianism attempts to ‘straightjacket’ love and
goodness into a preference calculus, thereby at times reducing them to a pale imitation of
themselves (the ‘remainder’ being conceived as ‘personal sentiment’); and duty ethics speaks of
supererogatory acts, thereby splitting the continuum of responsibility into duty and that which is
‘beyond’ duty, with love and goodness being largely consigned to this latter, strictly unnecessary,
category.

The strategic advantage of Levinas’s radical responsibility is that it avoids all the pitfalls outlined
above. It is singularly non-insular, conceiving the self as primally bound up with (any and potentially

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30 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145a. This should be kept distinct from his notions of ‘divine intellect’ from book 10,
where the emphasis is not moral virtue but rather the supreme excellence of self-sufficient contemplation.
all) others. Radical responsibility has no calculus, or at least as far as it might subscribe to one in response to a demand of justice it would insist on the right kind of underpinning for it. This underpinning firmly places the other foremost, at odds with the central preoccupations of the ethics of virtue and utility, and with the rationality-based notions of duty ethics. This sense of responsibility is in place prior to the preoccupations of these theories, subsuming and deepening one’s sense of them, as well as going beyond them, with plenty of space for the language of love and goodness. (In this respect religious and mystical terms can also be subsumed and deepened within Levinasian responsibility.) I now return to Socrates and the concept of ‘substitution’.

‘The impossibility of slipping away is the very singling out of the subject’. 31 This is an apt saying in relation to Socrates, on several levels. Least significant, although nicely fitting, is how the saying resonates with the question raised in Crito - whether to do just that (‘slip away’). More important is the consideration of what it would do to our view of Socrates if indeed he had slipped away. He would of course remain Socrates of Athens, philosopher, but he would not be ‘singled out’ in the same way that he is. If he had sought exile to avoid death his whole legacy would be (rightly I believe) tarnished. He might remain in some sense a philosophical example, but his moral standing would certainly be diminished, and at any rate I do not think these two can ultimately be separated. This does not of course mean that Socrates’ example is binding on all, with slipping away from execution necessarily being a moral failing that many would no doubt succumb to; it was binding on him, not necessarily on others who we might imagine in somewhat similar circumstances. This is because of the unique relationship that Socrates had with Athens. Socrates the individual – the ‘singled out subject’ - is constituted by his finding it ‘impossible to slip away’, where this impossibility conditions his entire adult life, not excluding the manner of his death. Using Levinas’s terms, I argue that he indeed ‘substituted’ himself for his persecutors, and in doing so realized a kind of

responsibility for them that in one sense completely closed the gap between him and them, rendering the option of slipping away a betrayal of their will and command. This could also be expressed in terms of Socrates betraying himself, with his self being at one with Athens, although this mode of expression tends to facilitate the traditional understanding of a negotiated kind of unity between two separate and free egos or subjects, an understanding radically at odds with Levinas’s notion of responsibility. Substitution precludes the subject as separated being. Accordingly human subjects are always and already responsible for the other:

Substitution is not an act but contrary to the act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act, on this side of the act-passivity alternative. It is the ex-ceptionable, which cannot serve as the grammatical category of Noun or Verb, the recurrence that can only be stated as an in itself, or as an inside-out of being, or as nonbeing. Nonbeing is a matter of bearing the burden of the misery and failure of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be a ‘self’ is always to have one degree of responsibility more. The responsibility for the other (autrui) is perhaps the concrete event designated by the verb ‘not to be’, in an attempt to distinguish it both from nothingness and from the product of the transcendental imagination.32

There is much of note in this passage. For instance: the absence of the for itself. Substitution holds the radical freedom of Sartre’s Being and Nothingness hostage to nonbeing, where nonbeing is crucially distinguished from sheer nothingness and from being a creation of the self. Nonbeing is a ‘being’, but one which is created out of no free or autonomous act, but instead in passivity, in passion.33 The only concession Levinas grants to any kind of autonomy or freedom here is a contingency with which we might initially approach the other,34 but which subsequently is extinguished. Before the ethical relation kicks in so to speak – and with this ‘before’ being a logical

32 Ibid., p.91.
33 Ibid., p.95. This is a useful conjugation to offset the impression of any kind of quietism.
34 Ibid.
(not chronological) term – we are ‘free’ in our separateness and strangeness to each other,35 but this is not a freedom out of which we contract or reason moral rules or obligations. Rather it is a freedom that is ethically disturbed and disrupted by the other; responsibility (for the other) calls as responsibility, not as an offer to a free being – it is a call that commands. By contrast the radical responsibility of Sartre’s for itself wholly concerns the choices we make. Bad faith is the denial of the freedom at the heart of (non) being, freedom as the basis of the obligations we assume. The other is strange, alien, a threat to our freedom, but the threat is not posed by responsibility, but rather of freedom itself endangering freedom. For Sartre’s for itself responsibility comes not from without, but from within. There is no automatic solidarity with others on this basis of choice. One must ‘commit’ to an obligation, to a cause, and even then the responsible awareness that one has done so out of freedom potentially and ironically alienates. By contrast, the commanding responsibility that comes from the other commits one in a fundamentally solid way, with this commanded commitment being for Levinas the essential mode of freedom.36 If this sounds odd, contradictory even, perhaps it is because we are still accustomed to thinking of the ethical relation as resulting from a choice we make; to commit or not to commit to the other. In order to resolve this puzzling aspect I need to back up from this thought somewhat.

In discussing Socrates’ attachment to Athens, I identified a resonance between the Crito’s question of Socrates’ evading execution and the Levinasian observation on the ‘impossibility of slipping away’. Here I focus on the latter part of the saying – ‘is the very singling out of the subject’ – which speaks of the very formation of subjectivity itself. I suggest that this formation be understood in terms of three layers. As creatures we exist apart from each other, enjoying ourselves separately, ‘free’ in this sense, but as subjects we are intimately tied up with each other. Our subjective selves are formed through and by others. In this layer the separating of the subject is not the separation of one subject

35 See Totality and Infinity, section two: ‘Separation as Life’ for relevant discussion of this theme.
from others as in throwing a spotlight on a dancer in the middle of a crowded floor, but rather the emergence of a subject as subject from out of his or her own creatureliness. Thus, in our very subjectivity we are ‘committed’ to others. We ‘owe’ them our human selves, (indeed we now realize we also owe them our creatureliness as well), we cannot escape this, no matter how ‘ethically’ we might try.\(^{37}\) We cannot escape as our subjectivity perpetually inheres in others. Other subjects, not other creatures, continue to form our selves, and there is no other forming foundation to fall back on. This is the first layer, a layer that prepares the way for an appreciation of Socratic attachment, but does not yet take us to the kind of ‘singling out of the subject’ at issue in the saying above.

The second layer is in a sense an extension of the first, but it deepens (or heightens) it in a transcendent sense. According to the way I described the first layer the ethical relation still fits into an implied contract or gratitude-type obligation (I have been supplied with an ‘I’, and having realized this I am obligated to repay). The second layer takes me beyond this type of obligation, for it commits me to others regardless of any consideration or calculation of debt owed, and goes much further than gratitude. Here Levinas’s concept of the face of the other comes into the picture.\(^{38}\) Recalling the passage quoted above, there is a move towards nonbeing, with the traditional ego of philosophy being replaced by an in itself or an inside-out of being. The in itself signifies the absolute, binding nature of the concrete command that I receive from the other, and it differs from Sartre’s version in that although the gaze of the other ‘fixes’ me, there is no free response to attempt an overcoming of its defining power over me. The command is absolutely binding – it actually ‘singles me out’, constitutes my ‘being’, rather than being a threat to it. The inside-out of being refers to me being literally turned inside out ethically. My very being is subject to the command which comes to me from the face of the other. In other terms my being is put into question by the face of the other,

\(^{37}\) For example, all debts paid, obligations settled, relationships reconciled to the decision, one sets off to live the life of a drifter, or a hermit even – one still owes for one’s very self as a self. This debt can never be paid off for the ‘gift’ of the self is never complete; it is forever ongoing. (It is a different question as to what one should or should not do about this debt, within the context of a particular life.)

\(^{38}\) There are numerous places in Levinas’s writings where this concept is discussed.
and this infinitely, meaning there is no end to this questioning. Relationships are forever, there is no closure as such, and there is no telling what directions they may take, and who I might become in ethical response to the other. And here resides the unique (‘singled out’) subjectivity of every human, absolutely irreplaceable in their unique ethical relation with each other.

But how does this command of the face of the other work? There is I think no rational explanation as such, although this by no means says that an account of a type cannot be given. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says ‘... and only the face in its morality is exterior. In this epiphany the face is not resplendent as a form clothing a content, as an image, but as the nudity of the principle, behind which there is nothing further’. This seeming absolute identification of the face of the other as the ultimate moral principle can be taken as a remarkable philosophical move in that in one fell swoop it ‘solves’ a number of problems. It does away with any need for elaborate and cumbersome metaphysical structures (for the metaphysical coincides with the physical); it locates the moral in the sensible, thereby bypassing argument as such; and it puts front and center the concrete human being in front of us, a move that squarely accords with our intuitions regarding the absolute preciousness of others quite apart from any externally bestowed value upon them.

But more needs to be said about the face, for the above quote is itself still too ‘nude’. Elsewhere Levinas talks of two aspects of the face of the other: vulnerability and prohibition. The face ‘says’ these two things, simultaneously, to me: I am vulnerable, and You shall not do me violence. I will elaborate much more on this later, but for now I wish to suggest that Socrates’ relationship with – his attachment to - Athens is shaped by the above-mentioned two layers. Namely that his being – as per his words from *Crito* – is formed by Athens, as in a sense being at one with it, and furthermore, that taking the escape option would be a transgression of Athen’s command to do it no violence.

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39 Of course this is not an empirical statement.
40 *Totality and Infinity*, section two: ‘Separation as Life’.
41 ‘Violence’ here is quite broadly conceived, encompassing all ethical breaches. The issue of what constitutes violence for Levinas is one which will be aired at various points throughout this work.
Now none of this needs be inconsistent with Socrates retaining all his critical thoughts from The Apology, and this claim leads on to discussion of the third layer of subjectivity.

Of course it is not necessarily the case that no one in similar circumstances to Socrates could take the escape option without doing moral harm to themselves or Athens. But Socrates could not. This is because the ‘singling out’ of his unique subjectivity that had gone on for (at least) all his adult life takes a particular form. For some half a century Socrates had consistently and persistently walked the streets of Athens, discussing and debating questions of virtue and justice with anyone who cared to engage with him. He had also served (with courage) in the Athenian army, done his obligatory stint (also with courage) in politics, and taken a keen interest in all things relevant to the moral good of the citizens of the city. In a sense Athens ‘the city’ was the ‘face’ that ‘turned’ Socrates ‘inside out’. As with all faces Athens expressed both vulnerability and prohibition in relation to violence, and from Socrates’ perspective he had attempted with all his time and energy to refrain from harming it. He had answered its call, obeyed its command, where this answering, this obedience, had actually formed not just his subjectivity as a human creature (the general sense of the first layer), and not just additionally his subjectivity as a commanded human (the second layer), but also his subjectivity as Socrates of Athens, the (third) layer where the Levinasian imperative of radical responsibility manifests in an actual, contingently attached life. So when Socrates argues on behalf of Athens that ‘... you are our child and slave...’ and ‘... if this is true you are not on equal terms with us; nor can you think that you have a right to do to us what we are doing to you’, we can take him at his word – he means this quite seriously. Socrates is ‘of Athens’ in such a way that for him, in

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42 This use of the concept of the ‘face’ here might be thought unwarranted given Levinas’s emphasis on the actual site of the individual face of the other, but I see no real issue with a coalescing of individual faces forming as it were the ‘face of a city’. That is, there is no necessary invoking here of some kind of abstract face of the city over and above the sum of a collection of individual ones. Here ‘Athens’ can simply become shorthand for the face of this individual, and this one, and this one too ... This use might also be considered to gain some legitimacy on account of the smallish size of the population of ancient Athens in Socrates’ time (40,000 male citizens is the usual estimate). The intensely personal nature of Socrates’ trial attests to a wide familiarity between himself and the citizens of Athens.

the context of his unique relation with it, the option of ‘slipping away’ was simply not an ethically live one. So although the form (and in some places content) of the considerations put forward in *Crito* might look similar to other arguments from other dialogues, taking the dialogue as merely the sum of these considerations gives a misleading impression of its character and significance. Rather, *Crito* as a whole is better thought of as being more akin to a devotional (ethical) statement.

To complete the discussion of Socrates’ attachment to Athens, and the impossibility of his ‘slipping away’ from the Athenian ‘face’, some consideration is now given to how this deeper sense or form of responsibility may be given content or filled out. I discuss this content/form relationship much more fully in connection with other dialogues, but it may be noted here that for Socrates the particular content that his sense of responsibility took was that of attempting to rationally persuade Athenians to look to the health of their souls, to seek virtue. *This* is what philosophy is for Socrates. The fact that, via orders and verdicts, Athens took steps to force Socrates to cease philosophizing is by no means ethically commanding for him; in this sense, regardless of Athens’ behavior towards him, his responsibility to and for it remains unchanged. He cannot conceive of himself ceasing to philosophize,\(^{44}\) as to do so would be to cease being, in the various Levinasian senses described. This idea is by no means inconsistent with the ‘child’ and ‘slave’ invocation of the Laws, for it is ethical obedience that is required in the formation of subjectivity, and not obedience in all things.

So why not escape to philosophize another day? And attempt to obey the ethical command of Athens in *this* way? I think if Socrates was convinced that indeed he could have somehow continued his ethical mission in relation to Athens by escaping, then he might very well have seriously contemplated it. But here, as pointed out in a very thorough discussion by Richard Kraut, the ‘obey

\(^{44}\) ‘..do as Anytus bids or not as Anytus bids, and either acquit me or not; but whatever you do, know that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.’ (*Apology*, *The Essential Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 1999, p.531.)
or persuade’ principle comes to the fore. If Socrates cannot persuade Athens to allow him to continue practicing philosophy, then he is obliged to obey its edict to cease, or failing this – which Socrates openly admits he will fail, because philosophizing is life to him – to then accept its verdict of forced cessation, namely death. The ‘obey or persuade’ principle is active for Socrates because of the considerations put forward previously, that being his life-long, intimate, ethical engagement with Athens. That is, to disobey without engaging in an ongoing attempt at persuading Athens of the injustice of its actions towards him would be to commit a wrong, a violence against the city. This is what escape amounts to for Socrates. Escape would not, and need not, necessarily amount to this for someone else, say, a resident alien, or a tourist, or even perhaps a long standing citizen who did not have Socrates’ particular relationship with Athens. It is the disengagement from the ethical relation presented by the escape option that I think is key from a Levinasian perspective, and which Socrates agrees with as being an act of violence (especially so in the context of his long term and particular type of engagement with the city). This of course is an asymmetrical notion of an ethical relation, where Socrates’ responsibility is to remain engaged with the face of Athens, even in the face of violence towards him on account of that very engagement! If Socrates was a lot younger, and if it looked as if there was a viable option to live elsewhere for a (short?) time, with the prospect of returning to Athens under more favorable conditions for philosophizing, might he have considered it? I do not know the answer to this, but it is germane here to remember that amongst the Laws’ considerations against escape is the time Socrates has lived in Athens - 70 years. His engagement with the city is also arguably deepened by his satisfaction with it relative to other locations. Although

45 See Kraut’s *Socrates and the State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, section III.
46 Whether or not death ends Socrates’ ethical being is a question that he conjectures about in the *Apology*, but what seems to be clear is that, regardless of the answer to that question, he cannot conceive of his being in any mode other than the ethical.
47 It is interesting perhaps to contrast with scenarios where modern communication is possible. For example, Julian Assange arguably has an ongoing engagement of attempted persuasion with certain authorities relevant to his particular legal issues, but this from a location removed from their jurisdiction. Might Socrates have considered asylum where the project of ongoing persuasion of the state was possible? One obvious reply is to emphasize the importance of face-to-face dialogue for Socrates, and so without this a proper elenchus is ruled out. (Video conferencing?)
in *Crito* there is reference to Sparta and Crete as being well-governed,48 Socrates must be aware that there is no other city that will afford him the freedom to philosophize in the way that Athens does (or at least *has*). The point here is that this relative satisfaction is known by the Laws, by the city, and it contributes to the sense of a contemplated escape being violent. This point connects with Kraut’s emphasis on the debt of gratitude playing a major role in supporting the Laws’ argument against Socrates escaping. While ultimately disagreeing with the argument from implicit agreement49 - for example the right to vote does not, and should not, depend upon swearing an oath of allegiance50 – Kraut does think that benefits received play an indebting role. I wish to resist this emphasis, or rather, not to resist it *per se*, but to set it in a Levinasian framework.

Levinasian responsibility is very different from gratitude-based debt, for the latter depends upon benefits received, whereas the former is of course prior to all such economies of exchange, and in a primal sense commands one *regardless* of such considerations. The various considerations put forward by Socrates’ personification of the Laws in *Crito* - the parent/child analogy, explicit and implicit just agreements, satisfaction with the city – are all worth dwelling upon, indeed are perfectly valid potential contributors to a properly ethical reflection, as well as obviously all playing an ostensibly decisive role in Socrates’ own decision to face death rather than to escape. However, within a Levinasian framework they become something other than considerations or arguments as to what kind of ethical relation to adopt. Accordingly, Socrates is ethically commanded by the face of Athens regardless of - *prior* to - the Laws’ arguments. What is not yet commanded is still yet the particular form his obedience must take. All the Laws’ points fill out what counts as violence in relation to Athens, and so they of course constitute crucial reflective material. Only in relation to this material may Socrates decide how best to avoid doing violence to the city. I have the strong sense

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49 Choosing not to emigrate, accepting benefits etc. implies agreement.
50 Kraut, Op.cit., section V.
that Socrates would be committed to the good of the citizens of Athens, regardless of the relative strength or weakness of the Laws’ arguments. Still, it is no surprise that Crito takes the form that it does, with those arguments clearly looking to be the decisive factor. As seen, being committed to the good of Athens need not necessarily be inconsistent with escape on a particular occasion, but in Socrates’ specific case the Laws’ arguments seem decisive in determining what form this commitment must take. In a Levinsonian framework, particular ethical considerations and arguments play a sculpting role in shaping one’s relation to the other, sculpting a relation that already obtains. 51 For Kraut (at least in Socrates and the State), and many others as well of course, these considerations and arguments play as it were a ground zero role, determining whether Socrates is committed to Athens in the first place, as well as what this commitment might amount to.

I leave Crito at this stage, and turn to a closer examination of various clues within some of the other dialogues. This examination will further establish the Levinsonian brand of ethical relation within Socrates’ life.

(ii) Socrates in Dialogue

One of the striking things regarding the way that Socrates relates to those whom he is in dialogue with is the type of attention he pays to them. At the end of book 1 of The Republic Socrates laments the fact that he seems to be no closer to the true nature of justice than when he began the discussion with Thrasymachus. He describes his conduct during the exchange as like an ‘epicure’

51 A way of looking at this shaping role is, for example, to question the parent/child analogy. Is it obviously a good analogy? Must Socrates’ relationship with Athens conform to this model? I do not think the answer to be obvious, which leads to the question as to why Socrates chooses this as an analogue of his situation? My answer is that he chooses this personification of the Laws as an imaginative way of attempting to portray the kind of responsibility and commitment that he already has towards Athens. The analogy does not establish this responsibility but rather imaginatively expresses it, and additionally, as Cora Diamond puts it, invites Crito (and us) to imaginatively inhabit Socrates’ story by ‘reading our way into his best possibility’ (‘Missing the Adventure’, The Realistic Spirit, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995, p.311). The parent/child analogy is decisive for Socrates not because it is an irrefutable analogy, a decisive argument as such, but because it imaginatively captures something of the essence of the radical responsibility that he already feels, and at the same time gives specific expression to the sense of what this radical responsibility means in his immediate situation - he must stay and obey his ‘parents’.
snatching a taste from each successive dish as it is brought to table, but without properly enjoying any.\textsuperscript{52} This alludes to a familiar theme of many of the dialogues: a long, drawn out discussion, backtracking and beginning again, arguments to and fro... and at the end, what to show for it? An even deeper and more profound ignorance than existed previously, or at least a surer knowledge of the depth and profundity of this ignorance. Now this outcome may be thought of as a kind of wisdom – knowing what one knows and knowing what one doesn’t know – and is also consistent with one of the earlier descriptions of Socrates’ purpose (that of testing the Delphi oracle’s claim regarding him being the wisest man in Athens). However, for my purposes here, more interesting than end results, even where wisdom might be one of them, is the \textit{actual way} the dialogues (or at least some of them) go. A close reading of book 1 of \textit{The Republic} bears some fruit in this regard.

A little way into the discussion regarding the nature of justice Polemarchus comments in relation to Thrasymachus that ‘those were not his words’.\textsuperscript{53} Socrates replies ‘...if he now says that they are, let us accept his statement’.\textsuperscript{54} A little further on, just after Thrasymachus has delivered his longish speech, he ‘has a mind to go away’. Socrates, after complimenting him in typical ironic style on his suggestive remarks, then proceeds to upbraid him on account of his looking to leave, without having proper care as to whether his audience ‘live better or worse from not knowing what you say you know’.\textsuperscript{55} Just after this Socrates appeals to Thrasymachus for ‘consistency’, or, at the very least, honest and open change, with no deception.\textsuperscript{56} And further on still Socrates comments that he is willing to go through with the argument as long as ‘I have reason to think that you, Thrasymachus,

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p.21.  
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p.27.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.28.
are speaking your real mind’. To this Thrasymachus replies ‘I may be in earnest or not, but what is that to you? – to refute the argument is your business’.\textsuperscript{57}

In a nutshell this last exchange between the two captures a key issue at stake when it comes to the question of how best to characterize just what it was that Socrates was doing for all those years in Athens. A popular view of Socrates is that of ‘a refuter of arguments’, this being seen as constituting his ‘business’ in life.\textsuperscript{58} However, my claim is that the real business of Socrates is something quite different. I maintain that the real reason why Socrates is able to (with some justice) describe himself as an ‘epicure’ at the conclusion of the discussion with Thrasymachus is not because he merely snatches the delights of varied topics presented by Thrasymachus, but rather because he is ‘captured’ by Thrasymachus \textit{himself}. This is a direct result of his attention to the soul of Thrasymachus, Thrasymachus who is inconsistent, bombastic, surly, resentful, and who apparently cares not for those around him, but for his own advancement and power. No wonder one does not get very far in discussion with someone like this. Sticking with him through all the convolutions is arguably a sure fire recipe for failure. But just this was the business that preoccupied Socrates. Not the winning of arguments as such,\textsuperscript{59} not even the establishing of wisdom (even if indeed he believed that such a task was capable of being carried out through dialogue), but rather the care for another’s soul through the conduit of discussion. The particular form is dialogue; words, logic, the search for knowledge and so on, but this is just the stage for the real ethical drama, the real substance or ‘business’ at hand, that of Thrasymachus and Socrates, face to face with each other, with all the possibilities that that encounter opens up. Schools of philosophy may study various arguments

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.34. 
\textsuperscript{58} Gregory Vlastos is perhaps chief amongst commentators for putting forward something close to this view. 
\textsuperscript{59} Wittgenstein queried whether Socrates experienced triumph in showing up the sophists: ‘Socrates keeps reducing the sophist to silence, - but does he have right on his side when he does this?’ (\textit{Culture and Value} 56, University of Chicago Press, 1980). I think this is a highly ethical question to ask (regardless of whether we could ever have a decisive answer to it), but I think that even if one answers it in the affirmative, this in itself would not necessarily rule out the reading I am offering, for triumph could be a side-product of a less than pure soul where the main driver is pure, or there might be more than one driver, a mixture etc.
coming out of the text (for example ‘might is right’), but this undertaking is distinct from an appreciation of what Socratic dialogue is, and may signify, for the ethical relation. To put the above in Levinasian terms, my claim is that in an ethically significant sense Socrates is commanded by Thrasymachus.

Less conclusive but possibly even more suggestive of this ‘commanding’ is Plato’s description of when Thrasymachus first enters the discussion:

I was panic-stricken at his words, and could not look at him without trembling. Indeed I believe that if I had not fixed my eye upon him, I should have been struck dumb: but when I saw his fury rising, I looked at him first, and was therefore able to reply to him.

Are we really expected to believe that Socrates was in fear of some kind of physical violence from Thrasymachus? A bit earlier he is described as ‘coming at us like a wild beast, seeking to devour us’, so there is some literal evidence for this, but the preferred interpretation is that of a kind of tension typically produced in company when someone disagrees strongly and dramatically with what is being put forward. So, allowing for Plato’s rhetorical flourishes, the passage reads as an attempt to colorfully capture Thrasymachus’s spirit at that moment. Nonetheless, I find the references to ‘trembling’ and being ‘struck dumb’, together with the emphasis on ‘looking at him’, to be suggestive of a kind of relating to that is not satisfactorily captured by dramatic imperatives or flourishes. Nor indeed is it captured by a (plausible) psychological account of the attempted exercise of some kind of behavioral control (self-control on the part of Socrates, but also possibly control of Thrasymachus). The suggestion is that Socrates experiences himself as compelled to concentrate not on the words of Thrasymachus, but rather on the saying of them, or – what amounts to the same thing – the sayer of them. The ‘replying to’ comes after the ‘looking at’.

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60 It may be that we cannot emulate this type of encounter in an academic setting, but what we can at least do is to be clear about this fact.


62 Ibid.
As alluded to above, there is a psychological explanation available to us here – the exercise of self-control and control - a managing of the situation, which then allows one to go on in discussion. According to this view, Thrasymachus the ‘wild beast’ is stared down, pacified, managed, and eventually domesticated into Plato’s dialogical form, emerging from the *elenchus* a thoroughly beaten man, at least in terms of the argument. This may very well have been Plato’s intention, with the dramatic interplay between the two protagonists merely spicing up the dialogue. However, given that Plato is *also* presumably attempting to capture something of the true spirit of his master, then it stands to reason that – despite Plato’s dramatic priorities – Socrates might emerge from the dialogues in such a way that even Plato himself could not foresee or control. This emergence from the dialogue of the ethical ‘relating to’ is not itself dependent upon the particularly dramatic interplay between Socrates and Thrasymachus (it emerges elsewhere in less dramatic circumstances); rather the drama might even serve to obscure it.

What follows in book 1 after this dramatic entrance of Thrasymachus is an exchange that follows the usual pattern of so-called Socratic irony; Socrates (allegedly) flattering his opponent, pretending ignorance, pretending belief in the real possibility of his opponent having wisdom which he (Socrates) is only too willing to listen to, and so on. But, here again, there is another interpretation available to us. Namely that, despite the indeed obvious element of irony, Socrates is *genuinely* deferring to his interlocutor. This is not on account of him having some empirical reason for genuinely believing Thrasymachus to indeed have some wisdom relevant to the discussion, and neither is it for the usual ‘ironic’ reasons put forward by Vlastos and others. Instead, it is because Socrates experiences the other as a genuine presence, and in some sense authoritative, commanding even. In a Levinasian context, Socrates’ deferral63 is not that of submission to superior knowledge, or wisdom, but rather to the ‘superiority’ of the otherness of Thrasymachus. To

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63 ‘Deferece’ – Submission to the acknowledged superior claims, skill, judgment, etc. of another.’ (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.*) The ‘etc.’ part of the definition is where I would want to radically expand the basis for deference.
generalize, the otherness of the other is ‘superior’ in that it comes to us, we experience it, from a
height; it commands. I said just above that it was the genuine presence of another that is
authoritative and commanding. This links to the constant references in the dialogues to Socrates
calling for a serious, genuine response from his interlocutors. In Euthydemus he says: ‘I will go on
where I left off before, as well as I can, in the hope that I may touch their hearts and move them to
pity, and that when they see me deeply serious, they may also be serious.’ And just before that he
resolves to ‘refuse to let them go until they show us their real form and character.’ In Protagoras
there is a remarkable passage:

He replied, I can not simply agree, Socrates, to the proposition that justice is holy and that holiness
is just, for there appears to me to be a difference between them. But what matter? If you please I
please; and let us assume, if you will, that justice is holy, and that holiness is just.

Pardon me, I said; I do not want this “if you wish” or “if you will” sort of argument to be proven, but
I want you and me to be proven; and I mean by this that the argument will be best proven if there
be no “if.” (My italics.)

It may be surprising to some to find just how often in the dialogues Socrates straightforwardly,
without sarcasm, calls for his interlocutors to get serious, to ‘show their real form and character’, to
prove themselves (along with himself). Arguably it is only, or at least primarily, when they fall away
from, or perhaps more commonly, do not even attempt to attain this requirement, that the famed
ironic tendency in Socrates comes to the fore. Where he detects pretentiousness, a preoccupation
with rhetoric, irony kicks in, and because in the dialogues he only seldom meets with the kind of
genuine seriousness that he is looking for, there is of course plenty of irony to be found!

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64 See ‘Transcendence and Height’, Levinas, Emmanuel, Basic Ethical Writings, Indiana University Press,
Indianapolis, 1996.
66 Ibid.
Being in dialogue with Socrates is to undergo pressure to present oneself in terms of one’s genuine ideas and beliefs. It is not primarily a pressure to be logical, to argue validly from premises to conclusions, but rather to stay with oneself... in the inquiry (the elenchus). The integrity, or genuineness (indeed the humility) at issue, is tested via the content of the inquiry, which tests the seriousness of claims made in regard to a desire for, or belief in, the importance of knowledge, of wisdom. It is not so much that Socrates sets out to test the claims of various citizens of Athens in relation to wisdom (although he does!), but rather that once this process is in place, Socrates finds himself commanded by any genuine response that he comes across. He is bound to follow (be ‘commanded’ by) the genuine saying (or presence) of any interlocutor, and in following this saying he necessarily is also bound by its form (its ‘said’, the ‘whatness’ of the saying). This leads to dialogue, with all its twists and turns, but these are importantly secondary to what drives them, namely Socrates sticking with, adhering to, that genuine (commanding) presence which he initially is partly instrumental in evoking. Socrates may be compared to a faithful slave, but – as with the relevant sense of ‘deference’ – Socratic faithfulness is by no means that of blind obedience. Rather this faithfulness manifests a piercing vision of a certain aspect of the other’s soul, and is engendered by (the ‘slave’) not having a being apart from the other. The ‘slave’ is nothing apart from the ‘master’. The ‘slave’ gets his being from the ‘master’, his very reason for being revolves around the ‘master’, but none of this means that he is subservient in the way we typically understand this. Because Socrates is nothing apart from the other, he stays with the other through all the vicissitudes of dialogue. In this sense the other and Socrates are one, and hence Socrates is importantly different from the quintessential slave in that respect. Even while Socrates does have a ‘passivity’, this passivity is best understood as a passion, and it takes the form of radical responsibility, responsibility even - in fact even especially - for the other’s failures. This seemingly paradoxical ‘responsibility for/commanded by’ master/slave metaphor is above directed only to Socrates in

68 See p.16.
dialogue. (Given the almost complete lack of separation between his personal and philosophical life, I see no reason not to take it as a suitable characterization of his life as a whole, with this of course including his relationship with, and his execution by, Athens.)

This characterization of Socrates in terms of the master/slave metaphor is not meant to deny the obvious focus in the dialogues on the search for the good, of an obedience to the ‘master’ as something other than just the face of the other. Indeed, this ongoing search for the good may mark out a key difference between how Socrates and Levinas understand the right approach to the ethical (the good), and thereby identify pressure points for my support of a Levinasian alternative, or perhaps a limitation in using the dialogues as the working context for this alternative. Nonetheless, elaborating upon this metaphor should capture something of the responsive practice of Socrates, a feature of his life that I think importantly contrasts with his intellectual understanding of what it is that he is doing. That contrast is discussed in the next two sections, but before turning to that task I first develop the theme of autonomy in a Levinasian context.

(iii) Autonomy

In ‘Substitution’ Levinas says that ‘in the incomparable relation of responsibility, the other is not merely a contestation but is supported by what it contests’. The ‘service’ (but not subservience) that Socrates is bound to in responsibility to Thrasymachus (and others) is supportive of his being because for Levinas what it is to be a self is to be responsible for the other. One’s self, in its very contestation by the otherness of the other, is actually constituted as an (other-supporting) self. The substitution is not that of standing in for, of taking the place of, or in some sense absolving the shortcomings of another’s being, but rather that of bearing the full weight of it. This bearing is not

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69 Levinas’s idea of the ‘trace’ of god does possibly offer some sort of parallel to Plato’s good as ‘beyond being’, but it is so shorn of traditional metaphysical traits, so identified with the face of other(s), that the parallel I think begins to suffer when pressed.

an attempt to alleviate the other of their burden, but to *bear responsibility even for the other’s lack of responsibility*. Levinas does not talk much about the particular content of radical responsibility. So, though it is all very well to talk about being (radically) responsible for the other, the question must arise as to what form this takes. Unless it is condemned to be hostage (to use another term from Levinas) to any desire or project whatsoever of the other, then must there not be something that guides or constrains this responsibility? I make this point not in order to focus on the particular content that might be involved in Socratic dialogues, but rather to mark a distinguishing feature of the type of responsibility that, although (in Levinasian terms) turns one’s being ‘inside out’ - even resulting in ‘nonbeing’ – yet nevertheless does not lead to the type of subservience or dependence that we would rightly decry. Although one indeed gives up the idea of one’s self as an end in itself, becoming instead a ‘hostage’ to the other as end,\(^71\) this is not to be conceived of in traditional philosophical terms of giving up one’s autonomy, of sacrificing one’s very sense of self, of either merging or replacing it with that of another. Rather it involves a radical re-conception of what it is to be a self in the first place. Once one overcomes the apparent necessity of seeing oneself as an end in itself, but instead realizes the attachments with others that are already in place, that already constitute the self, and that continue to constitute it in a dynamic and ongoing manner, then the ‘problem’ of giving up one’s autonomy dissolves, at least as it is traditionally conceived.

To illustrate this I turn to *The Symposium* and the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades. In a passage leading up to the entrance of Alcibiades Socrates relays the teaching of Diotima on the nature of love. In the context of discussing the universal desire for immortality, she says in regard to both the character of a soul and the nature of knowledge, that these are not fixed, but are ‘always coming and going’, and that they are preserved ‘not by absolute sameness of existence, but by

\(^{71}\) Ibid., p.94.
substitution.’ Even within the background of the Platonic forms (still intact), where the ‘substituting’ is drawing from eternally fixed entities, this is still a remarkably fruitful idea, for it potentially frees us from a certain kind of inviolability of self that has become commonly thought in the western tradition. The sovereignty of self arguably received its supreme philosophical warrant from Kant, who placed it on a similar plane as that of god, albeit a god still subject to universal reason. The modern ego’s self-legislative nature was not just substituted in the place of a now vacant god, but was given the *same sublime status*. This trades upon the Christian theological tradition, where the various qualities of god are mooted to be immutable. However, as Levinas points out, ‘the thought that names creation differs from ontological thought’. In this regard he contends:

> But in creation, what is called to being answers to a call that could not have reached it since, brought out of nothingness, it obeyed before hearing the order. Thus in the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, if it is not a pure nonsense, there is the concept of a passivity that does not revert into an assumption. The self as a creature is conceived in a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter, that is, prior to the virtual coinciding of a term with itself. The oneself has to be conceived outside of all substantial coinciding of self with self. Contrary to Western thought which unites subjectivity and substantiality, here coinciding is not the norm that already commands all non-coinciding, in the quest it provokes.  

This quote is dense, but the key idea for my purposes is that of oneself not consisting of a coinciding of self with self - ‘one’ is split from ‘self’. One is ‘one’, but one’s ‘self’ is non-coincident with one. One ‘has’ a self, but the creative ‘thought that differs from ontological thought’ calls one from ‘nothingness’, a ‘place’ outside of, prior, to being, to substance, constituting a hyperbolically passive obedience to an external order that can never be incorporated into any system of thought. This

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order to the one both calls for and at the same time constitutes the self, dynamically, continually, infinitely. One is forever related to this call (it is what constitutes a subject, it is its very form), but the self one is called upon to offer is never a fixed content. It cannot be fixed for there is nothing substantial to affix it to. Said another way: an ethical subject is a form in perpetual flux, forever emptying out its continually re-forming self in response to an infinitely changing order.

So, this (other Christian) tradition of *ex nihilo*, which Levinas refers to in a number of places in his writings,\(^4\) in splitting apart subject from substance, allows for a sense of self that can conceive of itself as radically beholden to an ‘outside order’, but without this sense collapsing into the kind of subservience which threatens, or at the very least compromises, its very autonomy. On this reading its ‘autonomy’ is not driven from within, but from without. There is no essential from within self (‘substance’) to lose or compromise, but only the continual re-forming of the self (‘subject’) via a passive submitting or obedience of oneself to the ‘order’ from without. In terms of creation *ex nihilo* one’s very day-by-day subjectivity is a kind of relation or alternation between nothingness and creation. One’s self is constantly created and re-created *ex nihilo* by a passive response to a call or command from the other.\(^5\) (And in the terms of the *Symposium*, might this idea not also be filtering through into Diotima’s teaching, the ‘always coming and going’ and ‘substitution’ of the soul?) This ‘order’ from without I have parenthesized for it has (at least) two senses. One is that already referred to in terms of the command of the other, but the second is just as important, and takes up the issue of autonomy and my earlier point regarding Levinas’s relative lack of discussion regarding the issue of the content of radical responsibility. This second sense is that which keeps the idea of *ex

\(^4\) *Creatio ex nihilo* is a strain of thought argued to be present in the Old Testament, and certainly Christian theologians and Jewish thinkers from at least as early as the 2nd century explicitly developed it. Levinas is well known to have been heavily influenced by Jewish rabbinical thought, and this is no doubt the inspiration for his use of the phrase in this passage.

\(^5\) This thought will connect up with section 3, especially with the ‘Anxiety’ and ‘Proximate Beauty’ parts.
nihilo from indeed collapsing into (at least one version of) ‘pure nonsense’, the nonsense of the ethical degenerating into simple dominance by the other.

That which prevents Socrates from merely falling into the desires (designs or ‘orders’) of Alcibiades is the order of temperance. That is, the Greek virtue that existed in the way that it did at that time. For those ancient Greeks, temperance is an ideal, an aspiration for ‘balance’, and this ideal shaped the ‘order of things’. In Levinasian terms, the ‘face’ of the poets and philosophers, mediated through the idea of the Greek cosmos (‘order’, ‘balance’), commanded temperance; this manifestation of balance constituted a ‘true’ Greek self. And this is what Alcibiades is referring to when he speaks of his shame in relation to Socrates, his having to ‘shut his ears against him’, of having to ‘fly from the voice of the siren’, lest he be reminded once again of his failure to obey the command of his example. Socrates comes to Alcibiades from an ‘outside order’, like a force of nature. His example of temperance and courage, whether it be on march, on the battlefield, or in social settings with its sensual temptations, constitutes a personal face of the cosmos to which Alcibiades can neither fully face, nor from which he may successfully hide. Hence his shame in the face of the personal other (Socrates), and in the face of the cosmic or Greek ‘other’. For Socrates’ part, he is ‘commanded’ by both the individual presence of Alcibiades, but also by the demands of temperance. Both commands come from the ‘outside’; the first source is the individual face of another soul in need, the second source of command is via the ‘face’ of the culture Socrates inherits, with its love and passion for the order and balance of beauty. It is this love and passion that in Socrates results in his constant calls

76 Accompanying it of course is the virtue of courage, essential to its maintenance.
77 One of them that is. The Greek heroic ideal, with courage being employed in the pursuit of glory and honor, with this being conceived in terms of its ultimate aim of victory and booty rather than temperance per se, is of course still in play at the time of Socrates.
78 Symposium, op.cit., pp.752-3.
79 We may understand this in terms of an ‘internalizing’ process, where Socrates as it were makes this ideal ‘his own’, but this does not undermine its original, and indeed its ongoing, source, and neither does this source undermine Socrates’ autonomy in any real sense. The notion that our autonomy is a gift of creative contingency rather than some divinely founded substance by no means renders it insubstantial or any less a
for others to take their discussions seriously. Indeed passion of this kind is, as Socrates describes himself, ’deeply serious’.\textsuperscript{80}

So now that the elements of the particular relationship we see between Socrates and Alcibiades are in place, the text ‘explains itself’. Socrates knows that Alcibiades is attracted to his example, his temperance, but he also knows that Alcibiades either cannot or will not commit to what he needs to in order to change (for he is also powerfully attracted to other things). Socrates does not dismiss Alcibiades, indeed as the latter describes, he continually responds to him, spending long periods of time with him. Alcibiades interprets this, at least partly, as physical desire for him, and in this mode of solicitation by Alcibiades Socrates also responds - until the point where temperance (in response to desire) is called for.\textsuperscript{81} The ensuing frustration leads Alcibiades to a corresponding wonder at Socrates’ soul. This wonder overcomes, silences even, his sense of dishonor in being rejected as desirous. Alcibiades finds himself commanded by the personal face of the Greek ideal of temperance. Socrates also finds himself commanded by this ideal, but as well by the face of another Greek in need (of temperance). Socrates obeys both commands, with the latter at times dictating that he actually acts against the stated desires of Alcibiades. Socrates’ obedience thus shapes the particular course the relationship between the two runs. It leaves Socrates’ autonomy intact, yet is also consistent with the kind of radical responsibility put forward by Levinas.

If accepted, then the compatibility between these two - autonomy and Levinasian responsibility - necessarily and fundamentally shifts our understanding of the former. Autonomy is now conceived of in terms of dependence upon, and obedience to, an external order (or orders), whereas of course the standard understanding is of it being a matter of individual will, self-legislation, or obedience to

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thing of wonder. For that to follow would involve I believe some unnecessary metaphysical assumptions. There will be more discussion on this point below.
\textsuperscript{80} Not of course to be in any way confused with solemnity.
\textsuperscript{81} This by no means denies physical intimacy between the two, but is a point about temperance even within such a relationship.
}
oneself. These two understandings are not necessarily in contradiction. The former can embrace the latter as being a somewhat limited version of it, with ‘oneself’ actually containing or consisting of external orders, indeed consisting of nothing other than external orders, but obeyed consistently. When I am ‘true to myself’, and when I do this with ‘inner strength’, ‘integrity’ etc., I am consistently obeying the command of some external order. And where this obedience is not in contradiction with also obeying the command of the face of the other, then ‘autonomy’ understood in the standard sense can remain intact and compatible with Levinasian responsibility. I may consistently resist the urgings of business colleagues to cheat on my company taxes, with this consistency being in obedience to the external order (command) of the ethical principle ‘don’t steal’. My consistency delivers me a certain autonomy from my colleagues, or at least from certain aspects of them; it provides me with the armor of autonomy, the means to resist them. In doing so am I disobeying their ‘commands’? That is, are their urgings Levinasian commands? If these urgings are merely on behalf of what is taken to be my self-interest, then my resistance to them – my autonomy in relation to them – need not be at odds with Levinasian responsibility (and indeed, may be required by it). On the other hand, if one imagines an external order of a certain type, where for example the state is thoroughly corrupt, with taxes being ratcheted up and up, together with the revenues collected being used for reprehensible causes (e.g. war mongering, sponsoring terrorism), then perhaps my business colleagues’ urgings may indeed come to me as ethical commands. In this case, my continuing disobedience of them – and continued obedience to the external order of ‘don’t steal’ - while providing me with an autonomy from them, at the same time does violence to them and to the wider social body. The point here is not one of particular situations or sets of circumstances, and how the various factors might or might not feed into ethical decisions, but rather to affirm that whatever the scenario, it is exteriority that rules. Whether it be the face(s) of my business colleagues, or the ‘face’ of the wider social body (represented by ethical principles either constructed or handed down), or some combination of the two, which of course might be unstable
over time, the command will always come from outside. In psychological terms I may ‘internalize’
exteriority, ‘make it my own’ so to speak, and even become a ‘person of integrity’, but in essence
this amounts to no more than consistently obeying a certain order, or a certain ‘class’ of orders,
rather than another.82

So, where does this leave the notion that my ethical views are produced via a process of some deep,
‘autonomous’ reflection, of years of comparing, contrasting, and weighing up the merits of various
theories? The answer is that this notion will need to be heavily qualified, for it is in fact the external
(commands of) faces of others - actually or potentially affected by those theories - that does the real
work in deciding my views. Or, conversely of course, it is the absence of the commands of the faces
of others in relation to those theories that limits and distorts my views.83 This is not to in any way
decry the reflective exercise, merely to point out that which must anchor and orientate it. Indeed,
although for Levinas the face of the other says two basic things: ‘I am vulnerable’, and ‘You shall not
do me violence’, just what is involved in obeying this command is not always clear, and so reflecting
upon the other and what it is that in fact does violence to them is a fundamentally important aspect
of being responsible to and for them.

Hopefully this reflection on the nature of autonomy has somewhat clarified its structural aspect in
relation to Levinasian responsibility. It is not intended in any way to say anything about what
theoretical considerations one might include or exclude in decision making, or which standpoint
might be considered to be decisive in any situation. It is intended only to make the point that
whether one takes a virtue ethics, a Kantian, a utilitarian, or some contract-type approach, the

82 Someone who vacillates between different orders is usually seen as double minded, or weak willed, not as
autonomous. Of course one might consider switching allegiances for various reasons, but even here there will
be a certain consistency in the kind of reflection or considerations brought to bear on the issue. This note is
just to reinforce the notion of autonomy as being a kind of consistency or constancy, rather than some kind of
essence of a true (enlightenment?) self.
83 The ‘absence’ of the commands of the face of others does not indicate any actual external absence, but
rather my own marginalizing or ignoring of them, however this may come about.
question of autonomy in the face of the command of the other is not necessarily a problem for interweaving Levinasian responsibility into these approaches. While autonomy is subservient to the other, at the same time it is created and modulated by the other.

I earlier outlined in fact three (external) orders commanding Socrates: the face of his interlocutors in dialogue; the authority of the state of Athens; and the authority of the wider Athenian/Greek love of beauty, of harmony - broadly conceived, temperance. I have argued above that Socrates is obedient to all three. His autonomy in relation to the temptations of Alcibiades is gifted to him by his obedience to the authority of temperance; his autonomy in relation to the urgings of Crito to escape is gifted to him by his obedience to the authority of Athens; and his autonomy in dialogue – that is his steadfastness in resisting the temptations of rhetoric, of sophistry – is gifted to him by his obedience to the face of the other in front of him. The latter is the (Levinasian) command of doing no violence (with this of course being interpreted in the best way he could in terms of the acknowledged highest ideal of his culture84). So, does it begin to look as if Socrates’ autonomy is preserved through a kind of balancing act between the different external orders? This I think is a mistaken understanding, for rather than autonomy being the priority, with some deft shifting between the orders providing the means to elicit or preserve it as the situation requires, it is more a matter of one order or another coming to the fore at different times, with no contradiction or tension necessary between them. The obedience to each is permanently in place, either back-grounded or fore-grounded, with this ‘smooth’ obedience – the absence of inner contradiction or tension - being that which is central to Socrates’ autonomy. Obedience to the face of Alcibiades is not to be understood as taking place at the expense of obedience to the face of Athens, and

84I am aware that ‘the best way he could’ might look to absolve Socrates of the failure to realize a much simpler and more universal level of Levinasian responsibility, namely that of simply responding to the poor, to the widow, to the stranger (more on this shortly). While pleading guilty to the construction of this charitable account, it is part of this work’s motivating force to make sense of Socrates as a distorted version of a Levinasian response.
obedience to the latter is not to be understood as being at the expense of obedience to the Greek ideal (face) of temperance. Indeed, perhaps (and particularly) the integrity of this unity of obedience that Socrates achieves between the three orders that command him is directly indicative of autonomy.

However, at this point I need to place a caveat. I said that there is no necessary tension between the different orders, and for the purposes of preserving autonomy I think this holds. However, at a more fundamental level of what might be termed the ‘phenomenology’ of experience there is indeed a tension between obeying the different faces, for as mentioned earlier there is an infinite command from each, and any attempt at a division or splitting of infinity must involve a kind of ‘violence’, at the very least an internal wrenching from one to the other. This is inevitable, structural, a part of being human.\(^85\) This issue creates an opportunity to introduce another key concept from Levinas, that of the third, which provides another way of discussing what I have already broached in terms of different orders. The Levinasian third indicates a division of loyalties; where one is face-to-face with the other, there is always a third in the face of the other. Humanity cannot be totally separated out from any individual face, any individual face cannot be totally separated out from humanity. Socrates was equally responsible to the three orders or ‘faces’ named above. He showed this by taking seriously the concerns and the commands of each, by attempting to obey in each case the ‘do no violence’ injunction.

Now Levinas himself is not concerned with supporting autonomy expressly. His concerns lie rather with elucidating an order that ethically disrupts it, puts it into question, or at least does so in relation to the version of it that we typically hold to in the west.\(^86\) My concern over the last several

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85 A simple and universal example of this is the parent with more than one child. Each child is the ‘apple of one’s eye’, yet the parent loves them all equally. A ‘wrenching’ from each to the next is an inevitable part of this structure. (It is significant I think that we would not wish this to be any other way.)

86 Certainly Levinas resists the version of autonomy prevalent in western philosophy. How prevalent this version is in wider western culture is perhaps a more debatable question, but I leave the broader claim in place
paragraphs has been to give an account of Socrates’ relationship with the different orders that allows him an autonomy that is compatible with Levinas’s ethical relation, and thereby perhaps allay a general concern that is sometimes expressed in relation to Levinas, that being the problem of heteronomy and its apparent dissolution of autonomy. For is not Socrates lauded as the epitome of individuality, of integrity, of inner strength – in short all the classic ingredients of autonomy? 87

Structurally at least, the above-mentioned three orders have their parallels in virtually any culture: that of individual others, that of one’s local group or city or state/country, and that of one’s history, one’s traditions, one’s cultural ideals. 88 This structure provides enough ‘variety’ so to speak, to allow a certain kind of autonomy, albeit it composed philosophically in a radically different manner from our usual view. It is not the kind of autonomy constructed from individual, independently thinking, enlightenment-type development, which believes in a kind of bootstrapping rationality (causa sui), but rather an autonomy engendered by obedience to external orders, with the construction being guided by the central pillar of the vulnerability of the face of the other, and the various interpretations of what ‘do no violence’ (to it) can mean. This account of autonomy allows for the disruptive elements of Levinas’s ethical relation; these being the absolute priority of the other, and the corresponding continual putting into question of one’s own egoistic being’s concerns. It might be termed a ‘dependent’ autonomy, in that it indeed depends upon the above-mentioned external orders existing in such a way as to make possible something like a Socratic-type integrity between them. In Socrates’ case he was able to combine the priority of the other (obedience to the face of his interlocutors), the priority of the Greek ideal of temperance (the content of his concern for his

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87 Of course there is the possible dissenting view of Nietzsche here, who argued that Socrates in fact was the ‘last man’, that is, fatally ‘diseased’, the figure of Greek philosophical decadence par excellence. However, it is not Nietzsche’s particular concern that I am attempting to allay, for I am presuming that he wouldn’t necessarily disagree with the term autonomy in relation to Socrates, but rather with its inner psychological construction, which is another matter altogether.

88 In more modern, pluralistic cultures, of course there may be many different strands of authority, many possible different orders, which of course presents its own kind of issues for the development of autonomy.
interlocutors), and the priority of his allegiance to the city of Athens (which demonstrated his absolute commitment to the previous two).

However, a question arises here. Although I said that Socrates was equally responsible to the three orders, this was because in his case the orders ‘lined up’ (or rather that he was able to line them up?). His interpretation of ‘do no violence’ to the face of his interlocutors was of a piece with his reading of Greek culture and with his allegiance to Athens. So, within the narrowness of this reading (see the next 2 sections), Levinas’s ‘third’ (humanity) is evenly enough represented across the three orders for Socrates to respond to each of them in some harmony. The first order of the face of the other reigns in the other two orders as well. Well and good, but: what if the other two orders – the local and the historical faces of a culture – do not line up so well, cannot be read in some harmony with the first?89

I said above that ‘structurally’ the three orders can be paralleled in virtually any culture. I need to modify this somewhat. The face of the other is a fundement of what it is to be human, and in this sense exists wherever humans exist. So one is commanded by the vulnerability of the other in all circumstances, without exception. However, when we come to the other two orders - what I have termed the local and the historical faces - then the question of whether the priority of the first order can be reconciled with the latter two might look to be a contingent affair. Indeed, as alluded to

89 Further to the previous footnote, Zygmunt Bauman puts forward the notion that we (at least in the West) are now in ‘the liquid-modern’ era, where identities are continually (re)-negotiated. This involves a shift from the local (and historical? history revised, reconceived, debunked?) orders being conceived of as the ‘solid-modern bureaucracy’ – in terms of responsibility for others this is mediated through answerability to superior persons, authorities, causes etc. – to a liquid mode in which responsibility for others is replaced by responsibility for and to oneself. This latter responsibility is conceived of in terms of the ‘free space’ of self-creation, in reality mediated through market-based forms of provision, which of course include ‘spiritual’ quests, do-it-yourself projects etc. Bauman seems to think that this shift towards an egoistic responsibility is in some sense a psychological bulwark against the intolerable abyss of Levinas’s infinite version, an abyss opened up to consciousness by the breakdown of the ‘solid-modern’. But of course the autonomy (integrity) achieved by this egoistic responsibility looks in many ways to take the self further away than ever from the Levinasian relation with the other. (See Bauman, Z., ‘What Chance of Ethics in the Globalized World of Consumers’, in Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2008.)
above, the question of what the content of the first order is can be dependent upon the local or the historical. I say ‘can be’, for a crucial issue arises here, flagged by the motif of the stranger, the widow and the orphan,\textsuperscript{90} which occurs regularly in Levinas’s work. This motif immediately provides content for the first order, the face of the other. The making welcome of a stranger, the material/psychological support for the widow and orphan in their self-titled needs are straightforward obligations for Levinas’s ethical relation.\textsuperscript{91} (These motifs are sometimes referred to by commentators as examples par excellence of his ethical relation.) But when dealing with those not straightforwardly in the category of this motif, what then is the content of the obligation of the face-to-face relation with the other understood to be? To be sure, ‘do no violence’, and perhaps also to be sure, a welcoming attitude may be understood by this obligation. But beyond this? Or, put another way, and to pick up the earlier issue of Socrates’ conception of what it was his fellow Athenians (citizens) were in need of: what is it to do no violence to another who is not in any ‘obvious’ need? In Socrates’ case, without his conviction that his contemporaries were in dire need

\begin{footnotes}
\item[90] See Levinas, Emmanuel, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, Dusquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, pp.244-245, and many more places in Levinas’s writings.
\item[91] By ‘straightforward’ I do not mean here that we touch some trans-historical moral norm that forever applies, apart from its instantiation in particular cultures. I mean simply that in all cultures hospitality is a norm, no matter how it may be trumped or trampled over by other imperatives, or even at times by other norms. The existence of this content is sufficient for the form of Levinas’s ethical relation to be realized (although not guaranteed), even as this realization is conditioned by the particular norms that particular emphases within the broader norm of hospitality will take. (It might be said that Socrates’ relation with the norm of hospitality is in some sense trumped by his relation with his own norm of ‘soul concern’ – see final section.)
\end{footnotes}
of temperance (and its accompanying virtue of courage), what line would he have taken with them? Examination is all very well, yet is pure examination intelligible, free of any guiding convictions? 92 Socrates may have felt a formal responsibility to and for others, but what content could we put into this form? Furthermore, it is in fact the shared conviction of the need for temperance that links Socrates to his fellows in a way that provides content for the first order, a conviction shared indeed by the local and the historical. 93 It is this that provides a basis for what I have earlier termed Socratic integrity (a form of autonomy), even where one of the orders – the local – actually formally condemns him. Another way of describing this is: Socrates stands out starkly from his society while at the same time being clearly at one with it. This ‘at oneness with’ would not be possible without a certain level of continuity between the local and the historical. It is this continuity that produces the genuine controversy, the taking of sides, the heartache, the bad conscience in relation to his case, and the subsequent respect that he is held in.

Now none of this is to deny that there were of course fault lines forming in Greek society; the old warrior ethic was coming into question, with sophists and philosophers beginning to question the existing order. Nonetheless, I think that Greek society in Socrates’ lifetime still had enough homogeneity between the local and the historical for his integrity to be maintained, and maintained in a Levinasian sense. This points to the fact that mere homogeneity between the local and the historical is not enough, for what if the content of this homogeneity was restricted solely to, say, the extolling and supporting of the (believed) inherent superiority of an aristocracy? If this were the dominant ideal, the supreme value, then would ‘do no violence’ amount to something like

92 The famous ‘life which is unexamined life is not worth living’ quote (‘Apology’, The Essential Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 1999, p.541.) has no content without a context of guiding convictions, which are also plentifully available in the ‘Apology’.

93 Of course there is also local content. That is, the particular issues connected with virtue that Socrates and his acquaintances examine in the various dialogues; in Laches Lysimachus and Melesias are concerned with the question of what is the best education for their sons; in Euthyphro the issue is Euthyphro’s imminent prosecution of his father and whether this is truly a holy undertaking; in Crito it is that of Crito’s concern that Socrates should escape into exile and whether this be a just proposal; and so on with many of the other dialogues.
entreating and influencing others (beyond their ‘stranger, widow and orphan’ needs that is) to locate themselves appropriately in this hierarchical order? Could this be squared with Levinas’s ethical relation? The answer is no, or at least not in a full sense, for with Levinas there is no distinction between ‘Jew or Greek’, ‘master or slave’; indeed there cannot be so, for the face of the other in its vulnerability, its ‘nudity’, comes stripped of race, class, or gender, and is prior to all these classifications.

This suggests three considerations: first, the wider (and perhaps particularly modern) question of inhomogeneous cultures and how in these the Levinasian ethical relation is to be situated in relation to autonomy or integrity; second – and closely related – the apparently contingent nature of what is possible in this regard; and third, the hitherto un-discussed question of limitations within Socrates’ Athenian culture, and even more pertinently, within the Platonic/Socratic approach, and what consequences these might have for a Levinasian re-reading of his life. The first two are of course particularly important for the issue of how to relate the ethical in Levinas to the political, but I merely flag them here, and will not pursue them in this work. The third I now turn my attention to.

2. Socratic/Platonic Limitations: Dialectic

There are some obvious limitations when it comes to an attempted Levinasian re-reading of Socrates’ life. By limitations I mean not only those aspects and modes of being that are more plainly not in keeping with, that run counter to, Levinas’s ethical relation, but limitations which additionally do not exhibit tensions consistent with departing from this relation. In this additional sense of limitation, the ‘running counter to’ Levinas does not show in the way that the exertion needed to swim upstream may affect one’s stroke, for instance. The tension is rather a smooth disobedience, a kind of obliviousness. Slavery, the place of women, the superiority of Greeks over ‘barbarians’, of
Athenians over Spartans, are all aspects of culture that Socrates may or may not have questioned, and all of these ‘commands’ of Athenian culture run counter to the (non-cultural and a historical) purity of the Levinasian ethical relation. For the purposes of this work these limitations are of limited philosophical interest. All these limitations show I think is a certain prevailing narrowness of what, for short-hand purposes, could be called the ethical imagination. This kind of narrowness is a truism of any and every culture. The fact that Socrates may very well have shared this narrowness of ethical imagination is not surprising, nor do I think it necessarily compromising to the Levinasian re-reading of Socrates that I am attempting to elucidate. This is because narrowness may be merely of scope rather than of essence; that is it may distort, limit the proper range of sources of one’s ethical responses without necessarily distorting the actual quality of responses within that range. To employ a reverse kind of analogy, a marksman may inflict the maximum damage on certain enemies in battle, with the ammunition being of the highest quality, discharged with unerring accuracy etc., but at the same time have totally misleading intelligence in regards to certain other (legitimate) enemies, intelligence which renders them as neutrals or even friends in his eyes. So, it is not these obvious limitations that I will focus on, but rather a second type of limitation which shows up within Socrates’ responses, or – more precisely – within Socrates’ responses within Plato’s ‘onto-theological’ context. Hopefully this focus will illustrate from a reverse or negative angle, as it were, the ethical relation that I have previously tried to show from a positive Levinasian perspective.

(i) Ascending Dialectic

I said above, and have tried to show earlier, that there is a pure (‘quality’) Levinasian aspect to Socrates’ responses, but this takes place within a philosophical approach that potentially limits it from ‘coming into its own’ in a full-blown sense. Socrates finds himself moved, commanded by the face of his fellow Athenians, yet nowhere in any of the dialogues is there awareness on his part
indicating that precisely this is the key to the ethical relation.\(^\text{94}\) Of course the ‘collapse of onto-theology’ is still at least two millennia into the future, and so to the extent that we think that awareness of Levinas’s ethical relation is necessarily concealed by the continuing respect for onto-theology we would not expect Plato’s dialogues to be any exception to this. This lack of awareness presumably acts as a severe handicap to the development, the expansion, of the ethical relation to envelop what the Greeks were oblivious to – slavery, the place of women etc.\(^\text{95}\) To be clear, this is not to maintain that if the ethical relation were to be broadened out into these areas it would be a straightforward matter of extension or expansion, without any reverse impact on the responses within the narrower scope. The inclusion of slaves or women within the ethical relation would necessarily change the view of humanity itself (as it has). However, I do maintain that the relation to essential otherness that crucially provides the above-mentioned quality of response in Socrates is still detectable at various points within his scope. This is a point of basic structure or form, I think, rather than content, and is not vulnerable to charges of narrowness therefore.

However, having said this, it is worth dwelling here for a moment. For example, if we were to attempt to imagine the inclusion of women in the philosophical world of Plato/Socrates, then it’s difficult not to think that this ‘feminine’\(^\text{96}\) sensibility would inevitably bring about significant change in the response to the other. I fully concede this, but here recall my original contention, which stated that Socrates can be understood as responding to the other out of a Levinasian-type asymmetrical structure, as opposed to more traditional motivations put forward (the search for knowledge, 

\(^\text{94}\) This does not deny that Plato - as dramatic artist - can be interpreted as exhibiting (or showing awareness of) this key. This interpretation would focus on certain literary moments in the texts, involving an ‘unwritten doctrine’ approach. It would also be accompanied by assumptions that I usefully avoid in this work.

\(^\text{95}\) Of course this lack of awareness which prevents ethics from coming into its own is also present in all periods prior to what is termed the ‘post-metaphysical’ period that we are now supposed to occupy. But depending upon the particular ethical system in question this lack will show up in different ways, with its tension – for it conceals, in some cases perhaps represses, a real force - sometimes affecting the system in a manner fruitful for reflection both on the system itself as well as on the force concealed.

\(^\text{96}\) Of course this sensibility can be manifested by males; the use of ‘feminine’ here merely reflects an empirical/historical weighting of it towards the biologically female, which of course might very well be shifting over time.
wisdom, and so on). Responding from this asymmetrical structure means that his responses can be considered to be ‘pure’, quite apart from the limitations he expresses within it. In this instance, the example is the limitations of excluding gender from the asymmetry of response, and a lack of feminine sensibility will of course be a quite serious limitation, especially given Levinas’s emphasis on a sensual/sensitive sensibility. So this example is interesting, and one I will briefly refer back to in the ‘Embodiment’ part of section 3.

I now turn to the dialogue Phaedrus in order to discuss the kind of ascending dialectic that Plato takes to be crucial to a realization of the good. To do this I will compare and contrast the pairing of knowledge/ignorance with same/other (the latter terms come from Levinas).

In ‘Transcendence and Height’ Levinas says that:

The ontological event accomplished by philosophy consists in suppressing or transmuting the alterity of all that is Other, in universalizing the immanence of the Same (Le Meme) or of Freedom...

and:

The knowing I is the melting pot of such a transmutation. It is the Same par excellence.

Also:

The Other (l’Autre) presents itself as human Other (Autrui); it shows a face and opens the dimension of height, that is to say, it infinitely overflows the bounds of knowledge. 97

Despite Levinas pointing out that there are elements within Plato’s philosophy which emphasize the importance of a non-ontological transcendence or ‘height’, 98 for the most part he sees Plato as

97 In Basic Philosophical Writings, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1996, pp.11-12.
98 For example: in the Republic the allegory of the Sun and the idea of the Good beyond Being (509b), and perhaps in Phaedrus the extolling of a ‘divine madness’. 
‘wedding the soul to the Ideas’, with the good - the form or idea of the good - being revealed to the soul via a dialectical approach. For Plato, it is dialectic that enables the soul to transcend to a height. The vision realized by the soul once there may indeed be claimed to grant access to ‘beyond being’, but certainly the process involved in transporting one there is that of philosophizing (even if the energy or spirit to persist in it is provided by the ‘divine madness’ extolled in the Phaedrus). This pursuit of wisdom, with the ‘higher elements of their [the lovers’] minds prevailing’, is the only way that they can win ‘the greatest blessings that either human virtue or divine madness can confer on man.’ This whole dialectical movement is essentially contained within the realm of knowledge. Within the terms of Socrates’ second speech in the Phaedrus, it is the ‘knowing I’ that in a sense takes advantage of the beauty of the other to aid recollection in guiding its dialectical ascension towards the good. However, for Levinas it is the face of the other that ‘opens the dimension of height’, that ‘infinitely overflows the bounds of knowledge’, and that therefore cannot be contained in ideas of the good. I think that in places Plato’s writings show a strong inkling of this ‘infinitely overflowing’ (Levinas sometimes calls it a ‘surplus’) aspect to the other, yet it seems not to overflow into his overall philosophical approach. Or rather, the idea of this overflowing (that cannot be contained by ideas, by knowledge – by ontology), does not fully come into its own in Plato’s approach; it rather breaks through it in places, shedding light here and there, but fails to transform it from its predominant focus on dialectical knowledge. I contend that the Phaedrus provides an example of this inkling of the ‘overflowing infiniteness’ of the other, yet ultimately this is tamed, constrained within the bounds of knowledge. The effect is that the alterity of the other is transmuted into the ‘knowing I’, what Levinas calls the ‘Same par excellence’.

99 Basic Philosophical Writings, p.13.  
101 Ibid.
In what follows, I render the mythos aspect of the Phaedrus as exhibiting both the genuinely mythical (and metaphorical), together with what I take Plato to hold to be ‘literally’ so. By this I mean that his talk of an ‘ultimate realm’ is meant seriously in a way that the references to the gods, chariot horses, festive days, obviously are not. The myth exhibits a genuinely ascending order or ranking of things; the higher the god or soul ascends, the more reality is encountered. I am aware that this might not be the only way of reading the myth, for (within the context of a myth) the concept of the ultimate realm - of ‘true knowledge’ - itself might be taken as a metaphor by some. But I think the ‘literal’ approach has validity inasmuch as it accords with how Plato elsewhere more straightforwardly conceptualizes knowledge, as well as according with other similes such as ‘the line’ from the Republic, where the idea seems to be that of pure knowledge (‘pure thought’) playing the primary role from beginning to end. Here, pure knowledge is both the ultimate destination as well as the instigator and guiding force of the journey from the visible to the intelligible world. Although Plato at times says that the intelligible cannot be approached apart from the visible, I take this to be a concession on his part to our ‘fallen’ condition, which once overcome, allows a purely spiritual mode of existence to become possible.

To some this might bring to mind the wider issue of how to read Plato in general: two worlds or one? (A bit more on this later.) But my reading is not necessarily committed to either of these alternatives, or at least not in the standard metaphysical way that they are usually conceived. For, regardless of this question, it is rather the consequences of Plato’s particular emphasis on dialectic and knowledge, and the consequences that this has for concrete relations with the other that interests me. For example, Plato’s notion of true knowledge or the ultimate realm conceived of as a depth dimension - as it were of the one world - would not necessarily make any significant difference to the kind of limitation that I now attempt to show.

102 The Republic, 509-11.
103 See Phaedrus, 250.
In the *Phaedrus* there is an arguable tension between talk of ‘mystic visions’, 104 of absolute beauty, on the one hand, and of a region of ‘true knowledge... a reality without colour or shape, intangible... apprehensible only by intellect which is the pilot of the soul’, 105 on the other. This realm of ultimate reality is apparently covered by both ways of speaking. It is considered to be ‘beyond the skies’, and it is said that ‘no mortal poet has sung or ever will sing in such strains as it deserves’. 106 Is there not at the very least some mystery about how we are to understand these two ways of speaking as both referring to the one realm? Perhaps the last phrase quoted – ‘no mortal poet has ever sung etc.’ – is consistent with Plato’s well known suspicions in regards to the limitation of the poets. (Indeed there is a kind of apology to the god of love at the end of the second speech for its expression in poetic language.) This leaves it open for Plato to claim that although poets cannot sing praises appropriate to the realm, *philosophers* can. However, can a realm ‘apprehensible only by intellect’ generate the kind of soaring language that Plato uses throughout the second speech? Granting of course that ‘vision’ is a metaphor for intellectual apprehension, and physical beauty merely a trace of the absolute beauty of pure concepts such as justice and self-discipline, nevertheless is there not a mismatch here in the tones, between the apparently festive and almost sensual spirit of the whole speech, and the supposedly intellectually governed realm that the speech concerns? The apparently penultimate stage in the soul’s journey to the ultimate realm is still beneath the vault of heaven, and here there are ‘many glorious sights [that] meet the eyes of the blessed gods’, and ‘festive days’. 107 The life of the gods involves eternal revolution, to and fro beneath the vault of heaven, with sorties outside to the ultimate realm, where they take their fill of the objects of ‘absolute reality’, to then return below to tend to their chariot horses with the nectar of ambrosia. 108 For Plato, our true ancestry traces back to this realm of the gods. Yet it looks as if within the terms of the myth our true

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104 *Phaedrus*, 249.
105 Ibid., 247.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
station is that of following the gods, where this includes the ‘glorious sights’, the ‘festive days’, as well as periodic ‘fills of the objects of absolute reality’. Both realms are a part of the life of the gods. So, is the realm beneath the vault really the penultimate one? Or is the ultimate realm – that which no poet can sing of - in some sense ‘only’ ultimate (or, merely co ultimate?) in virtue of the continuing existence of the realm beneath, which poets can indeed sing of, evidenced by Plato himself? The idea here is that without the actual singing of the poets in relation to the realm beneath the vault, the ultimate realm would be emptied of even the sense given by ‘not being able to sing about it’. Plato almost seems to grasp this nettle, but it importantly eludes him. 109 This grasping is in effect like a ‘grasping’ of the elusive, ungraspable co-dependence of the absolute with the contingent.110

There is perhaps a useful comparison here with the Christian notion of some esoteric realm. In First Corinthians Paul says, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.’111 This saying takes place in the context of Paul discussing the wisdom of men as being foolishness to god and the foolishness of god being wiser than men.112 Now Paul actually claims to be quoting the saying from Isaiah,113 yet if we look at the context there we find that in fact Isaiah is talking about ‘the eye [that has not] seen a god besides thee’ in relation to the adversaries of god, that is, in relation to the

109 Perhaps he does grasp it in his praxis, but still not in his philosophical approach. Does Plato really dream of an existence without the delight, indeed even of the necessary delight, of reading a Phaedrus?
110 In terms of Plato’s Form of the Good, Iris Murdoch, supported by David Robjant amongst others, posits the Good as a ‘fact’ of everyday life which can only be approached via experience of its sovereignty (its ever present and distant perfection), together with poetic images that help mediate it. This ‘experience’ is obviously bound up with language, but is not translatable into the knowledge/ignorance paradigm. (See Robjant’s ‘The Earthly Realism of Plato’s Metaphysics, or: What Shall We Do with Iris Murdoch?’, in Philosophical Investigations 35:1 January 2012.)
111 First Corinthians 2.9.
112 Here and elsewhere I use the lower (rather than upper) case for ‘god’. Although it is the singular Christian god, and the singular Jewish god, that Paul and Isaiah respectively refer to, the key idea is not of this or that god, but rather of a divine or esoteric realm. Elsewhere, I think this usage is more consistent with Levinas, who, even when referencing god as a proper name, does so in a universal way that actually transcends the reference.
113 Isaiah 64.4.
godless. Also, Isaiah shortly after goes on to speak of a new heavens and earth, with an astonishingly different co-dependent relation, given account through such notions as the wolf and the lamb grazing together.\footnote{Ibid., 65. 17-25.} The Isaiah references clearly indicate an empirical reality, albeit one that has features that have never been seen since the days of Eden. It appears that Paul has tweaked the Isaiah reference into an esoteric sounding notion, no doubt taking advantage of the opportunity to authorize the idea using its scriptural underpinning.\footnote{This is thereby an example of Midrash, and no less authoritative on account of its acknowledged hermeneutic method.} However, can we make sense of Paul’s notion apart from Isaiah’s relation to the godless? Could Paul make sense of his notion without Isaiah’s? That the wisdom of men may be foolishness to god is all very well, but short of some kind of revelation (which we know Paul claimed to have had, but the rest of us?), how are we to think beyond that which we can make sense of? The idea here is that the sense that we can make of the esoteric realm is dependent in at least some sense upon the sense we can make of the empirical realm. The metaphysical is dependent upon the physical. (Conversely of course philosophers such as Kant hold that the sense we make of the empirical realm is dependent in some sense upon the non-empirical realm, the phenomenal being dependent upon the noumenal.\footnote{Not that we can make any sense of the noumenal apart from the phenomenal. Likewise there is a co-dependence of realms here.})

It is well known that Greek thought influenced Christianity, with the latter and its other-worldly emphasis moving beyond that exemplified in Judaism. By comparison Judaism may be seen as a very physically-based religion. (Elsewhere I acknowledged the broad relevance of Judaism to Levinasian thought.) The comparative melding of these three thought traditions is to specify that this Platonic movement ‘beyond’ is integrally connected with what went before. Indeed the connection is so indelible that a Platonic movement ‘beyond’ amounts to a movement ‘beyond sense’ when and where that movement is towards some (claimed) metaphysically foundational realm. So it appears
that Plato needs the poets’ singing after all, if he wishes to make sense of his ‘beyond the skies’ realm. The context of the knowledge/ignorance pair of terms appears limited in its capacity to posit an ultimate realm. Perhaps Plato overestimates how far knowledge can take him, being seduced by how far it apparently has taken him? (For Plato and Socrates ignorance is a pejorative term, hence the continual emphasis on knowledge to overcome it, whereas for Levinas the knowledge/ignorance pair of terms is not even applicable in principle to explain the ‘ultimate realm’, the realm of the ‘height of the other’.)

However, the reading of the Phaedrus that I am positing is one of an ‘inkling’ of the otherness of the other. Taking cue from the pair same/other: Plato shows by his soaring language, by his extolling of a ‘divine madness’ that he has this inkling, or at the very least that as a dramatic/poetic writer he has it. I emphasize this because it is the form of the dramatic/poetic that expresses Plato’s work. Whether in the face-to-face encounters of the dialogues, or in the rhapsodic tones of the myths, knowledge is in a sense surpassed by the otherness of the other. The Phaedrus is arguably an outstanding example of this amongst the dialogues. By poetically portraying the divine madness as a gift of the gods, rather than emotion needing to be tamed by reason (as is more the Republic’s emphasis), Plato shows some awareness of the non-epistemic power or authority of the other. However, unlike Levinas, Plato locates the source of this authority in the realm of the gods rather than in the face of the other period. He ultimately attempts to tame the divine madness by locating it within his dialectical ascension to an ultimate ‘beyond the skies’ realm, a realm which I argue he confusedly depicts as being ‘beyond being’, and yet at the same time a realm reached exclusively through dialectic, through a process strictly contained within the knowledge/ignorance pair. The inkling of the other is thereby reduced or assimilated by Plato to knowledge, to the ‘knowing I’, to the same. The species of ignorance that might lead Plato to rethink divine madness – to consider the truth that the only realm that can do justice to an inkling of the otherness of the other cannot be
approached in terms of the ignorance/knowledge pair - is not recognized, and thus any opportunity to rethink the metaphysical in terms of the physical, or to bring the divine into the face of the other (rather than accessing the divine merely through the other), is lost.

The hegemony of the knowledge/ignorance pairing is essentially affirmed, and importantly so in the midst of a dialogue that perhaps more than any other exhibits in its writing a kind of sensibility that threatens to break free of its hold. The otherness of the other is transmuted into knowledge of the same, perpetuating ignorance of genuine alterity. The realm of the gods substitutes for genuine alterity, and is an achievable target that provides justification for the dialectical journey. (In terms of the ascension of the soul the *Phaedrus* is discussed hereinafter in section 3.)

At this point someone might object: there is a much more everyday mode in which an inkling of the otherness of the other is registered without recourse to poetry, or the gods, and that one may even ‘know’ the otherness of the other without needing to go outside or beyond the realm of knowledge. What about the simple re-evaluation or ‘coming to know better’ of someone who we thought we knew? This re-evaluation is not a matter of assimilating new knowledge, or even of re-assessing old knowledge, but rather of ‘seeing afresh’, or ‘seeing in a different light’? The interaction between the mode with which we approach things, and the things themselves, may be revealing expressly because this interdependent interaction is unique, and cannot be replicated. For example, we re-evaluate someone in the mode of love, where this mode cannot be reduced to something like a measurable scientific or psychological perspective.117 Neither can the ‘object’ of love be sensibly compared to something inert, waiting for its secrets to be opened up, or indeed to anything less than uniquely other. Yet it is perfectly common to describe this phenomenon as ‘coming to know better’, or ‘look, you just don’t know him’. (In this context it can also be common to use the term ‘absolute’,

117 Iris Murdoch addresses this in her well known example of ‘M’ and ‘D’ (Mother and Daughter) from *Sovereignty of Good.*
as in ‘I have absolute faith in him’ etc.) If we do (as I do) think this kind of example captures something of the otherness of the other, the question is whether this is a way of speaking not strictly comparable with the knowledge/ignorance terms and concepts as Plato employs them. As will be evident I think the answer here is yes. The reason is that, as I contend above, I take Plato’s employment of the terms and concepts to be infected with his ascending dialectical approach, an approach which is notably absent in the context of ‘coming to know someone better’. There is obviously much more to discuss of this context, but hopefully this brief reflection suffices to clarify somewhat just what species of ‘knowledge’ is at issue in a re-reading of Plato’s dialogues. (Additionally, perhaps in a wider sense, this reflection illustrates how a preoccupation with metaphysics has an ethically problematic effect on how knowledge is understood?)

However, more should be said regarding dialectic and its role in both Socrates’ and Plato’s approaches. For Levinas, Plato defined (Western) thought itself as dialectic, as a ‘dialogue of the soul with itself, proceeding by question and answer’. Despite the emphasis on the importance of dialogue with others, Platonic thought - understood in metaphors of vision, in terms of knowledge (or in its most modern incarnation in terms of intentionality) - remains reductive in relation to the other, a work of synthesizing egology, a gathering of alterity into the synchrony of representation. Levinas understands the Platonic doctrine of recollection as serving the privileging of a philosophy of presence, where past (and future) are synchronized into the present. The otherness of the other is, by contrast, essentially non-coincident with time. Hence these dialogues, in

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118 When I mull over this ‘coming to know someone better’ example, I think it striking that non-philosophers have no ‘metaphysical’ issues with it. Indeed, most of them (that I know) are not even tempted to understand it in what I have called the ‘ascending dialectical’ way. Philosophers by contrast...! (Wittgenstein becomes relevant here. Bob Plant sees interesting parallels between Levinas’s transcendence and what he [Plant] takes to be a non-knowledge based ethical naturalism of Wittgenstein. See Plant’s Wittgenstein and Levinas: Ethical and Religious Thought, Routledge, 2005.)
120 Ibid.
being distracted by what they privilege, must literally over-look the other for being temporally present. The Delphi Oracle’s ‘Know Thyself’, or in popular terms ‘finding one’s self’ (or in psychological terms ‘self-actualization’), reflects the goal of this dialectical journey of the soul. The goal is essentially a return to an eternal presence. (This return, together with Levinas’s opposing notion of diachronic time – the time of the other that cannot be synchronized with the same – is discussed in the next section.)

As the originator of the dialectic method, and its proponent in apprehending truth, goodness, and beauty, Plato sets up dialectic as indispensable for a type of intellectual progression. (Education in the Republic is of course totally based upon a discipline geared to this pursuit.) There is a pathway laid out by Plato, one that leads the seeker to transcend through the various stages, from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the abstract, ascending towards the true vision, a vision ‘beyond being’ even. But along this pathway the focus is primarily upon the goal – the achievement of the ascension, the ‘escape from the cave’. As illustrated by the Phaedrus, the other may be indispensable to one’s progression, but this indispensability posits the other as the rung of a ladder. One draws inspiration, divine energy even, from - or rather through - the other. This energy potentially sweeps one towards one’s goal, but in drawing this energy through the other the impetus of progression is dialectically located ‘beyond being’, and not located with the other. Herein lies the Phaedrus’s illustration of a divine madness, and a madness. ‘Divine’ and ‘mad’ cannot be accommodated within the sphere of human knowledge. 121 So by connecting the other (as a conduit of energy) to the ‘ultimate realm’ (the ‘good beyond being’), a realm outside of knowledge, together with situating this ‘outside’ as being accessible only through dialectical pursuit, Plato achieves two things. First, he keeps the otherness of the other always beyond the concrete, the physical, face-to-face world, for while the inspired and inspiring ‘madness’ of the lover is indeed triggered in relation

121 Perhaps modern notions of madness can be, with various psychological diagnoses possible, but it is clear that for the ancients madness was in a truly ‘beyond’ realm.
to the actual beloved, it nonetheless is harnessed by dialectic, which always looks ahead to a different (‘sane’?) world, and not to the face of the other. Second, he splits the otherness of the other so radically from itself that ‘its otherness’ has nowhere to inhabit but the divine realm.\textsuperscript{122} The concrete other, who may very well be one’s close companion on the dialectical journey - an indispensable conduit of divine inspiration even - is necessarily consigned to a same/other split existence. The ‘other’ aspect of this split is indeed ‘beyond being’. But, this aspect is rendered as virtually unapproachable within Platonic dialectic – effectively disabling a relation with the concrete other – and thoroughly reducing the aspect to the confines of the ‘knowing I’, (the same) of human knowledge. All mystery, all incomprehensibility, and all real otherness in relation to the other is shifted, by the dialectic process, by the goal of knowledge, to a realm which, while exhibiting traces of Levinasian otherness courtesy of Platonic poetry, is virtually inaccessible.\textsuperscript{123} With this shifting of otherness, the Levinasian ethical relation is correspondingly shifted. Once the seeker reaches ‘there’, the relation with the other cannot survive in the mode that it does face-to-face, and so naturally it is cast in the only terms that seem available to Plato, those of dialectic, and of system building.\textsuperscript{124}

\textit{(ii) Deck-Clearing Dialectic}

But what of Socrates? Is there a useful distinction that can be drawn between his approach and Plato’s? Or, at least, between the approaches of ‘Socrates’ and Plato? I intend to bypass the old question of where Socrates ends and Plato begins. Regardless of considerations as to how one might attempt to answer this question, or whether the question is considered to be unanswerable, or at least involves an impenetrable gray area between the two, I wish to maintain that there is indeed a

\textsuperscript{122} Where the ‘madness’ is of a piece with divinity, and so carries respective connotations to this realm. It is only madness in the human realm.

\textsuperscript{123} Virtually inaccessible in two senses: one, in the sense of the elite requirements of correct dialectic; but two, and more importantly, because the ‘beyond being’ realm of Plato is necessarily distorted by the very dialectical approach that is supposed to deliver one there.

\textsuperscript{124} Hence one may account for Plato’s metaphysics of recollection, the forms, the \textit{Republic} blueprint, and so on, by reference to these same terms.
philosophically significant distinction that can be drawn between two types of dialectic. Perhaps, more accurately, a significant distinction exists between two different approaches or outcomes in relation to dialectic in the dialogues that Plato and Socrates may notionally represent. In the following, my use of the phrases ‘Platonic dialectic’ and ‘Socratic dialectic’ is therefore primarily intended to identify what I contend are two different approaches or outcomes, rather than as a serious attempt to comment decisively on existing discourse on this old question.125

Whether by design or by dint of a provisional stage of his metaphysical development, in a number of dialogues Plato leaves (or finds?) the ending open. In these dialogues the dialectical process seems to undo itself, rather than ascending to a higher level, as portrayed by the Phaedrus and The Republic (and The Symposium). For example, Lysis cycles through various definitions and counter-definitions as to the nature of friendship, but eventually they all dissolve, leaving the question of its nature open and unresolved. The dialogue ends with a jest, with Socrates saying:

Here is a jest; you two boys, and I, an old boy, who would fain be one of you, imagine ourselves to
be friends, and we have not as yet been able to discover what is a friend! 126

The jest lies of course in the fact they are friends, or at least they have been friendly throughout the dialogue. The ‘faining’ and ‘imagining’ references provide the ironic recognition of this fact, while at the same time paying lip service to the notion that an intellectual discovery on the true nature of friendship is still vitally needed. I deliberately use the phrase ‘lip service’, as it is my reading of Lysis

125 My own reading of the Platonic dialogues would pretty much rule out the historic Socratic character portrait from virtually all of Plato’s metaphysics and political philosophy. These are seen as attempts by Plato - one of the young men so impressed with Socrates - to actually answer the questions which his master could not (knew he could not?). Plato’s purpose is to try and ‘tie down’, to ‘anchor’ Socratic virtue in a form (the dialogues), and a logos (the metaphysics), which would save Socrates from being a ‘one off’, a ‘fluke’, a ‘mystery’, and therefore lost to posterity. Whatever one thinks of Plato’s attempt, I think one thing remains true: whether successful or not, it is a magnificent attempt, which in fact has manifestly succeeded in ‘saving’ Socrates - mystery and all - for posterity.
that the dialectic on display there plays the role, whether intended by Plato or not, of actually partially clearing the decks of ontological obstacles. These are obstacles that block a clear (Levinasian) sense of an appreciation of the ‘essence’ of friendship.

(There are alternate readings of Lysis, and of other dialogues which are also thought to end in impasse, in aporia. Penner and Rowe offer a recent reading that denies this supposed aporia, believing Socrates to have indeed made significant intellectual progress towards a firm conclusion. According to them, this is a conclusion that, while rejected by the two boys (possibly because of its radical nature), leaves the discussion in aporia only in a social sense (with Plato not wishing to ‘enforce’ the right conclusion). In brief, this conclusion, taken from Lysis, is that ‘the good is congenial to every one’. In terms of desire, Penner and Rowe put it this way: ‘it’s what belongs (oikeion) to us, then, that’s actually the object of passion and friendship and desire...’. The reason why Penner and Rowe think this not fatal to friendship - for it has already been conceded that the like do not need the like and so friendship cannot be founded on this basis - is that there remains ignorance in relation to what actually is truly good. In this respect, friends can be ‘like’, or alike, in desiring the good - that which naturally belongs to each of them - but unlike in their relative states of knowledge about this desire.

Penner and Rowe’s reading may affect one’s interpretation of the ending of Lysis – and potentially the endings of other dialogues as well – but it does not affect the basic point that I discuss immediately below. This point is the fundamental contrast between the ontologically conceived concept of desire at work in the Lysis and that of Levinasian desire. Additionally, I think it is philosophically fruitful to proceed upon the standard impasse assumption, even if Penner and Rowe’s reading were to become more prominent. The impasse reading is still standard, and interestingly,

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127 Ibid., p.928.
129 Ibid., p.160.
Penner and Rowe's take on the nature of the Platonic/Socratic conception of desire, even though articulated in terms of a search for a knowledge-based species of wisdom, nevertheless involves something which they call 'the principle of real reference'.\footnote{The principle of real reference’, an idea that allows reference to something ‘real’ (e.g. the good) that is ‘not currently designated by any of our beliefs or meanings in our dictionaries – something, indeed, whose nature may falsify both those beliefs and those meanings’ (ibid., p.207).} This principle, consistent with their thesis that Socrates is indeed making progress towards wisdom, allows a kind of openness that does not seem inconsistent with the reading that I will offer.)

A key point in the dialogue occurs when Socrates laments to the two young friends Lysis and Menexenus the possibility that desire (hunger and thirst in the example given) may disappear, along with the disappearance of evil.\footnote{Lysis, op.cit., p.926.} The lament extends to how friendship – as a means to help one another combat evil – will be fatally undermined if evil disappears.\footnote{And so ‘perfect’ friendship would in fact undermine itself (my further point, not Socrates’}. However, Socrates goes on to suggest that perhaps desire does remain without the existence of evil. The suggestion involves understanding hunger and thirst as desires that might not be internally connected with ‘hurt’ (lack, or evil). It is at this point in the dialogue that I think a potentially important opening appears for characterizing the kind of reading I offer. Desire is very briefly discussed as a possible ‘cause’ of friendship, with it, in itself so to speak, endearing itself to the desirer, perhaps simply as reason enough: ‘for that which desires is dear to that which is desired at the time of desire? and may not the other theory [the necessary connection of desire with the elimination of evil] have been just a long story about nothing?’\footnote{Ibid., p.927.} If this idea of unsupported desire seems too obscure or sheer then the reader is in good company. Socrates and the boys also find it insufficiently illuminating, and the notion is immediately assimilated into the perspective of the desirer, construed in terms of desiring ‘that of which he is in want’, that which ‘is dear to him’, that ‘of which he is deprived’.\footnote{Ibid.}

‘Deprivation’ here is understood in terms of a lack of what is familiar, congenial, of what is natural to

\footnote{130 ‘The principle of real reference’, an idea that allows reference to something ‘real’ (e.g. the good) that is ‘not currently designated by any of our beliefs or meanings in our dictionaries – something, indeed, whose nature may falsify both those beliefs and those meanings’ (ibid., p.207).}
\footnote{131 Lysis, op.cit., p.926.}
\footnote{132 And so ‘perfect’ friendship would in fact undermine itself (my further point, not Socrates’).}
\footnote{133 Ibid., p.927.}
\footnote{134 Ibid.}
the desirer. Of these terms, congeniality is the one put forward as being a promising candidate to
depart the previous argument whereby the like does not need the like (thus rejecting this as a basis
for friendship). But, this promise is not realized, and congeniality similarly collapses into the terms of
likeness, resulting in the dialogue's impasse, its open conclusion (quoted above).

Here I introduce Levinas's understanding of desire to elucidate the above-mentioned 'opening' in the
dialogue. In section two of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas discusses an 'exteriority foreign to needs', and
puts forward desire as:

> ‘not coinciding with an unsatisfied need; it is situated beyond satisfaction and nonsatisfaction. The
relationship with the Other, or the idea of Infinity, accomplishes it. Each can live it in the strange
desire of the Other that no voluptuosity comes to fulfill, nor close, nor put to sleep.’ 135

A little later in his writings, in ‘Meaning and Sense’, he says:

> Such is desire: to burn with another fire than need, which saturation extinguishes, to think beyond
what one thinks. Because of this unassimilable surplus, because of this *beyond*, we have called the
relationship which links the I with the Other the idea of the infinite. The idea of the Infinite is
Desire. 136

To those who might think the ‘strange desire of the Other’ *itself* to be a strange idea - why is desire
here considered to be *strange*? – I take it that Levinas uses this term not in some exotic fashion, but
merely to capture an aspect of this desire. *When compared with desire understood entirely in terms
of need*, the idea does indeed look ‘strange’. To non-philosophers of desire I suggest Levinasian
‘desire for the Other’ does not at all necessarily appear strange. Enjoying one’s on-going needs in
relation to the other (in addition of course to enjoying the satisfaction of them), is I think

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136 Levinas, Emmanuel, ‘Meaning and Sense’, *Basic Ethical Writings*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis,
immediately (instinctively?) accepted. This point is clarified in subsequent discussion, as well as in the next section that introduces Socrates’ relation with Callicles.

The discussion in Lysis never comes to terms with an understanding of desire as being anything other than ‘assimilable’ within one’s own egoistic\(^\text{137}\) concerns. ‘Deprivation’ is understood as a lack of what is natural, what is ‘congenial’ to one. Although there is a glimmer of the ‘surplus’, the ‘beyond’, in the idea of (what I termed above) ‘desire in itself’ endearing itself, or in being reason enough for the desirer, this glimmer is not sustained. The perspective of the deprived desirer takes over, guiding the dialectic to its ironic end. By contrast, desire animated by the desirable other is fundamentally different from egoistic desire (deprivation). This desire comes from an ‘exteriority foreign to [one’s own] needs’, and speaks of an interruption to the ‘natural’, the ‘congenial’. This is not to say that the content of this desire may not consist of wishing to meet the other’s needs, needs which may be entirely familiar (natural and congenial) to oneself insofar as one is a fellow creature and human. Indeed this will be one of the more typical types of content of this type of desire. Yet, the form of this desire will outstrip the completion/incompletion of the content, and will always (infinitely) look to the other, will never be done with the other. With this in mind, the desire to provide food and drink to another takes on a surplus form; that animating desire which perpetually goes beyond the mere meeting of a biological lack or need of nourishment. In meeting this need there is a surplus enjoyment, beyond that of physical satisfaction.\(^\text{138}\) Levinas says that ‘the human being thrives on his needs; he is happy for his needs’.\(^\text{139}\) This is said in the ‘Separation as Life’ section of part two of Totality and Infinity, where he is discussing an individual’s relation with his own needs, but the same applies to the other’s needs. Once this surplus is involved in meeting needs, then one’s

\(^{137}\) ‘Egoistic’ here is not a pejorative.

\(^{138}\) Or indeed of psychological, emotional, or spiritual satisfaction. The surplus enjoyment is not a satisfaction as such, but inseparable from ongoing desire.

\(^{139}\) Levinas, Emmanuel, Totality and Infinity, Dusquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, p.114.
understanding of friendship may be opened up to a species of desire not solely dependent upon a
grammar of deprivation.

But what indeed is the friendship, or at least the friendliness, on display in *Lysis* dependent upon?

One standard reading would hold that the boys are in need of teaching, and so Socrates willingly
obliges – in this regard he meets their lack, their deprivation, and the friendship between them
depends upon this lack. Accordingly, even though the dialogue ends in ‘failure’, the fact that it fails
does not undermine a rational (deprivation-based) account of why they came together in the first
place. Yet might it undermine the possibility of future dialogues between them, especially if they all
consolidate Socrates’ pessimistic conclusion as being final? And, especially so if they fail to see the
very openings in the text that I am pointing to? But do we really think Socrates would not engage
them again, if invited to discuss the same topic (excluding the possibility of him seeing where the
dialogue went wrong and wishing to correct this.)? I think the answer is clear. The open or ‘failed’
conclusion of the dialogue notwithstanding, Socrates likes nothing better than to discuss these
subjects over and over again. His interlocutors are always pointing this out to him, sometimes with
disdain and contempt (e.g. Callicles in the *Gorgias*). But Socrates *enjoys* this life, this *is* his life. My
reading of his life is that, whatever else may be motivating him – the search for knowledge, for
wisdom, the conviction of what is just in his practical engagements with the state - he also
importantly lives *from and for* the ‘unassimilable surplus’, a surplus practically evident (though only
intelлектually glimpsed) in *Lysis*. This surplus – yet a further invocation of ‘the beyond’ - accompanies
and outstrips his desire for knowledge and wisdom. Telling, it is *this* ‘Desire’ that drives him to
continually respond to others as he does, seemingly never tiring, and seemingly never discouraged by
so-called failed endings, whether in dialogue or indeed in his own life. Socrates’ ironic conclusion is
partly a result of him not thinking his way through, or rather *out of*, the limiting form of dialectic that
is typical of his approach. In the failed process, indeed *because* of its failure, he has *practically*
cleared away the obstacle of the idea of friendship needing to be approached via knowledge. The irony additionally expresses both an acknowledgment and – even stronger - affirmation of the existence of friendship, together with a certain openness (or even skepticism?) on whether friendship can ever be intellectually understood.

Socrates may have understood this ‘failure’ as genuine (although presumably not blameworthy), although it is noteworthy I think that nowhere in any of the dialogues does he seem downcast, and nowhere does he seem to suggest that his own, personal virtue is dependent upon him getting definitive answers to the questions that arise. Indeed, one might even think that what transforms Socratic irony into Socratic humility is precisely the disciplined undoing of much so-called knowledge, knowledge that actually blocks the fullness (the otherness, the ‘strangeness’?) of the other from being realized. It blocks humility in relation to the other, and in doing so blocks humility in the face of knowledge itself, for true humility in regard to knowledge is mediated through the other. This humility manifests in the process of engaging the other and engendering humility in them. This is a joint discipline (the elenchus) of what might be termed other-discovery (or perhaps more accurately, other-obedience). In terms of knowing the other (as friend in this case), this failure so-called is in fact a genuine openness. No matter what one learns about the other, it must always be subject to a reappraisal in light of the (infinite) ‘presence’ that the other offers each time.

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140 ‘Practically’ for it only applies at this point, and this ‘clearance’ may not at all lead to a realization that solidifies into a concrete understanding.

141 Does Socrates’ wisdom consist in him not only knowing that he does not know, but additionally in knowing/believing that he cannot know? (See footnote 144.)

142 Chris Cordner thinks there is a serious question as to whether we would have been better off if ethics had never been subjected to a certain kind of philosophical reflection, holding that this reflection has actually played the role of obscuring the essentially non-rational ground of it (‘Ethics, Philosophy and Love’, in Truth and Faith in Ethics, Imprint Academic, 2011). Perhaps this question, as a serious one, is more easily realizable after 2400 years of philosophical endeavour, which might add to our admiration of the quality of Socrates’ seeming intuitive conviction that his own ethical life was not dependent upon rational conclusions as such.

143 My thanks to Chris Cordner for this point.

144 What this ‘presence’ amounts to will be further discussed at various points in this work (e.g. see ‘Anxiety’ and ‘Proximate Beauty’ parts of section 3). It certainly is not captured well by traditional philosophical notions of presence.
This understanding of Socratic irony takes it as an expression of a kind of confidence that, say, friendship, does not crucially depend upon knowledge (not even mistaken knowledge). The ironic project is to disavow knowledge in the vast majority of cases where it is claimed. Far from undermining what some might call ‘core values’ in relation to how Socrates relates to his community and to individual others, this disavowal actually plays the role of showing the sheer force of his ethical relation all the more starkly. He is enduring, indefatigable, forever enthusiastic. No matter which way a dialogue twists and turns, no matter how inconclusive - pessimistic even - its ending might be, Socrates remains steadfastly committed to the others. In Levinasian terms he ‘lives it [exteriority] in the strange desire of the Other’, a ‘Desire’ which Levinas thinks only the idea of infinity can do justice to.

By ‘undoing itself’, ‘Socratic’ dialectic actually helps separate out this proposed Levinasian ethical relation from dependence upon the sphere of knowledge. It allows the relation to be conceived of as ‘beyond’, as ‘surplus’, and at the same time as being the most significant thing of all. ‘Platonic’ dialectic by contrast, while indeed acknowledging the ‘beyond’ conceptually, persists in wedding it to knowledge in various guises – poetic, dialectical ascension, the forms – which by my reading obscure what I termed above this relation’s ‘sheerness’ - what Levinas calls its transcendence, its ‘height’. For Plato qua metaphysician, the ethical relation’s height is ascended to via knowledge. Only after this ascension can one see to the beyond, and this ascending knowledge is not then necessarily discarded (as per Wittgenstein’s ladder and some Eastern philosophies of transcendence), but rather subsumed, taken up into more abstract ideas, generalized to the point of virtually demanding some notion of beyond, of transcendence. In this way Plato’s ‘beyond being’ is infected by knowledge in a manner that Socratic irony is not. This is not in any way meant as a critique of Plato’s poetry, or of his

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145 The irony is not that Socrates knows answers and holds them back, but perhaps rather that he ‘knows’ that there are no answers? His ‘knowingness’ or wisdom consists in that.

146 This of course references the charges of corrupting the youth and denying the gods brought against him, with his interrogation of others, along with its accompanying disavowals of knowledge, being key to these.
metaphysics of the forms and so on, as general attempts to give expression to goodness, truth, and beauty, but only to point out that to the extent that these attempts are infected with a type of dialectical emphasis on knowledge that takes itself seriously as the key to attaining the realm beyond, then these attempts are compromised in a way that I think Socrates in dialogue is not. I emphasize ‘in dialogue’ here to focus the attention in a two-fold manner: first, to focus on Socrates in dialogue, that is, in actually responding to others; and, second, to draw a distinction between both early and late dialogues. In the later dialogues, the form looks to become a mere vehicle for Plato to hold forth in a more monologue-based style; in the earlier dialogues, the two tendencies – the dialogical and the monological – may of course occur within the same work. So, Socrates ‘in dialogue’ here has a specific meaning within the dialogues.

However, despite the distinction drawn between ‘Socratic’ and ‘Platonic’ dialectic, with the former argued as playing a more subsidiary, even a ‘clearing’ role in relation to the ethical, Socrates ‘in dialogue’ nevertheless suffers at times from the general approach of dialectic. This approach not only clears away genuinely inadequate notions, but also succumbs to sweeping away positions that have (at least) implicit merit, but which on account of either inferior reasoning or inarticulateness do not emerge as they might.\textsuperscript{147} Levinas’s criticism of dialectic - that it is essentially a dialogue of the soul with itself - is not of course necessarily a point against the method of question and answer per se, but rather of the use to which it is put, or more accurately, of its very instrumentality. There is a useful distinction between the dialectical and the didactic method of discussion that goes back to Aristotle. Dorothea Krook develops this distinction, characterizing the dialectical as the method of the market place, and the didactic as the method of the academy.\textsuperscript{148} Whereas the latter dictates and outlines the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{147} I do not here mean that a superior standard of logic and expression would necessarily enable these positions to genuinely emerge, for of course this would involve more than just a kind of ‘hitting upon the solution’. Would it be recognized for what it is? Could it be recognized as such? The ‘solution’ in the \textit{Lysis} is in a sense thought and articulated, but not recognized as such.
\item \textsuperscript{148} Krook, Dorothea, \textit{Three Traditions of Moral Thought}, Cambridge University Press, 1959, p.302.
\end{itemize}
starting premises in as clear a manner as possible, the former begins with whatever position the other happens to have, and proceeds from there, examining each position as it emerges. This fits with my earlier account (in section one) of Socrates as beginning with, and staying with, his interlocutors - being commanded by the other - with question and answer operating as the glue, or the means of obedience. Here the method of question and answer has the potential to cease being instrumental, to become a form of pure expression, or what Levinas sometimes calls exposedness. (The clearing role described above is also not inconsistent with this.) However, this of course is not how Krook’s account of Socratic dialectic develops, as it is a far more controlled and strategic affair than this. According to this account, Socrates’ own position is for the most part held in reserve, careful not to launch frontal attacks, and so on – in short, a position typical of the fairly standard versions of Socratic irony. I think many of the dialogues exhibit something of both of these senses of dialectic - the non-strategic Levinasian response or exposedness to the other, along with the strategic movement designed to ultimately bring the other into the orbit of the same. This understandably leads to mixed results, with the dialogues varying in terms of their respective Levinasian flavor. I now explore a more negative example, where this flavor, although arguably evident, is actually firmly suppressed by the strategic dialectic.

(iii) Socrates and Callicles: A Double Reductio

I identified in Lysis an expression of desire where Socrates (or, at least, the dialogue) comes to an opening that may be exploited in a Levinasian way. The Gorgias provides a second example of a place where the dialogue could have gone another way, but did not. This time I think the example is more striking than that of Lysis, on account of the dramatic and personal nature of the argument between Socrates and Callicles. In what follows I am going to take a fair amount of license in my reconstruction of Callicles’ position. My reason for this is twofold. First, I think of Callicles as something of a caricature, quite probably even a fictional character designed as a stooge by Plato,
and this I think invites a treatment with some degree of license. Second, this treatment offers some philosophical interest, even if one concludes that the character of the dialogue does not anticipate such license. Additionally, I am treating the dialogue ‘straight’, that is, with the assumption that Plato is straightforwardly putting forward what he takes to be a victory for Socrates’ position and a defeat for Callicles’. Stating this assumption possibly invites the thought that Plato makes Callicles into a caricature in order to simultaneously expose problems with both interlocutors’ positions. According to this thought, Plato, despite being the chief cheerleader for Socrates, is at the same time not averse to subversively portraying the latter’s notions as being potentially subject to similar reductios as those he inflicts on others. I will not pursue this possibility, which could perhaps be investigated especially in relation to some of Plato’s later dialogues where he more explicitly acknowledges questions and problems with some of his (and Socrates’) earlier ideas. I think this lack of pursuit hardly needs justification, in view of the fact that the dialogue is read and interpreted mainly in the ‘straight’ manner. For those interested in the subversive reading what follows should be highly relevant, even though my treatment of the dialogue does not focus its issues from that possible Platonic perspective.

In discussing the two lives in the Gorgias, the temperate and the intemperate, desire is dealt with in the simile of the casks - the temperate life is sound, and the intemperate life is leaky. As is well known, Callicles champions continual and progressively increasing satisfaction of desire(s). The notion of a more or less permanent, once and for all, store of wine, honey, milk etc. in one’s casks is abhorrent to Callicles, and he compares this life to the ‘existence of a stone [or a corpse]’.\(^{149}\) Socrates responds by comparing the opposite, the continually leaky casks, to the life of a charadrios, supposedly a species of plover that excretes while it eats, a ‘greedy and dirty bird’.\(^{150}\) Of note is Socrates’ earlier immediate response to Callicles’ ‘stones and corpses’ comparison: ‘nevertheless


\(^{150}\) Ibid., 494b.
even the life which you describe has its alarming side’. Socrates subsequently introduces the idea of leaky pitchers or souls, leading to the casks simile. It is not insignificant I believe that these responses are consecutive. When responding to Callicles’ stones and corpses comparison, Socrates immediately chooses to switch the focus onto Callicles’ preferred life, rather than defend the life that he [Callicles] is critiquing. I think it plausible to read Socrates’ responses here as implicitly conceding at least some force in Callicles’ comparison. Callicles is aghast at what he takes to be the complete overturning of human life that Socrates is advocating, with natural desires for the expansion of one’s external goods, one’s influence in the community, one’s personal standing and power, all coming under threat from temperance. For Socrates’ part, he sees this proposed continual expansion as necessarily involving an eternal lack or deprivation. The (attempted) satisfaction of the intemperate life, as along with the charadrios example, is compared to an itchy man with unbounded opportunities to scratch. With this comparison, and its associated model of desire in place, it seems an easy matter for Socrates to show the need for a good measure of temperance.

But, and to develop my claim above, does not Socrates’ implicit acknowledgment of the force of the stones and corpses comparison place his own position, that of the philosophical life as a kind of dying, at least under some kind of question? This question has broad scope. Are the judgment myths of the Gorgias, the Republic, and Phaedo, to be dismissed as playing no supporting role in the justification of the philosophical life? Or, no supporting role in the dialectical justification of such a life? This distinction I take as crucial in a reading of the dialogues. As claimed earlier in the

151 Ibid., 492e.  
152 Ibid., 481c.  
153 Ibid., 494c.  
154 Nietzsche of course is the most notorious critic of Socrates as the ‘last man’, the example par excellence of a decadent/dialectical strain in Greek culture.  
155 The judgment myths play a strategic role, occurring where argument breaks down, or at least where interlocutors are not persuaded (e.g. Callicles). So, by ‘dialectical justification’ here I intend this in the general sense of supporting the dialectic process, rather than being a supposed strict result of it. Plato is well aware of the distinction between the myths, which presumably are needed for political purposes (namely those related to dealing with the unenlightened), and what he takes to be true dialectic. This latter results in a true vision of
discussion relating to Lysis, Socrates does not in fact live his ethical relation with others out of the results of dialectic, but virtually in spite of them. He lives from this relation, he enjoys it. His demeanor, his temperament, his sociality, these do not – despite Callicles’ claims to the contrary – actually speak of a philosophy of dying.\textsuperscript{156} My contention is that because Socrates is operating within a general dialectical approach, he is led by this process towards the judgment myths, which – as well as the (possible) aesthetic contribution they make to the literary merit of the dialogues – do play a contributing justificatory role in the argument for the temperate life, as opposed to the intemperate life. This general approach therefore restricts Socrates from coming to a Levinasian-type understanding of the very life that he leads.\textsuperscript{157}

Here Levinas’s understanding of desire again comes to the fore. This understanding can act as a third position, in contrast to the polar opposites of the argument between Callicles and Socrates. A third position enables the terms of the debate to shift in their fundamental meaning. At a cursory glance, Callicles’ position seems more akin to Levinas (than to Socrates), for it might be thought that the idea of ‘surplus’, of ‘overflowing’, is common to both. But as long as the understanding of desire is restricted to that which proceeds from lack, from deprivation, and with this deprivation being something that one experiences essentially in relation to oneself, then the debate never transcends the orbit of the same and knowledge. Callicles’ position never gains a perspective on the otherness of the other. Unlike the Phaedrus, about which I argued that there is evidence of a real inkling of this otherness, in the Gorgias desire never really escapes the simile of the casks. The focus remains firmly on either filling the casks more or less permanently, or continually re-filling them because of leaks. I

\textsuperscript{156} In this sense his opposition to desire is not ‘Eastern’?

\textsuperscript{157} An alternate interpretation would be that Plato (as opposed to Socrates) is led towards the judgment myths for reasons of political control, and in this regard Socrates is merely his mouthpiece, but this makes no difference to my overall point, which is to outline the way in which the general dialectical approach constrains a possible Levinasian understanding from emerging in the dialogues, regardless of the question as to the nearness or farness respectively of the historical characters Socrates and Plato relative to this understanding.
will return shortly to Levinas to explore the implications of this focus, but first outline what I take to be a fault line in the dialogue. It is a fault line that invites the above-mentioned third position, or provides that elusive opening for a Levinasian-infused Socratic dialectic.

Might one not argue that Callicles’ position - that of the leaky casks - comprises at least a kind of openness to the world that Socrates’ position lacks? The dialogue itself reduces Callicles’ position to that of supporting the life of scratching itches (or of the *catamite*) as a life as good as any. This I think occurs because the leaky casks position is never developed as it might have been. As alluded to above, positing the life of a stone or corpse as the logical comparative of leaky casks is not argumentatively exploited. There is no doubt that Callicles has genuine contempt for the life of restriction or abstinence. For him, it is an *anemic* life, no life that could be worth living. Logically, this life has no pleasure or pain, a point that Callicles clearly makes:

> It is just as I said a moment ago; once his casks are filled his existence is the existence of a stone, exempt alike from enjoyment and pain. But the pleasure of life consists precisely in this, that there should be as much running in as possible. \(^{158}\)

This statement reveals that Callicles directly identifies the ‘pleasure of life’ with both ‘enjoyment and pain’ (my emphasis). ‘As much running in as possible’ clearly implies a life that is *extremely open* to both pleasures and pains. Indeed, Callicles’ phrasing, ‘the pleasure of life’ – in the context of the leaky casks simile - can be interpreted to indicate a judgment that emanates from a *different* place than that of the pleasures/pains plane. This judgment, one that is variously expressed in the dialogue as ‘natural justice’; \(^{159}\) as ruling by the superior; \(^{160}\) as the courageous and intelligent intensification, enhancement, and satisfaction of ones desires; \(^{161}\) and, as the ‘favoring of one’s friends at the

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\(^{158}\) *Gorgias*, op.cit., 494a-b.  
\(^{159}\) Ibid., 484b.  
\(^{160}\) Ibid., 490a.  
\(^{161}\) Ibid., 492a.
expense of one’s enemies’, looks to be anything but a straightforward identification of the good with the plane of pleasures and pains. But of course this is the identification which Socrates relies upon in the dialectic of the argument in order to offer a *reductio* of Callicles’ position. It is Callicles’ inability to consistently articulate this judgment as being something actually *distinct* from the pleasures/pains plane that opens him to the *reductio* that results in the equating of the good with a life of perpetual scratching. This proposed articulation is of course what Socrates has been angling for all along, at least in a formal if not a substantive sense. Socrates seeks a clear distinction of the good from that of pleasure. Callicles’ problem seems to be that he cannot conceive of the good as being distinct from pleasure, even though I think that in his own way he gives expression to that very idea. He identifies this idea as necessarily belonging to conventional morality, and this hampers any possibility he might have of developing a position distinct from it, as well as from that of Socrates.

It will be evident by now that I take Socrates’ position to be likewise vulnerable to a *reductio*. I suggest that this is what Callicles’ stones and corpses comparison points towards. Although this ‘fault line’ in the dialogue remains only a surface crack, I think it can be developed into a legitimate critique of Socrates’ position, a critique which will invite a different approach, that of Levinasian desire with its opposition to the deprivation model. I claimed that the life Socrates leads is at odds with a philosophy of dying, but that his dialectical position in the debate with Callicles at least implicitly acknowledges the force of the *reductio* of the stones and corpses comparison. Does the emphasis in the dialogue, that of attacking Callicles’ position rather than defending Socrates’, actually say something about the latter’s position? The deflections in the dialectical pathway referred to earlier - the turning away from the stones and corpses comparison - may suggest a certain discomfort, an unease with the Euripidean saying ‘who knows if life be death, or death be life’. Socrates

162 Ibid., 492b-c.

163 I do not mean that Socrates (or for that matter Plato in writing) actually experiences any psychological discomfort or unease, but only that the text itself exhibits something of this.
introduces this saying as his initial defense to Callicles’ first criticism, only to then switch to the leaky casks example. Might not this discomfort be in part a product of the claimed tension between Socrates’ dialectic and Socrates’ life? The dialectic explicitly yields on the one hand a thoroughgoing and explicit reductio of Callicles’ position, but also on the other what I contend is an implicit reductio of Socrates’ position. It is my contention that both interlocutors suffer blindness (in different ways) to the true meaning of the life that Socrates actually leads, and the dialectical pathway of the dialogue illustrates this blindness by splitting into the two irreconcilable positions. Callicles formally concedes the argument, but towards the latter part of the dialogue it is difficult to interpret his role as any other than that of a yes man, a stooge. No one thinks that he has actually conceded anything in his heart (or even in the heart of his mind). As is well attested, Callicles is full of genuine contempt for what he takes as a betrayal of what a genuinely human (or at least Greek) life should be. Regardless of the question of Callicles’ historicity, this attitude is taken very seriously as a formidable opponent within the dialogue, and Callicles’ first, long speech, following from Polus, is a powerfully seductive expression of a position from which this contemptuous attitude springs. I think it is Plato’s concern to portray Callicles’ position in its most seductive light, for then Socrates’ demolition of it will be all the more convincing. Indeed it is in its ‘Nietzschean’ appeal to natural strength, to natural intelligence and courage, together with an ever-increasing scope for their expression, that Callicles’ position has an instinctive appeal. I find that many students instinctively respond positively to this aspect of Callicles, and yet by contrast respond with only grudging admiration to Socrates, an anecdotal note which I think nicely captures something of what I have elucidated about this dialogue. With an alternate, Levinasian understanding of desire, I think that this positive, instinctive response to

164 Ibid., 492e.
165 If Callicles has conceded in his heart, then it looks as if he would have to radically reconsider his entire way of being. He doesn’t respond at any point as if this is so, although one might argue that this is just what we might expect from someone so opposed to a position, only to have their opposition so quickly and totally demolished. Psychologically they would need time to adjust, indeed might initially even be in denial.
166 I speak here only of the Gorgias.
Callicles can be given some philosophical weight, and Socrates’ strategy in critiquing the intemperate life, rather than defending the temperate life, can be better understood.

I said a bit earlier that one reason Callicles cannot articulate a consistent distinction between pleasure and the good is that he is unable to conceive of this distinction having any other source than that of conventional morality. He understands this distinction (in Nietzschean-like manner) as involving a strategic creation by the naturally weak.167 And Socrates of course reinforces this understanding with his argument that equates the majority with the strong with the better.168 However, with Socrates pointing out that the majority holds that equality, and not inequality, is right, then Callicles loses the force of his emphasis on rank, on natural right in any individual sense. It is in relation to the question of ruling or exercising power over others, or exercising one’s power or natural strength at the expense of others, that Callicles’ position founders. But what I termed the students’ positive, instinctive response to Callicles may not necessarily be incompatible with conventional morality’s emphasis on equality (indeed the same students also clearly endorse this latter emphasis). These two items can be reconciled, and I will now embark on this exercise using Levinas’s idea of desire. This reconciliation will then extend to include a reconciliation between Callicles’ intemperate and Socrates’ temperate lives, providing a critique of aspects of both, but also importantly retaining aspects of both. The reconciliation comes not from a third dialectical vantage point, or synthesizing point, but rather from a third ‘point’ that comprises an understanding that is transcendent to both positions, a vantage point that actually transforms the meanings of the terms in question.

I claimed that there is a tension between Socrates’ life and a philosophy of dying. I referred to his demeanor, his temperament, and his sociality as some evidence of this. In offering further support

167 Ibid., 483b-c.
168 Ibid., 488c-d.
for this I refer to his stance in the *Apology*, where Socrates looks forward to the next world. The speech takes place after his guilty verdict, and sentence of death, is announced, and it reflects perhaps a freer spirit than the tenor of his words prior to the verdict. There is a genuinely joyous anticipation expressed at the prospect of social intercourse with (amongst others) legendary ‘half-divinities’ and heroes. Socrates desires ‘above all ... to spend my time there, as here, in examining and searching people’s minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks he is’, to ‘talk and mix and argue’ with them, an activity which he envisages as providing ‘unimaginable happiness’. 169 In short, he desires nothing other than to continue his way of life in *exactly the same manner* as in the city of Athens. And he cannot conceive of anything higher, more satisfying or joyous than this. In this speech, there is no Buddhist-like hope or desire for some Nirvana-type state, where desire ceases and one gets off the wheel of life. Neither is there expressed a desire for some end or final answer to the quest for knowledge, for wisdom. 170 The air of the speech is *eternal*, with a desire for sociality – certainly of a particular knowledge/wisdom-seeking type – that seems to value it for its own sake. Indeed, for Socrates a key advantage that the next life has over this one is that this eternal sociality of course cannot be terminated by death sentences (either juridical or natural). 171

(At this stage, it would perhaps be remiss not to mention a possible counter-example to what I have been arguing, namely the account of purity of the soul taken from the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* famously contends that purity depends upon ‘practicing death’, which is understood as keeping one’s soul free from ‘contamination of the body’; as having ‘never willingly associated with it [the body] in life’; as having ‘shunned it [the body] and kept itself [the soul] separate as its regular practice’. 172 Are such strong words opposed – at least in their *spirit* – to the spirit that I have attributed to Socrates’ words

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170 Levinas cites the Talmudic maxim that ‘the doctors of the law will never have peace, neither in this world or the next; they go from meeting to meeting, discussing always – for there is always more to be discussed.’ (‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas’, *Face to Face with Levinas*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1986, p.31.)
171 Ibid.
in the *Apology*? I will not go into the issue of whether or not the two passages really need to be understood as setting up a genuine tension, because even if one were take them in this sense, then this example would fit into my general contention that Socrates’ life is in a certain kind of tension with (Socratic) Platonic dialectic. I rest the plausibility of my contention on what I have argued so far, as well as on further reflections to come.\(^{173}\)

Because Socratic/Platonic dialectic takes the general form of reasoning qua knowledge, Socrates has no way, or at least only restricted ways, of articulating what I wish to contend is his desire for that which is beyond thought. ‘Beyond thought’ signifies other than terms of a search for knowledge. ‘To burn with another fire than need, which saturation extinguishes, to think beyond what one thinks’.\(^{174}\)

Perhaps with a certain liberation of speech that might come with a proximity to death,\(^{175}\) Socrates describes the life that he looks forward to in the next world more like a non-knowledge seeking affair than anywhere else in the dialogues.\(^{176}\) That is, virtually freed from the earthly, dialectical project, he is liberated to express a desire that transcends the desire for knowledge. Although Socrates refers to his impending death as a ‘release from my distractions,’\(^{177}\) which is consistent with a downgrading of this earthly experience, or a desire for another world, when he actually envisages his life in this other world, it turns out to be identical in spirit and style to his life in this one. ‘Distractions’ is an interesting term. It could merely refer to the inconveniences of the trial, or it could refer to earthly life in relation to its appetitive and sensual aspects. (It could be both of these.) A more interesting

\(^{173}\) Derrida (with a natural reference to Heidegger) interprets this passage from *Phaedo* in terms of the very creation of the psyche, the soul. It is concern for one’s death that initially separates and assembles the soul; death breathes the life of the soul (see Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p.14). From this perspective a ‘philosophy of dying’ might not necessarily be at odds with Socrates’ life, for it is so integrally linked with life that even Socrates’ eternal hope of sociality might not be inconsistent with it.


\(^{175}\) ‘. . . I am at the point where the gift of prophecy comes most readily to men: at the point of death.’ The *Apology*, op.cit., 38D.

\(^{176}\) One might also think that here, in relation to Socrates’ last public words, the historical accuracy of Plato’s account, for both personal and evidentiary reasons, would be towards the high end?

\(^{177}\) Ibid., 41A.
interpretation construes ‘distraction’ as referring to the constraints of dialectic itself. This interpretation accommodates Socrates’ self-understanding whereby dialectical ascension leads him to the transcendent realm of ideas. Yet, if my Levinasian analysis of Socrates’ relation to others holds, then he has already reached transcendence in his relation of responsibility to and for others, and the dialectical project is merely the content that this form of relatedness takes. So, what Socrates looks forward to in the next life is a purer form of this ethical relation - this ‘eternal sociality’ - one that is free from dialectic, or rather, is free from the particular (Platonic) emphasis on it. This is an emphasis that – as I shall shortly try to show more fully in relation to the Gorgias – shapes the unsatisfying outcome of the exchange between Socrates and Callicles.

From Callicles’ perspective Socrates’ way of life (or at least significant aspects of it) is contemptible. It is worth taking a closer look at this contempt:

Philosophy, Socrates, is a pretty toy, if one indulges in it with moderation at the right time of life; but if one pursues it further than one should it is absolute ruin. However gifted a man may be, if he studies philosophy to an advanced age he will inevitably lack all the accomplishments which one must possess if one is to be thought a gentleman a person of consideration.

People of this sort have no knowledge of the legal code of the city, or of the principles to be employed in private or public business, or of the pleasures and passions of mankind; in a word, they are absolutely ignorant of human nature.178

(He goes on to say that the proper response to someone who takes philosophy too far in this way is a ‘whipping’.179) If true, then of course this is some indictment, for in anyone’s book ‘absolute ignorance of human nature’ would be hard to top as a damning criticism. More than just a ‘pretty

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178 Gorgias, op.cit., 484c-d.
179 Ibid., 485b.
toy’, Callicles claims to see philosophy as part of a proper education, indeed even indispensable to
the formation of ‘noble ambitions’,yet if philosophy itself is posited as one of these ambitions
then it has betrayed its strictly instrumental role in a man’s life. Philosophy becomes a substitute for
the genuinely noble pursuits of worldly wisdom and power, leading a man to spend ‘the rest of his
life in obscurity, whispering with three or four lads in a corner and never uttering any sentiment
which is large or liberal or adequate to the occasion.’ This last phrase now looks odd to us, given
Socrates’ life is the polar opposite of obscure. His utterances having become ‘large’, Socrates is
considered by posterity as being amongst the noblest figures of the ancient world. Plato knew at the
time of writing that Socrates’ life certainly refuted the ‘obscurity’ charge. So we need to censor out
this knowledge to get the proper spirit of Callicles’ position. He sees Socrates as being clever with
words, and this in regard to matters of inconsequence; clothes, shoes, cobblers, fullers, cooks,
doctors, and so on. Socrates’ cleverness enables him to nit-pick over points of logic, winning
dialectical battles but failing to ‘learn the accomplishments of active life’. Anyone who finds
themselves in conversation and out of one’s depth - where one is simply not familiar or comfortable
with the particular style of interchange, and conversely where one is confident one is dealing with
someone of dubious merit – may reflect on this experience to better understand Callicles’ position.
Callicles cannot imagine the Socrates that we all now know, and cannot conceive of this style of
reasoning being the key to the good life. For him philosophy looks to be something that helps to
educate (bring out, develop) noble ambitions, but it doesn’t construct them through dialectical
argument. And it certainly doesn’t posit itself as the good life. The good life is already settled for
Callicles in a somewhat traditionally conceived way; success in battle, political success, an active life
with full scope for the expression of one’s passions and enjoyment of life’s pleasures. To be sure, the
introduction of democracy to Athens made things more complex, with argument or rhetoric in the

180 Ibid., 485c
181 Ibid., 485d-e.
182 Ibid., 486c.
law courts shaping Athenian life in ways that did not exist in Homeric Greece. Callicles makes reference to the importance of this kind of argument, but maintains that Socrates’ dialectical tricks are irrelevant to this skill. For Callicles, oratorical and rhetorical talent in the law courts is just one more worldly skill to be mastered, along with the traditional warrior virtues. There is no conception that rigorous, rational argument should actually decide things, that it should actually shape the world and how one chooses to live in it. I wish to maintain that there is something importantly right about Callicles’ outlook, and I now return to the leaky casks example to illustrate this.

The dialogue takes a crucial turn just after the stones and corpses and greedy, dirty bird (charadrios) comparisons are discussed. The turn orientates discussion towards the allusions of scratching itches, and explicating the happy life. Socrates, in taking up the charadrios example, asks Callicles whether he is speaking of things such as eating when hungry. Callicles agrees, and adds ‘all the other appetites and being able to satisfy them with enjoyment. That is the happy life’. Socrates then immediately introduces the scratching example, which Callicles finds ‘fantastic’ and ‘thoroughly vulgar’. The reductio is apparently complete when Socrates shames Callicles into ‘recanting’ this finding of vulgarity. The shaming exploits Callicles’ aversion to conventional morality, for Socrates knows well, that all (including Callicles of course) agree that scratching itches is a fantastic allusion for the happy life.

(iv) Levinasian Desire

Levinasian desire is ‘situated beyond satisfaction and nonsatisfaction. The relationship with the Other, or the idea of infinity, accomplishes it’. In the ‘Separation as Life’ section of Totality and

183 Ibid., 494c.
184 Ibid., 494d.
185 Levinas, Emmanuel, Totality and Infinity, Dusquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, p.179.
Levinas outlines a conception where ‘nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment’. The context here is not yet the ethical relation with the face of the other. It is rather the analysis of how we relate to the ‘other’ of nutriments, of how we live the ‘contents’ of life; ‘good soup, air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc.’. ‘One lives one’s life: to live is a sort of transitive verb, and the contents of life are its direct objects. And the act of living these contents is ipso facto a content of life’. Levinas here opposes the traditional analogy between truth and nourishment, where desire is understood in relation to potential satiety. ‘The human being thrives on his needs; he is happy for his needs.’ An alternative, yet still related understanding is, he desires his needs, rather than desire coming out of them. Levinas thinks that we desire the above contents of life (good soup, air, light…) directly, as objects of enjoyment rather than objects towards enjoyment (satisfaction). The instrumental relationship with these contents of life is denied, or at least instrumentality is denied as the primary relationship we have with them.

Herein lies the ‘unassimilable surplus’ or ‘beyond being’ aspect of desire referred to earlier in this section. Desire (and enjoyment) is not explained in terms of deprivation, whether of a biological or psychological kind. Instead the order is reversed: we lack because we desire, rather than desiring because we lack. In attempting to explain our desires we turn towards explanations and theories of various kinds, but for Levinas enjoyment surpasses, transcends satiety. So, no matter how much knowledge we gain from these explanations, it can never capture or contain our (infinite) desire. Levinas refers to the ‘negative notion of need’, whereby our neediness is conceived of in terms of

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186 Ibid., p.111.
187 Ibid., p.118.
188 Ibid., p.110.
189 Ibid., p.111.
190 Ibid., p.114.
191 Although even here a qualification is needed, for to be more precise it should perhaps read: we can only experience lack as lack because of desire.
deprivation, and where further, this deprivation is understood as a kind of sickness. 192 (Indeed he uses the figure of scratching oneself as in scabies, which recalls Callicles and Socrates.) 'To conceive of need as simple privation is to apprehend it in the midst of a disorganized society which leaves it neither time nor consciousness'. And: 'A being has detached itself from the world from which it still nourishes itself!'193 The movement described here is one of detaching oneself from the above-listed 'contents of life' (good soup etc.) in the ‘thriving on his needs’ mode, while reattaching oneself (to them) in the negative-need mode. The ‘lack of time and consciousness’ reference indicates a distancing of man from his needs. Man is individuated from the world in such a way that he cannot – from this negative-need mode at least – relate to it except in ‘sickness’.194 He neither has the time nor the right kind of consciousness to satisfyingly relate to, ‘to thrive on’, his needs. The world is now conceived of as a potential satisfier of one’s health-related needs, but with man’s detachment or dislocation from it, it is not compliant in this regard, it not being a ‘fit’ anymore. In philosophical terms one might say that man is now estranged in ontology, with ontology involving a fundamentally misconceived notion of need.195

Despite glimpses of the Levinasian species of desire in the dialogues, the negative-need mode version is essentially Plato’s, and is the one that Socrates is working from in the exchange between himself and Callicles. From the leaky casks exchange, I contended that this negative-need mode of desire has an internal logic that shapes a *reductio of both* sides of the debate. While Socrates advocates the completely logical solution to the ‘sickness’ of negative-need based desire – that being

192 Ibid., p.116.
193 Ibid.
194 The Garden of Eden story is an example of this kind of negative-need mode of understanding. Exile from the garden structures man’s life as deprivation - as toil - only because life in the garden before exile is idyllic, and with no real conception of need. Subversively, the story can also be seen as a cryptic or esoteric account of the movement from an idyllic state to one that is actually necessary for man to be able to ‘thrive on his needs’, this not being possible without exile.
195 I leave open to the reader the question of how widely this ‘sickness’ ranges. (Is it mainly the philosophical tradition that Levinas has in mind in *Totality and Infinity*, and not necessarily western thought as a whole? Perhaps, although his diagnosis I believe does have application beyond philosophy – and this at least partly because of philosophy!)
complete cessation or containment – Callicles can logically only advocate the opposite; the complete indulgence and expansion of desire. Because desire here is strictly one dimensional, this grand sounding life is easily reduced to the same plane as that of scratching or that of a catamite (the sexual slave). The former is absurd, the latter disgraceful. Callicles’ subsequent surliness in the rest of the dialogue can be read as a product of his intuining that something has gone very wrong with the exchange, but having no resources to articulate this.

Could the dialogue have proceeded in a different way? The ‘crucial turn’ towards the scratching life reductio referred to above follows immediately after Callicles has ‘conceded’ that his casks indeed must have large holes to allow much running in and running out. This concession (‘certainly’) in response to Socrates’ claim on the large holes may be read with a ring of confidence, for Callicles has just previously asserted that ‘the pleasure of life consists precisely in this, that there should be as much running in as possible’.196 I claimed earlier, and emphasized in the stones and corpses comparison, that Callicles may be read here as identifying the ‘pleasure of life’ with enjoyment and pain, and that this judgment on his part may emanate from a different place than the pleasure/pain plane. ‘The human being thrives on his needs; he is happy for his needs’. With a Levinasian (re)construction of Callicles’ response to the leaky casks example, the ‘different place’ may be synonymous with a different conception of desire. This conception of desire positively embraces the ‘running in and running out’, is one that ‘thrives on needs’, that refuses an understanding of needs as mere deprivation, or as a kind of ‘sickness’. In fact Callicles understands Socrates as suffering from a kind of sickness because he sees negative-need based desire as something to be escaped. The enjoyment – Callicles’ ‘pleasure of life’ – connected with this infinite desire operates on a different plane from the negative-need based version, and therefore would not be vulnerable to Socrates’ reductio.

196 Gorgias, 494a-b.
This is not to maintain that Callicles’ position is not vulnerable to criticism. However, a critique of it should acknowledge what it offers as more robust than may seem at first glance. I now offer a critique of the obvious shortfalls of Callicles’ position from the perspective of Levinas’s infinite desire. This critique develops an understanding of the (previously mentioned) students’ positive, instinctive response to Callicles, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of how to situate him in relation to ‘conventional’ morality.

Callicles attempts to articulate his stance in terms of natural justice, courage, and intelligence. But because he will not, or cannot, conceive of temperance other than that of a limitation on potentially ever-expanding appetites, and additionally, because he understands temperance as an invention of conventional morality – which he identifies as a product of weakness – this limitation is clearly objectionable for him. Callicles’ ever-expanding appetites - his version of ‘infinite desire’ - is importantly like and unlike Levinas’s. I think the two versions share something of the ‘other’-regarding aspect of infinite desire, and specifically in relation to ‘nutriments’. For Levinas nutriments are all the elements or contents of life - good soup, air, light etc. - but ideas as well, presumably including ‘grand’ ideas that convey varying conceptions of the good life, including Callicles’. No matter Callicles’ confusion on the relationship between the concepts of natural justice, strength, courage, and intelligence, the key question here is whether he lives from these contents of life in the Levinasian sense. Or is he related to these in the non-negative-need mode of desire? It may look as if he lives for (rather than from) these contents. On this appearance, Callicles identifies a need for certain things, then looks towards, or for them. However, I think this is misleading, and the appearance occurs because of the very form of argument he shares with Socrates. The Socratic form of argument is always a search for justification, for reasons, but for someone like Callicles this form is already a form of compromise. It is patent that he is almost offended that he be required to offer a defense of what he takes to be a perfectly obvious truth: that the living out of grand and noble
ambitions (conceived of in largely traditional terms) comprises the good life. From this perspective Socrates is indeed sick, evidenced by the attempt to argue for radical restrictions to this life of bounty. Callicles takes these things for granted, or at least as far as he conceives of himself as being one of the naturally strong and gifted then the good life is granted him. In opposing this life of natural bounty, Socrates is a natural enemy, but an enemy Callicles is ill-equipped to combat. The dialectical tools to do so have never previously been part of Callicles’ good life. So, initially he offers a grand sounding speech, extolling the natural strength and right of various figures, putting a case of (what he takes to be) how things are. 197 How things are is, for Callicles, how they ought to be. There is no distance between him and these contents of life. Completely in keeping with this, his speech is both an extolling of natural right and a disparaging of (what he takes to be) natural weakness. In this regard the speech is thoroughly status quo. It is designed to bring Socrates to his senses, not to win a dialectical argument. I think it plausible to hold – given earlier discussion on distancing or detaching oneself from the world – that Callicles shows that he is attached to the world. The nourishment he draws from it is direct, and does not first go through the negative-need mode of desire. The spirit of his speech is instinctual, ‘attached’, and non-philosophical.

For Levinas the self, the ego, is not primarily an observer, nor a thinker or contemplating representer, but rather an enjoyer. Levinas says that ‘it is an existence for itself – but not, initially, in view of its own existence. Nor is it a representation of self by self’. 198 Additionally, ‘the I is not the support of enjoyment’. 199 This originary enjoyment (logically) precedes the creation of the I, a process that Levinas terms a ‘contraction of sentiment’. 200 A good measure of subtlety is needed here in order to get the relationship right between the creation of the ego and the two modes of desire in question (the infinite and the negative-need modes). Callicles’ lack of distance from the world, his enjoyment

197 Ibid., 482-486.
198 Totality and Infinity, op.cit., p.118.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
of the contents of life directly, is entirely consistent with him indeed being an ego, a self. His ego is created through a dual process, on the one hand the infinite desire that lives from, that ‘enjoys’ directly, and on the other hand the ‘contraction’ of this sentiment into a separated or isolated self. Contraction is very different from representation. Contraction is more akin to a kind of shrinking down or back from a totality, but where the basic affective experience of that totality is maintained. The ego, separated from the totality, appropriates the world for its own enjoyment. Nonetheless, the ego does not represent the world to itself, but still relates to it in direct mode. It is representation which brings distance into the picture, creating negative-need desire. Instead of directly enjoying the appropriation of the world - the much ‘running in and running out’ of the leaky casks - representation measures one’s pleasures and pains, intellectually feeding them into one’s calculus, weighing them up, judging them in terms of their relative satisfaction status. One becomes concerned for one’s pleasure calculus, and this concern leads to insecurity, an anxiety for how one’s life might transpire in relation to it. One’s ‘happiness’ becomes tied up with settling this anxiety, for which one obvious solution (the solution of Socrates) is minimization or contraction of desire. Not to be confused with the ‘contraction of sentiment’ involved in the creation of the self, I contend that Callicles instinctively recognizes this contraction to be artificial (in his terms a product of cowardice or unmanliness even), but he lacks the subtlety to adequately articulate this. Together with Socrates, he gets caught in a one-size-desire-fits-all dialectic, from which the double reductio results.

201 Here is Henri Bergson from Matter and Memory: 'Why insist, in spite of appearances, that I should go from my conscious self to my body, then from my body to other bodies, whereas in fact I place myself at once in the material world in general, and then gradually cut out within it the center of action which I shall come to call my body and to distinguish it from all others? (Bergson, Matter and Memory, Zone Books, New York, 1991, pp. 47-48.) Also: 'the distinction between the inside and the outside will then be only a distinction between the part and the whole' (ibid). The part is not something different ('apart') from the whole, but rather a fundamental constituent of it. Likewise the whole plays a constitutive role in the meaning of the part. Hence the traditional inside/outside distinction (along with its particular accompanying epistemological and ethical puzzles) collapses. Bergson of course was a major influence on Levinas. In a conversation with Richard Kearney in the 1980s Levinas lists Bergson as the first contemporary influence on his thinking. Despite departing in important ways from him, Levinas thought that Bergson’s work on the nature of time constituted a major (although obfuscated) formative influence on Continental thought, and indeed would come back into its own at some point. (See Face to Face with Levinas, ed. Richard Cohen, State University of New York Press, 1986, pp.13-14.)
So, Calliclean desire has at least something of a Levinasian flavor to it, but is also very different. To outline the significance of this difference I turn now to a closer examination of the character of Callicles, and his relation to traditional Greek heroic virtue, as well as to his ‘creator’.

Callicles underestimates Socrates’ attachment, or at least Socrates’ motivation, in relation to the dialectical approach. He cannot understand it in any other terms than a radical departure from proper manliness. In Levinasian terms, Callicles fails to appreciate that Socrates lives from (amongst other ‘contents of life’) this approach. He is incredulous that Socrates cannot conceive of a departure from this approach, any more than he (Callicles) can conceive of his own departure from his love of ‘demos’ (his love of power and influence). Callicles cannot conceive of courage, of ‘proper manliness’, being centrally connected with dialectic and philosophy. In this regard his view of course is very narrow (and especially so to us), but that is unsurprising for someone who might in some respects be seen as a kind of throwback to Homer’s time. I say ‘might’ because in fact Callicles might not fit anywhere, and his response to Socrates’ introduction of the notion of ‘self-mastery’ illustrates the uncertainty of fit. Callicles seems to have no place whatsoever for this notion, except in relation to the ‘half-witted’, synonymous for him with the majority. He maintains that the majority created this notion for the purpose of shaming and constraining the excesses of the naturally gifted. But does Callicles really see no legitimate role for self-mastery, for temperance, in the soul of anyone, heroes included? Or is this, as some surmise, evidence for the artificiality, the lack of historicity of the character of Callicles? Despite his grand style of rhetoric his stance is a

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202 Gorgias, 485b.
203 Ibid, 481d.
204 Ibid., 491e-492a.
205 Ibid., 492a-b.
207 There might be a defense mounted on behalf of Callicles. According to this defense, he deliberately takes up a counter position to that of Socrates, not because he has no room whatsoever for temperance, but rather
rather crude one, almost as it were ‘designed’ to be highly vulnerable to Socrates’ critique. It highlights the absolute bankruptcy of a view with no room whatsoever for temperance. Without temperance, Callicles’ stance is taken directly to the leaky casks comparison, and then on to the reductio of the scratching and catamite examples.

It is plain that I find the character of Callicles to be of considerable philosophical interest. Yet, he becomes even more fascinating if we conclude that he is artificial, that he is a fiction more or less created directly out of Plato’s soul. If Callicles is an historical character, then he is certainly unusual, odd, in his lack of appreciation for any need for temperance. This oddness may lack philosophical interest insofar as it can be critiqued merely as a childish understanding of desire. Callicles could be seen as simply undeveloped, an enfant terrible. It might seem more difficult to conceive of an historical Callicles responding as the character does to the introduction of the concept of self-mastery into the discussion, than it does an a historical Callicles, one designed by Plato to show the bankruptcy of intemperance. I said earlier that I think Plato is concerned to portray Callicles’ position in a seductive light (p.74), in order to all the more convincingly demolish it. Within the dialectical terms of his approach I think this strategy indeed succeeds, but too successfully! Proceeding on the a historical assumption, as Plato strips Callicles of any place whatsoever for

because he is vehemently opposed to temperance in the service of convention. Callicles in general holds that desire should be unrestrained, but in particular cases where the general expansion of desire is served by an exercise of discipline, then temperance might indeed be in order. So for example Heracles (cited by Callicles as an example to follow), endowed with natural gifts of strength, still needs some discipline, some exercise in maintaining them, for otherwise how would he continue to be the superhero that he is? This is more consistent with Callicles’ position, and would round out his character more realistically. However, it doesn’t seem to affect the main point of contention, that of temperance in general. Accordingly, I treat Callicles as Plato presents him, even if this portrayal comes about through an unsympathetic rendering of an historical figure.

‘Unless new evidence unexpectedly appears, we shall never be certain whether Callicles was a historical person, though there are ample grounds for believing he existed. If he did, Plato’s genius can be credited with having identified him as the most intelligent and formidable example in politics of the consequences of Gorgias’s rhetorical teaching. If he did not, Plato’s imaginative powers must be admired for the creation of a complex composite character made up of the most salient traits of the young aristocratic Athenian intellectuals who flocked to the sophists out of political ambition in the 420s and later’ (Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law*, University of California Press, L.A., 1986, p.245). Also see Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* 12-13, and Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1969, 3.102.)
temperance, in order to portray him as a formidable opponent he renders him as a caricature rather
than a real character. But in this caricaturing does not Plato involuntarily show something of the non-
negative-need based appeal of the ‘intemperate’ life? The appeal contained in a direct enjoyment of
the ‘contents of life’? Ironically, in Callicles’ very vehemence with which he opposes temperance, a
vehemence intended to be completely undermined by Socrates, we see something of that direct
relation to the contents of life that accords with Levinasian desire. If Callicles is a fiction of Plato then
Plato is debating himself, but even so, this debate proceeds with a character representative of a
species of embodied desire. The character concurrently represents the ‘losing side’ of the debate,
and this muddles an appreciation of what Callicles provides the reader. Callicles may lose the debate
(apparently even decisively), and yet he exhibits that mode of desire that I think ‘gets away’ from its
author. Callicles overflows the dialectical terms of the debate. As both character and caricature,
Callicles manifests a surplus, a ‘beyond’. Continuous with the ‘beyond’ aspect of the Phaedrus, this
escaping Levinasian desire is now a plausible and fascinating aspect of Plato’s soul. Callicles is a part
of Plato. (This is at least to Plato’s artistic credit!) In this respect it is not surprising that Plato is hard
on Callicles, for as we know he is also hard on the poets, although - or because? - he is one himself.

Having elucidated the escaping, non-negative-need mode of desire within Plato’s soul, a Levinasian
reconciliation of the Socratic-Callicles exchange becomes available. It may appear that Callicles is
clearly closer to Levinas than Socrates concerning infinite desire. (This appearance indeed provides
the ‘fault line’ in the dialogue from which I have so far proceeded.) Nevertheless, in ethical terms
Callicles’ position remains crude for its complete lack of self-mastery, of temperance. Recall the gap
between the conclusions of Socratic (Platonic) dialectic and the life Socrates leads. From whence
comes genuinely ethical temperance in the presence of this gap? My (and Levinas’s) answer to this
question is not sourced from dialectical conclusions, but rather (and consistent with the
considerations of section 1) sourced from the other. It is the other who interrupts, who disrupts the
enjoyment of the ego, by commanding an infinite response (desire) towards them. In terms of its structure - its immediacy, its pre-reflective (non-representational) aspect - this is the same species of desire pertinent to ‘nutriments’ (good soup, light, ideas etc.), but alternately captured or colonized by the face of the other. This commanded desire radically tempers one’s egoistic enjoyment of the contents of life. I earlier established a plausible understanding of Socrates as being commanded by the face of the other, and it is this that tempers his life into the ethical form that we see, a form that partly constitutes that ‘gap’ between his dialectic and his life. (There is of course no evidence that Callicles shows any tempering of this kind. According to the a historical assumption, Plato is concerned to portray Callicles as totally lacking any regard for anyone apart from his friends.)

Further measures of subtlety are valuable here to gauge the desire Socrates exemplifies. In the Gorgias, Socrates argues for temperance from a negative-need mode of desire, and this leaves temperance indirectly related to others. It is the deprivation problem that leads to the indirect temperance solution. Socrates solves his own deprivation problem by tempering his negative-need desires. It is essentially an egoistic solution, not primarily concerned with others, whatever outcomes it might have in relation to them. In Levinasian terms this solution is obviously non-ethical. For Callicles’ part, he is (arguably corralled into) also arguing from a negative-need mode of desire, but this leads him to an opposite conclusion to that of Socrates. I have argued that Callicles moves in this opposite direction because he begins with something that has the flavor of Levinasian desire, a species of desire that instinctively resists the Socratic temperance conclusion. His instincts are sound, but he cannot resist the arguments of Socrates, and so subsequently he is dragged unwillingly along the dialectical pathway. Callicles is cast as totally unethical, endorsing any kind of pleasure-seeking life whatsoever. Yet, Socrates’ version of temperance is no more ethical. Plato ‘wins’ the debate with himself, but at the expense of marginalizing a species of desire that has the potential to illuminate a different account of temperance, one that could actually harmonize with Socrates’ life. The dialogue
thereby fosters a misunderstanding of Socrates’ life, forcing it through its particular dialectical prism. (Socrates may also misunderstand his own life, but this is less clear, as he lives it and presumably understands something by this lived experience, not trying to understand it in the terms that Plato does. One might also speculate that Plato may misunderstand Socrates’ example because he fails to be commanded, or at least fully commanded, by the otherness of Socrates. He is no doubt devoted, and massively impressed by Socrates’ example, but does he have the kind of openness to the otherness of Socrates that I revealed Socrates to exhibit towards others? Alternatively, Plato might have this openness in his personal responses - in the nature of his inspiration - but do his writings consistently show it, or are they a mixed affair in this regard?)

The point of a possible Levinasian reconciliation between Callicles and Socrates - the missing third term - is an infinite desire-based species of temperance. This species takes up something of Callicles’ Platonically overblown version of desire, and also takes up the other-regarding practice of Socrates’ life. The latter is a practice which I find patently not that of one who has adopted a ‘stones and corpses’ approach to life. Indeed, I emphasized that Socrates’ life is marked by its sheer sociality. It follows that his temperance is seen as remarkable because it is exercised right in the middle of this sociality. Socrates drinks liberally but remains sober; he shares the hardships of his fellow soldiers but never complains; he serves in politics but retains his sense of justice when others lose theirs; and, he keeps his overall course over decades while mixing with company that must surely tempt him in many other directions. What is the most plausible explanation for this remarkable temperance? An iron will? Knowledge of the Good? A naturally ascetic temperament? Some combination of these? I think none of these is a good answer. The formal Platonic answer is of course knowledge of the Good. For Plato knowledge equates to virtue, to know the good is to do the good. (No gap exists for akrasia in relating to the good, and therefore an iron will is superfluous.) However, as shown, reason - dialectically produced knowledge of the good - is decidedly not what drives Socrates, and so
Platonic knowledge is ruled out here. Regarding temperament, no doubt there are natural differences along the ascetic spectrum, but short of a profile of a young Socrates, we have little or no way of gauging him on this scale. I therefore think it more philosophically fruitful to see Socrates as driven by *all* the contents of life, including of course most crucially the otherness of others. Despite the form of dialectical pursuit which characterizes the bulk of his interaction with others in the dialogues, Socrates, not unlike Callicles, lives directly from the contents of life. The spirit of *his* life is instinctual, ‘attached’, non-philosophical.\(^{209}\) His temperance comes not from within, whereby an intellectual process directs the will, but directly,\(^ {210}\) from without (*exteriority*); (as discussed earlier) the face of individuals, the ‘face’ of Athens, and of Greek ideals. (However, this account of Socratic temperance is itself tempered or qualified in the next section, where Socrates’ relation with his body and with the world is examined, and an aspect of his virtue is seen from another, perhaps troubling perspective.)

A brief note on Socrates’ sociality, and how this sociality might relate to justice. I described Socrates as retaining his sense of justice in the midst of others losing theirs. This description might complicate Socrates’ absolute commitment to justice and my emphasis in this work on his responsiveness to the exteriority of the three orders, and primarily to sociality - to the face of others. After all, doesn’t Socrates have an inward looking, or self-focused approach to justice? That is, in the context of acting justly he identifies that the just *self* cannot be harmed, and the imperative of protecting the self from contamination, and so on?\(^ {211}\) The general emphasis is *not* the other, even while the other is the means by which one acts justly (or perhaps more aptly expressed considering this emphasis, the other is the means by which one avoids the temptation of acting unjustly). For Levinas, a sense of

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\(^{209}\) Of course this sounds paradoxical – Socrates as *non* philosophical! However, if we keep in mind the distinction between the *retrospective view* of Socrates - the philosopher *par excellence*, and the inspiration or catalyst for many philosophical schools - and the view of him that I have etched out, then perhaps the paradox is explained.

\(^{210}\) ‘Directly’ here does not imply that Socrates himself identifies this directness for what it is.

\(^{211}\) See the *Gorgias* and many other dialogues.
justice flows directly from the absolute prohibition on harming others, a prohibition realized in the face of their vulnerability.\textsuperscript{212} This direct connection between the face of the other and justice seems largely absent from Socrates, certainly at least in the way he speaks of it, even while his own sense of it similarly prohibits him from harming. Where does Socrates get his sense of justice from then? Unsurprisingly, given the thesis of this work, my answer is that he indeed gets it from the face of the other. However, an appreciation of this sense is complex. Socrates realizes justice in a distorted fashion, converting as it were the above-mentioned ‘direct flow’ into a spiritualized notion. As in ‘Ascending Dialectic’, the spiritual is an absolute realm, poetically/mythically envisaged, that gives sense and strength to Socratic justice. This should be likewise unsurprising, given that justice was conceptualized by humanity for centuries by failing to place the other front and center, preferring to displace the primary source of justice into realms or notions more ‘fitting’. As the source of the highest, most noble sense of all, the lowly human face can match neither heavens nor sublime ideas.\textsuperscript{213}

To resume the Callicles/Socrates discussion: I suggested earlier (p.84) that Callicles’ version of infinite desire is both like and unlike Levinas’s. I illustrated a certain likeness. The obvious difference is that Callicles’ version has very little scope for the human other. This is amply evidenced by his references to the exploits of Heracles and to Xerxes, to a notion of ‘natural justice’ that justifies the strong ruling over the weak. This notion basically justifies any means that serves the satisfaction of one’s ever-expanding desires - for Callicles, the ultimate good. In relation to the human other Callicles’ relation with power is worth discussing. To say the least his notion of power lacks subtlety; power over others, power (if need be) at the expense of others, power apparently with no notion at all of self-

\textsuperscript{212} At least this applies for the \textit{early} Levinas, where he uses the term justice in the general sense of being orientated towards the good. Later he restricts the term specifically to the issue of the ‘third’ and the necessary weighing and calculating of other others in relation to the original other.

\textsuperscript{213} Kant can be said to have given emphasis to the other in a way that virtually no philosopher before him had done, but of course even while crediting him for this one must qualify it with his emphasis on the sublimity of the mind (rather than the face) of the other.
discipline. To be sure, the qualities of intelligence and courage are needed to exercise this power, especially perhaps in the face of the attempted shaming by the conventional majority. Yet, nowhere does Callicles show any awareness of the potential need for self-discipline in the development of these latter two qualities either. Presumably either one has these qualities or one does not, one is gifted or one is not. In this sense then one is at the mercy of the ‘gods’. One’s natural makeup and one’s early upbringing, as far as it is taken to have a formative aspect on one’s temperament and character, determines whether one is fortuitously endowed with self-discipline. Excepting scant reference to his friends, Callicles shows no sense whatsoever for the ethical ‘power’ of the other, not even in terms of favoring Greek others over other others. (Xerxes’ exploits at the expense of Greeks are every bit as justified as those of the Greek hero Heracles.) This highlights again the crudity or extremity of Plato’s Callicles, and to repeat, this extremity is I think designed to bring into sharp relief the particular emphasis in the Gorgias on the need for the virtue of temperance, a need fulfilled by dialectical argument.

Dismissing the crude ‘might equals right’ element of Callicles’ natural justice, is there an ethical relation with power that could gain Callicles’ respect and be consistent with Levinasian desire? More specifically, and to situate this question in the context of the Gorgias, is there a way that Callicles could respect Socrates? I contended that common ground between the two consists in both their lives not being lived from the conclusions of dialectical argument. If Callicles were more skilled in dialectic, or even perhaps just an astute observer, might he not have demonstrated something of this common ground to Socrates? After all, the dialogue consists of both men referring to each other’s lives, and not just to the conceptual arguments as such. Where is the evidence that Socrates lives his life from intellectual conclusions, or from knowledge? While he himself argues strongly for this

\[214\text{ In The Symposium Socrates says that love (eros, desire) is the only subject that he claims any knowledge of (‘The Symposium’, The Essential Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 1999, p.704.). The subsequent account of Love as a kind of mean between ignorance and wisdom, between desire and possession, has a fluid or ‘suspended’}\]
approach to life, Socrates, paradoxically and simultaneously, repeatedly acknowledges that he is ignorant of conclusions that supposedly flow from it. As argued above, where is the evidence that Socrates actually lives from the stones and corpses position that Callicles represents in the Gorgias? If Callicles really knows the life that Socrates leads, why doesn’t he point out the paradox? Doing so would ‘clear the decks’ in like manner to the distinction that I made between ‘Platonic’ and ‘Socratic’ dialectic, a clearing that would open up a deeper exploration between the two. With the poles of the double *reductio* out of play, and the paradoxical nature of Socrates’ life acknowledged, a genuine comparison of just what it is that the two interlocutors have in common, and where they also might genuinely differ, becomes possible.

Alexander Nehemas has argued that, contrary to Nietzsche’s official view that Socrates’ was motivated by the tyranny of reason, his actions ‘had no source’, their spring(s) being mysterious. Nietzsche’s relationship with Socrates is paradoxical. ‘Being able always to do the right thing without effort or hesitation and without reason … is exactly what Nietzsche praises as “instinctive” action’. Nietzsche denies this of Socrates, yet this is precisely how Socrates lives. Furthermore, and in line with considerations put forward in this work thus far, I claim that this is not at all a controversial or tendentious reading of Socrates’ life. It is a highly plausible reading, and one that Nietzsche should have recognized. While Nehemas has his own theory as to why Nietzsche did not *(could not?)*

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215 Is this further evidence that Callicles is a fictional character? Of course it may not be, for Plato could always edit out certain kinds of objections to Socrates’ arguments.


217 Ibid.
recognize this reading,\textsuperscript{218} this is independent of why Callicles could not recognize Socrates this way. Obviously Socrates presents himself in the \textit{Gorgias} as someone who values dialectical reason extremely highly. Maybe Callicles knows little more about Socrates’ life than this presentation, and so his sense of alienation from him has something in common with Nietzsche (but without the latter’s ambivalence). Still: \textit{if} Socrates’ life were to be portrayed to Callicles in something approaching its entirety, \textit{if} this primary, ‘instinctive’ aspect was brought home to him, would Callicles retain the contempt for Socrates on display in the \textit{Gorgias}? I think it to be a common enough misconception in regard to Socrates’ life that it is a ‘life of reason’, or more accurately, a life \textit{based} on reason. It certainly is a life of ‘much reasoning’, that is he spends an inordinate amount of time actually reasoning with people. Yet the ultimate springs of his life, which make him so immediately and perpetually confident that rational inquiry is absolutely central to his being, and which also make him certain that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, and that nothing can harm a good man – these springs remain opaque to us, at least in the terms of a traditional philosophical understanding.

Perhaps Callicles’ take on ‘natural justice’ looks particularly crude when read through the prism of our current view of nature. This view is post-Hobbesian, post-Copernican, post-Darwinian, and post-Nietzschean (post the ‘death of God’) – in short, post-teleological. This means that we are corralled into understanding nature in a way whereby morality is reduced to power. Callicles’ language fits quite nicely into this understanding. However, matters are not so straightforward, as we should expect, given the very different understanding of nature that the ancients had. In Callicles’ view, there is a clear gap between things as they are and things as they should be. The naturally gifted \textit{should} cultivate their gifts and not give way to conventional morality. The naturally strong \textit{should} rule, \textit{should} reveal themselves as the masters that their natural endowments equip them to be. It is

\textsuperscript{218} Nehemas sees Nietzsche as being conflicted in his relationship with Socrates because he owes him so much. Yet at the same time it is an integral part of Nietzsche’s philosophy not to model oneself on anyone else, but to truly be an individual. (It is easier perhaps to see why Plato could not recognize the ‘instinctive’ basis of Socrates’ life, for his writings are primarily invested in \textit{explaining} it.)
not just a natural failure of power, but a *disgrace* when gifts are wasted. The contemporary view of nature has little or no place for these concepts of ‘should’ and ‘disgrace’. These concepts speak of an order, a *cosmos*, and a departure from it, where this departure is in a sense a *moral* one. When Callicles uses the term ‘natural justice’ it is plausible to think that he means a natural, moral order where strength, courage and intelligence *should* shine. Callicles’ negative response to Socrates’ counter-argument (in which the majority are actually more powerful than individuals, and in Callicles’ *own terms* therefore superior), illustrates that for him it is not a simple matter of ‘might equals right’, of pure or naked power, but of a certain type of life that certain *individuals should* live. I said earlier that for Callicles how things are is how they ought to be (p.85). Taken literally this is at odds with my present discussion. But taken in terms of a natural order which constitutes a fundamental reality – a cosmos of the gods - then it makes sense to see Callicles as arguing a moral position with more sophistication than the crude ‘might equals right’ one (whether conceived individually or collectively). For Callicles, as for Plato, something has gone wrong. A shadow has fallen over the world, and the fundamental reality is obscured. For Plato, reason is the way to dispel the shadow. For Callicles, reason is one more shade of the same, or perhaps even worse, as it shades or obscures in a particularly deceptive manner, leading the reasoner progressively away from genuine (natural) instinct or power. Reason has a kind of power to be sure, evidenced by Callicles’ own kind of impotence in its presence, but it *shouldn’t* have this power. Reason is a ruse, a trick of some kind, something fundamentally unreal. And, as shown - and despite his employment of it - it doesn’t actually have genuine power for Socrates either! Callicles is moved (empowered) not by reason, but by the naturally impressive exercise of nature’s (god-given) talents. Beyond reason, these talents are self-evidently a good. Exercising them is, to use Aristotelian terms, pleasurable in itself, or desirable ‘for its own sake’. Socrates’ life is moved (empowered) not by reason – as reason leads to Socratic ignorance - but by the naturally impressive (powerful?) exercise of human sociality, where he is ‘impressed’ upon by the natural authority of the otherness of others. Beyond reason – granting
reason is one form through which sociality is expressed - this sociality is a self-evident good. In response to, and engagement with it, one’s very subjectivity is constituted, maintained and developed. One ‘desires’ sociality, infinitely. Despite Callicles’ preoccupation with power conceived of as domination over others, I argue that it is in the actual exercising of power as a process of as ‘much running in and out’ as possible that his position becomes philosophically interesting. On this level Callicles is similarly ‘exposed’ to the ‘contents of life’ as is Socrates. (And in this regard they are perhaps closer together than is Plato – as metaphysician - to either.)

I described Callicles’ and Socrates’ respective relations with ‘empowerment’ from the perspective of the ego’s ‘side’ of the ego. By this I mean that the description remains couched in Aristotelian-type terms, with myself acting as an agent on behalf of the two disputants. My language has them in some sense realizing the ultimate or foundational good. For the reader, my account might imply a philosophical endorsement of this realization, as if Callicles and Socrates follow my argument within themselves, and thereafter adopt their respective positions. But my argument is that neither Callicles nor Socrates philosophically represent to themselves the reflections set out above, and then endorse and adopt them as their positions. The reflections may be a reason to judge or endorse that their positions (or their ways of being?) are in some important sense connected with something fundamentally or self-evidently good in itself, but they do not equal or produce a realization of that connection. This is because even in Aristotelian terms one needs to already be a good man to be able to perceive that which is good (kalon),219 and in Levinasian terms one’s very subjectivity depends upon being ‘exposed’ to sociality, before one can even begin to philosophically reflect or calculate with that subjectivity. Additionally, Socrates being moved or ‘impressed’ by the natural authority of the otherness of others cannot involve being impressed in any reflectively-endorsing fashion. In this scenario I, say, philosophically endorse that Callicles is actually impressive in some regard, and then

act upon (am ‘moved by’) this endorsement.\textsuperscript{220} No, the (Levinasian) experience of natural authority is rather a \textit{passive} affair. Socrates is impressed \textit{upon} by human sociality, by the face of others, in a direct, pre-reflective way. Levinas says that ‘in this most passive passivity, the Self is freed from every Other and from itself,’\textsuperscript{221} and ‘this way of being, without prior commitment, responsible for the other (\textit{autrui}), amounts to the fact of human fellowship, prior to freedom.’\textsuperscript{222} In a sense there is no self in Levinas’s ethical relation, or at least there is no egoistic self, just oneself as a part of the whole of sociality, of fellowship. The freedom ‘from every Other and from itself’ is freedom from the world of individual egos, those of others as well as one’s own. It is freedom from autonomy as traditionally conceived, freedom from Sartre’s condemnation to freedom, with its dilemmas of commitment and so on. Here we can gauge why Socrates strikes us as so profoundly confident in his manner of life. The confidence is not borne of dogma or indoctrination, but somewhat contrarily or paradoxically, entirely compatible and comfortable with doctrinal \textit{ignorance}.

Paradoxically, it is partly because of Callicles’ lack of argument, because of his very incredulity at Socrates’ arguments, and because of his apparent naivety in regard to any need for temperance, that his position can be used to illustrate a stance towards life that, separated out from the dialectical straightjacket imposed upon it by Socrates, has something importantly in common with him. Both stances are ‘instinctive’, both eschew argument as the basis for life - one explicitly, the other by his actual practice. Both stances impart a ‘grand vision’ for life, both firmly believe in rank, in ‘nobility’, in \textit{height}. The instinctive appeal of Callicles to students mentioned earlier occurs not on account of some attraction to a corrupt or maniacal notion of power; power at the expense of others, ever-increasing domination over the globe etc. (notwithstanding that this \textit{may} well be in play in some

\textsuperscript{220} It is rather that something about Callicles impresses itself upon me, through the medium of a kind of reflection no doubt, and then I decide to philosophically write something about this.

\textsuperscript{221} Levinas, Emmanuel, ‘Substitution’, \textit{Basic Philosophical Writings}, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1996, p.90.

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., p.91.
student responses!). Rather the appeal occurs by a certain instinctive and direct ‘empowerment’, or in more Levinasian terms, what might be called a ‘desirement’ (being ‘desired up’) by life itself,\textsuperscript{223} that one senses at play in Callicles. This is arguably a similar species of empowerment that moves Socrates’ life as well. It is an imaginatively narrow view of how this empowerment or desirement could conceivably manifest in a life – shaped as it is by Socratic/Platonic dialectic - that radically restricts the possibility that Callicles find much other than a sad waste of talent in the life that Socrates leads.

It is worth reiterating that equality is not necessarily incompatible with rank, or with height. For, as argued, Socrates somehow comes to see the souls of others as coming into his purview from a commanding height. But equally. Socrates is, from within the relatively narrow scope of his moral range,\textsuperscript{224} equi-responsible to all. The emphasis on the soul of others bypasses external marks of rank, or superiority. It rather puts into question the prestige and power attached to these marks. Socrates is commanded or ‘desired up’ by the height of other Athenian citizens, but only as souls, and as such, equally. Contrary to Callicles’ view, Socrates is not commanded by conventional morality in relation to equality, but rather by a direct ethical relation with the commanding otherness (height) of other Athenians, where their vulnerability as souls in need of corrective balance is absolutely common to all, no matter their external rank. From Callicles’ perspective, it appears that there are only two possibilities that can account for the way Socrates lives - the dictates of conventional morality, or the dictates of dialectical reason (which might collude at times). To set it out formally, if Socrates is not commanded by conventional morality, and neither is he dictated to by the conclusions of dialectical reason, then that would leave heroic virtue, or pure hedonism (or some combination of the two, which at points are compatible). But Socrates is manifestly not motivated by the latter two. We may

\textsuperscript{223} Although obviously awkward, ‘desirement’ speaks of a different connotation than that usually associated with empowerment; the latter speaking more of being enabled psychologically or politically.

\textsuperscript{224} Slaves, women, ‘barbarians’, Spartans; presumably all fall outside this range, although see next section, footnote 236.
now gain a certain understanding of why Callicles is astonished at Socrates, of why he sees his life as strange, unnatural, and grotesque. Socrates’ life cannot be conceived of in any traditionally admirable or worthy way, and yet it also does not seem to neatly fit into the framework of obedience (or disobedience) to conventional morality. Callicles is left with Socrates’ presentation of himself as a practitioner of reason, which in the lofty version that he advocates doesn’t even have the ‘virtue’ of craftily using conventional morality as a power play. Socrates’ lofty version of dialectical reason covers over and intellectually blinds him (Socrates) to the actual lofty (transcendent) height from which his ‘desirement’ really flows. It also assists in blinding Callicles to this height, and logically leaves him seeing Socrates as not exercising, or having any connection with, real power at all. This is because Callicles rightly sees that reason, argument, does not actually have the power that Socratic dialectic claims (or at least promises). And so, with Socrates not fitting into any of the categories listed above, this leaves Callicles with no other conclusion than to see him as ‘a grown man stammering ... playing like a child’.225

This now understandable lack of imagination as to what empowerment or desirement could amount to in a life - that it could manifest in a life such as Socrates’! – prevents any potentially fruitful encounter from taking place between the two interlocutors. And if we take Callicles to be a historical, a creation (a part even!) of Plato’s soul, then we may have a hint of why, for all of his writings about Socrates, that his actual life nevertheless remains a question mark, a paradox. What I have mooted as Plato’s lack of understanding is also Callicles’ - except in positive mode. Both understand Socrates as empowered by reason; the former in terms of reason providing its practitioner the only access to the one, true realm; the latter in terms of reason playing an illusory role, leading its exponent away from nature, from ‘natural justice’. However, what really empowers Socrates, or is his desirement, is the height, the commanding authority of otherness. This understanding naturally enough eludes all

225 Gorgias, 485b.
three (Plato, Callicles, and Socrates), but the speculation here is that in Plato’s case the failure to come to terms with the true nature of Socrates’ desirement is compounded by the simultaneous commitment to, and partial rejection of, dialectical reason, *within his own soul*. For Levinas, it is clear that this empowerment, or desirement, is at the base of all ethical relations between humans. However, despite its universality, this ethical relation is not necessarily easily seen. As is clear by now, my main purpose is to show that Socrates’ life may plausibly be read as positively exhibiting this relation, or at least as positively exhibiting a significant aspect of it, even in the midst of factors contributing to its obscuration. Plato as ‘Plato’ contributes to the obscuring of this relation in Socrates’ life, misunderstanding it as a life of reason. Plato as ‘Callicles’ also misunderstands Socrates’ life as a life of reason, yet, in his vehemently negative, or ‘pejorative’ response to Socrates, has a more realistic idea of the limitations of reason than does Plato as ‘Plato’. However, this ‘insight’ of ‘Callicles’ is not at all exploited by Plato. To sum up: the lack of fruitful encounter between Callicles and Socrates in the *Gorgias* is the lack of fruitful encounter between ‘Plato’ and ‘Callicles’ in the soul of Plato (or so goes the present speculation), and this lack distorts Plato’s understanding of Socrates’ life. The present part of this section (‘Levinasian Desire’), together with the previous one (‘Socrates and Callicles: A Double *Reductio*’), constitute an attempt to make good this lack.

The earlier outlined flow of Callicles’ position, the forever ‘running in and running out’ aspect of his take on desire, speaks of the possibility of a fluid self-image, one dynamically energized by the outside, one not inconsistent with the notion of an empowerment, or desirement, by *exteriority*. Callicles is instinctively and naturally impressed by nature’s strength; the commanding force of a Xerxes, the lion, Heracles. The ‘rightness’ or ‘justness’ of nature consists in the natural order and rank of power maintaining itself. He, Callicles, *should* be ruled by this natural power, whether it comes to him strictly from the outside, or whether it flows through him to others as well. The gifted, the

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226 This latter consideration is I think active in the intuitions of students’ responses to the dialogue referred to earlier.
strong, the intelligent, presumably have much ‘running in and running out’ as a basic structure of their soul. But Callicles’ major blind spot is the grandiose nature of his outlook. It seems that he cannot imagine this flow taking place in anyone without aspirations to worldly power, indeed even in anyone who is subject to anyone else: ‘For how can a man be happy that is in subjection to anyone whatever?’227 Callicles’ preoccupation with worldly status and power narrowly restricts the pathways that the flow of desire can take. This outlook must have winners and losers. The losers are those who are not naturally gifted, who cower, and can only exercise a pseudo power by shaming the naturally gifted through a conventionally constructed morality. And yet, at the same time, these losers are cowered by that very morality themselves. It is, quite understandably, beyond Callicles’ conception that there might be an order within which all are equally empowered by this running in and running out, regardless of their subject status. The source of the rank, the height, which commands this empowering flow, is exteriority, but not in any grandiose or worldly status sense. One’s empowerment, one’s desirement, flows directly from and to the other’s otherness, where this otherness is simultaneously vulnerable and naturally authoritative. Socrates’ preparedness to spend his ‘natural gifts’, his life, in ‘obscurity, whispering with three or four lads in a corner’,228 is a direct response to the natural authority of this vulnerable otherness, minus Callicles’ grandiosity. Callicles’ charge against Socrates of ‘never uttering any sentiment which is large or liberal or adequate to the occasion’229 is rendered impotent, or rather, inverted, for indeed there is nothing ‘larger’ or more ‘liberal’ than ‘whispering with three or four lads’ in relation to the state of their souls, and the ‘corner’ is as lofty as the most grandiose arena.230

227 Ibid., 491e.
228 Ibid., 485d-e.
229 Ibid.
230 ‘And as they “cower and spend the rest of their days whispering in a corner”, talking about instead of doing the important, there arises out of the ashes of active life a life of thought, and with it a novel fellowship: friendship constituted by shared commitment to think lucidly about the important’. (Marina Barabas, ‘In Search of Goodness’, in Philosophy, Ethics and a Common Humanity: Essays in Honour of Raimond Gaita, Routledge, London, 2011, p.92.)
‘Exteriority’ speaks of an ‘outside’, and an exposure to it (recall the ‘space’ example from the introduction).\(^{231}\) The exposure of Callicles and Socrates to each other, to the ‘exteriority’ of the other, is limited by the considerations I have put forward. These considerations prevent them learning from each other as they might. However, Socrates clearly exhibits a kind of ‘egalitarianism’ that Callicles lacks, and this ‘exposure’ to others can be discussed in another way, via myth.

I referred earlier to the judgment myths as being at least in part an outcome of dialectic, an attempted additional justification of arguments put forward in dialogue. Yet there are other ways of reading them. The \textit{Gorgias} myth can also be seen as expressing Socratic egalitarianism, and perhaps even Levinasian sensibility. In ‘Getting under the Skin: Platonic Myths in Levinas’, Tanja Staehler interprets the \textit{Gorgias} judgment myth as an example of Levinasian sensibility, albeit in ‘misconception’ mode. With Zeus stripping all the dead of their clothing, judges as well as the to-be-judged, an absolute equality is achieved – judgment purely according to the state of one’s soul – and this is interpreted by Staehler (and Levinas in a footnote from \textit{Otherwise than Being}\(^{232}\)) as ‘primordial contact’, proximity completely unmediated by status, by culture, even by the ‘said’ of language.\(^{233}\) However, in putting forward this myth as an account of \textit{community} judgment, Plato moves too fast, moving beyond the face-to-face encounter towards the political (Levinas’s \textit{third}). In doing so, Plato overlooks the 1\textsuperscript{st} person accusative sense of ‘judgment’, the whole basis of Levinas’s ethics. This is a move which arguably \textit{Socrates - in dialogue} - does not make. He resists the political right to the end of the \textit{Gorgias}, retaining his emphasis on one-on-one dialogue as the key to all else. Indeed, it is this very resistance to the political as it is popularly practiced (by Callicles & co), which Socrates takes to be necessary in contributing to his best guarantee of being truly harm-free in the only sense that matters, that being the sense of himself as an ethical soul. While the myth literally speaks of places

\(^{231}\) Levinas uses the term to deny the ego as traditionally understood.

\(^{232}\) \textit{Otherwise than Being}, p199, note 25.

\(^{233}\) \textit{Levinas and the Ancients}, Indiana University Press, Indiana, pp.72-74.
of bliss and suffering (the Isles of the Blessed and Tartarus) as consequences of the way one lives, it simultaneously captures an exposedness between souls, an exposedness which reveals the deformity, the ugliness, of an unethical soul (as well of course the purity and beauty of the ethical), an ugliness which crucially cannot be seen until its clothes are stripped from it. The myth is not explicit on this point, but it is plausible to see the exposure of the true condition of the soul as being revealed only by the vulnerable (equally exposed) ‘eye’ of the other. That is, not a shame before the collective vision of a community of others, with certain standards, values etc., and neither a self-realized sickness or ugliness (analogy: one finds one has cancer, the other playing a strictly instrumental role in this discovery), but rather an ugliness (or otherwise) in relation to the ‘single’ other.

Might we not see Socrates in dialogue as someone who (somehow) realizes this ‘clothes-free’ sense of purity (or ugliness), and who realizes it in its essential relatedness (its ‘primordial contact’) to others in the face-to-face encounter? Additionally, might we not also see Socrates as someone who realizes this sense so strongly that for him the judgment myths are mere dramatic expressions or flourishes of it? I think this consideration, taken together with Socrates’ professed skepticism in the *Apology* and elsewhere towards a life after death, make it implausible to attribute a seriously future reward-orientated motivation to him.

A brief contrast between the respective reactions of Callicles and Alcibiades to Socrates will close this section. While there is undeniably a tongue in cheek flavor to Alcibiades’ speech (it is delivered with a good dose of humorous self-deprecation), I ignore this in order to illustrate something that I think he does importantly register, even if in deliberately overblown terms.

Alcibiades shares something of Callicles’ astonishment at the ‘grotesque’ aspect of the phenomenon that is Socrates. However, in Alcibiades, we also see an extra dimension to this astonishment, a
dimension that actually transforms the astonishment into a truly ambivalent one. For Callicles, the astonishment is at how one as naturally gifted as Socrates could waste his talents in the way that he does. For Alcibiades, the astonishment is rather at how one so lacking in external beauty and power could have such an effect on him. For example, how can the very banality of much of Socrates’ discourse – just the type of trait that Callicles finds ‘vulgar’ – be so beguiling, speak to Alcibiades’ soul so strongly? Alcibiades’ whole speech towards the end of the Symposium could be characterized as a wondrous paean to an embodied god, but where this wonder is infused with an astonishment at the sheer ordinariness of the god’s appearance, of his external trappings. This picture of a wondrous yet banal god is counter-intuitive to almost every culture, hence the ambivalent nature of Alcibiades’ wonder. Alcibiades experiences the potential sublimity of ‘whispering with three or four lads in a corner’ in a way that Callicles does not, and in this respect he may be understood to have an inkling of the Levinasian ethical relation (which Callicles does not). Alcibiades is not astonished by Socrates’ quality of argument, but by his concern for souls, for his (Alcibiades’) soul, a concern so committed, so steadfast, that he (Alcibiades) is driven to rhapsodic terms to do it justice. Both he and Socrates have some kind of grip on the transcendence of the ethical relation, and this allows them to see the significance of the apparently mundane, the ordinary, and enables them to see through the superficial grandiosity that shapes Callicles’ views.234

234 Robert Faulkner puts forward an account of Alcibiades’ relationship with grand ambition that lines up well with his own speech in the Symposium (see Faulkner’s The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007). For Callicles, political ambition appears to be purely a means to the end of maximizing pleasure (although even that way of describing it should now be qualified in the light of the discussion above). For Alcibiades, it is rather a more mixed affair. Alcibiades exhibits a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards external bouquets; while he clearly enjoys them for themselves, he also sees their true worth as being marks of deserved honor. But what is deserved honor? It appears that Alcibiades never settles this question, and a certain unhappy combination of a preoccupation with grandiose exploits, together with an apparently genuine concern for friendship, for justice, for the state of his soul, leaves him conflicted, and perhaps goes part the way to explaining his shifting loyalties between Athens, Sparta, and Persia, where in each case a simple mercenary analysis does not do justice to his motivations. It is plausible to think that as a ‘lover’ of Socrates, Alcibiades remains permanently affected by him, by his example, and – in line with his speech in the Symposium – he never manages to successfully integrate this affect into that part of his soul that harbors grand ambitions.

There is a remark by Adriaan Peperzak from ‘Some Remarks on Hegel, Kant and Levinas’, where he says that ‘being-for [-the-other] is being a body, is having hands as well as a heart, is building a home in which warmth and meals can be given to the stranger. I cannot be a self claimed by an other if I do not enjoy the world’. He also comments that ‘because the other would not be fully other if he/she were my parent, husband or wife, sister or brother or friend, the other is a stranger’.235 As a ‘being-for-the-other’, Socrates qualifies on the second front (the ‘stranger’ aspect), but on the first (‘being a body etc.’) only in an attenuated sense I think. Allowing for the ‘narrowness of scope’ proviso previously mentioned (p.46), Socrates is no respecter of external rank or privilege, and his well-known preference for Athens is arguably explained in terms of it affording him a relative freedom to philosophize, something that virtually no other city could match.236 His attitude towards his sons seems to be as to souls in need of virtue,237 and whatever other modes of relation he has towards them (his family hardly figures in the dialogues), in this ‘soul’ regard they remain ‘strangers’ to him, equal in status to all other strangers. He may mix predominantly with the aristocratic class, but this perhaps is because of the ostensibly intellectual nature of his ethical ‘project’, and not necessarily because of any class or social preference on his part. (To potentially modify the above-mentioned ‘narrowness of scope’ proviso, Socrates does in fact allow for the possibility of women, slaves and foreigners acquiring virtue, if only they could be led by a true statesman.238) Whatever the degree of

236 *Kraut*, Socrates and the State, see sections VI and VII.
237 ‘The Apology’, op.cit., 42A.
238 *Gorgias*, 514d-515a. (And of course Plato allows for women taking up equal positions to men in the *Republic.* Possibly countering this is Socrates’ reference in the *Apology* (35A) to those who demean themselves in attempting to be treated leniently by the courts, as being ‘no better than women’. It may be that he is simply appealing to the standard view in order to make a point about behavior that he considers to be beneath him, and it is also possible that Socrates views women as being capable of acquiring virtue even though they behave in ways that would be a disgrace for men. Does Socrates (or Plato) think that there are
familiarity with others, their ‘fully other’, their ‘stranger’ aspect, must remain integral for Levinas’s ethical relation to be realized, and Socrates seems to meet this standard.

However, is Socrates a ‘body’? does he have ‘hands’? does he ‘enjoy the world’ in this embodied sense? I said earlier that Socrates is driven by a passion for what I termed eternal sociality, that he enjoys this life, that he desires nothing more than to ‘talk and mix and argue’, but this by no means pre-empts the need for the present question, for what is at issue here is Socrates’ (and Plato’s) relation to sensibility. According to Levinas we are all driven by desire for the other, but our understanding of the nature of this desire, what it amounts to, can vary greatly (otherwise no need to philosophize concerning it!). Although Socrates’ philosophizing is firmly set amidst social occasions, dinner parties etc. (there is no reason to think that he is in any sense priggish or a wowser), the question nevertheless remains as to what kind of (embodied?) enjoyment he actually experiences? The question can be formulated in terms of how Socrates’ ‘soul’ is structured in relation to his body, or in terms of what role sensibility plays in his relation to the world and to others.

Before tackling this question more directly, I will take a longish detour via an examination of a number of topics relevant to it. The following themes of anxiety, sensibility, eros, beauty, and embodiment, all contribute to the general consideration of the role that the Platonic notion of soul plays in Socratic sensibility.

(i) Anxiety

The aim here is to establish in Socrates’ case a certain level of ethical sensibility bona fides. Socrates’ equanimity in the face of death is suggestive not of some kind of bad faith or lack of authenticity, but rather of the possibility of a different and more fundamental species of anxiety. He demonstrates with his life that he is partly responsive to this species of anxiety, a responsiveness which provides masculine and feminine virtues perhaps? At any rate the remark is certainly disparaging from our vantage point.
him with a certain calm. However, this Socratic serenity is later questioned, particularly in terms of how it manifests in Socrates’ embodiment, in his lack of responsiveness to a second (non-soul) aspect of anxiety in relation to the world, and to others. As with most other conclusions of this work regarding Socrates, the verdict will be a mixed one.

Alphonso Lingis notes, by way of contrast with Heidegger, that Levinasian vulnerability arises on account of the ‘liability of being wounded and rent and pained by the force and substantiality of the sensuous element’, and not by anxiety over the imminence of nothingness.\(^\text{239}\) Heidegger’s being-towards-death, in its ‘resolute’ mode - which affords authenticity to man in his relationship with being - is a product of a philosophical move, a move that courageously anticipates and allows the certainty of death (nothingness) to ramify through one’s whole life.\(^\text{240}\) For Heidegger, death is not something distant and anonymous (‘we all die’), but something totally individual and promotional of ek-stasis; it is formative of our very (authentic) individuality, our standing out from the crowd (Heidegger’s ‘they’). In this sense death is seen to be at the heart of our very existence, imminent. In both Heidegger and Levinas vulnerability is imminent, not at all something ‘ahead’. For Heidegger, the key concept is nothingness, with its accompanying ‘spiritual’ anxiety, whereas for Levinas it is rather sensibility, with its included and ever present necessity of pain, a constant threat to one’s egoistic enjoyment, yet simultaneously a constituent part of the very creation of that ego in the first place (more on this shortly). Heidegger’s account relies on the philosophical move of interpreting death as being perpetually threatening. Levinas’s account has no need of such a move. The consideration in favor of the latter’s account is that Heidegger’s interpretation of death is contestable in a way that Levinas’s emphasis on sensibility is not, for can we not imagine (do we not in fact know of) many people for whom non-existence, nothingness, is indeed not threatening? There


certainly seem to be people, and peoples, who show no sign of this kind of anxiety, whereas the anxiety connected to the sensuous element is fundamental to subjectivity itself. Short of interpreting Heidegger’s ‘they’ as being in some kind of denial, or suffering from false consciousness, why conclude that the certainty of anticipatory non-existence is an existentiale of humans? And even if we substitute for this future, death-dependent formulation of non-existence, the imminence of the inevitable nothingness of all the possible selves that I might but cannot be, on account of my being’s dependence upon non-being (Sartre’s ‘negation’), I still maintain that this situation is not necessarily anxiety-producing.

The existential anxiety present in both Heidegger and Sartre is a product of a nothingness at the heart of being. It is crucial to note that this nothingness is an ontological nothingness; a being has no necessary existence. Heidegger responds to this with a somewhat traditional solution - the introduction of resolute-being-towards-death, a kind of courage in facing the situation. Sartre responds with something somewhat similar – the interpretation of nothingness as radical freedom, with an accompanying emphasis on commitment to causes that promote this freedom. Levinas does not so much deny this existential situation, but rather claims that there is a deeper (or prior) level than the ontological, a level that contests this concept of nothingness as being primary. This is the level or medium of sensibility, where through sensibility my enjoyment is both constituted and

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241 I take is as a fairly straightforward, anthropologically established fact that ‘primitive’ peoples show mainly indifference to death, treating it as a natural fact. At the very least they show a lack of the species of classical existential anxiety at issue here.

242 We are not here talking of psychological anxiety, for there are all sorts of reasons why one might not particularly suffer from this, none of which necessarily indicates freedom from existential anxiety. Presumably existential anxiety is the basis of all other types, but if one shows no resonance with the existential kind directly, and at the same time has another explanation for the types of anxiety that one does show signs of, then doesn’t this open up the question as to either the universality, or the primordial nature, of the anxiety under discussion?

243 Sartre’s phenomenological descriptions of anxiety are in fact closer to Levinas than are Heidegger’s, yet philosophically he remains bound in the same dyad of being and non-being as does the latter. (See footnote 255 below.)
threatened, from without and from within, and where additionally the sensibility of the other provides an ethical necessity for my existence. I am necessary not as an ontological being, but for the other. My ‘nothingness’, my complete contingency, can remain in place in a certain ontological sense, but this doesn’t touch my absolute necessity - my absolute responsibility - to and for the other. This could be formulated: what it is to be a human being is to be fundamentally commanded by the vulnerability, the sensibility of the other. This takes the form of an ontological statement, but at the same time it undermines traditional ontology, for according to it my being is always in question. My being’s ‘essence’ does not belong to myself, but always to the other, who I can never second-guess. In order for me to have an essence, I would need to be able to ontologically pin down the otherness of the other, but this is impossible. So there rules a kind of fluidity that necessarily defies a science of being.

For Heidegger, Sartre, and Levinas, the statement ‘I am in essence nothing’ would not necessarily cause any disagreement, but for Levinas the essential nothingness is on account of the fundamental asymmetry of the ethical relation, the absolute ‘superiority’ of the other, which paradoxically establishes one’s own necessity. For the other two thinkers this nothingness has no such relation to others. The philosophical critique that leads to existential anxiety is not denied by Levinas, for he by no means supports any attempt to reinstate either a natural-law or reason-based justification of being(s), but his particular phenomenological approach leads him to uncover an ethical relation that neither Heidegger nor Sartre see. This relation produces a fundamentally ethical anxiety, prior to the existential (ontological) version. Despite the existential emphasis on ‘existence before essence’, which is directed against the intellectualism of reflexive philosophy, it emerges that the ek-
stasis (the ‘standing out’) aspect of human being is still understood in the ontological language of essence/non-essence, being/non-being, necessity/contingency, and thereby fails to fully resist that tradition. Levinas’s innovation is to understand all these terms in a fundamentally ethical tone, thereby philosophically discovering (as it were putting in place) a sensibility beneath or prior to their ontological connotations. This ethical anxiety, springing from sensibility, problematizes existential anxiety by raising the question as to a conflation of the two species. Existential anxiety is taken to be primary because ethical anxiety, the deeper of the conflated pair, is not realized. Furthermore, if we accept Levinas’s claim that existential anxiety over one’s own death is in reality anxiety over the death of others, then existential anxiety begins to look less and less like a fundamental existentiale of the human, and more like a product of a certain philosophical period and mood.

However, this is to leap ahead (to the terrain on which I wish to defend Socratic serenity in the face of death), with the above-outlined contrast between the existential and the ethical tending to skim over the nature of pain involved in the ‘sensuous element’ referred to by Lingis at the beginning of this part. What that contrast fails to fully capture is the legitimate species of existential/ethical anxiety that is involved, that is at least implicit, in Levinas’s ethical relation. This legitimate species of existential/ethical anxiety, as is seen later (in ‘Embodiment’), is lacking in Socrates’ responses to others. It is an anxiety related to a kind of nothingness that is not death-based, but is rather connected to a fundamental equivocation in relation to being. As Lingis also notes, Levinas prefigured his account of the ethical relation with his early studies of the immanence of pain. He summarizes Levinas thus: ‘To be pained is to feel one’s substance, as a passive affliction, in the torment of wanting to escape oneself …. the inability to flee or retreat, the being-mired in oneself, is the

246 See Chapter III, ‘Sensibility and Proximity’, in Otherwise than Being, where Levinas responds to the phenomenological tradition, including Husserl and Heidegger, noting its ongoing constraints within a philosophy of knowing, of appearing (of phenomenology).
suffering of pain.248 These early studies include *On Escape* (1935), *Time and the Other* (1947), and *Existence and Existents* (1947). In the latter Levinas speaks of a fear of being rather than for it (as in Heidegger). This is a fear of being ‘prey to, delivered over to something that is not a “something”’.249 Levinas contrasts the pure nothingness of classical existential thought with the anonymous and indeterminate nothingness, a ‘presence of absence’ that is termed the *il y a* (‘there is’).250 This involves not the pain of being thrown back on oneself, of being unable to escape oneself (which is the pain of *On Escape*’s analysis), but a more primal horror at not being a subject (an ‘existent’), of being essentially anonymous, yet nevertheless being (‘existing’). Levinas describes this horror as stripping consciousness of its very subjectivity, not by a movement into unconsciousness, but rather by throwing one into ‘impersonal vigilance’, a ‘participation’ fundamentally different from Platonic membership in a genus, for this participation has no stable identity of terms, no private existence, and is the very impossibility of death.251 One concrete example or figure given of the manifestation of this impersonal vigilance, existence without existent, is that of insomnia, where there is no escaping to either sleep or to wakefulness, a position that eludes the classical terms of being and non-being. Another example of this condition might be ‘mid-life crises’, where one’s identity (*any* possible identity?) seems to be lost, and where one seems to be helplessly condemned to watch this loss and its accompanying anonymity from a ‘position’ itself which has no identity.

From this perspective, the emergence of the existent out of existence (of a private being out of impersonal and anonymous being) is a kind of mastery over existence, a freedom based not on the pure nothingness of non-being, but rather on the power of consciousness in tearing itself away from the *il y a* (the ‘there is’), from the eternal vigilance of insomnia. ‘Consciousness is the power to

248 Lingis, op.cit., p.229.
250 Ibid., pp.57-59.
251 Ibid., p.56.
sleep’. This retention of the possibility of withdrawing from one’s ‘watch’ implies an already existing participation of consciousness in vigilance (for otherwise how could it even begin to withdraw?). This view of consciousness, implicated in both existence and the emerging existent, is important as it renders it consistent with the notion of an ‘existent being put in touch with its existing’, consistent with the emergence of the ‘I’ as a relationship of an ego with a self. This is understood in terms of the I being ‘riveted to itself’, the ego being ‘encumbered’ with itself, being ‘irremissibly itself’. The fundamental duality of being and non-being is thereby avoided, and along with this the classical existential freedom of Sartre is radically compromised, as this ‘Levinasian’ freedom is responsible for its own emergence from the anonymity of the il y a. It accomplishes this emergence as materiality, a process that Levinas describes as ‘hypostasis’. Thus ‘the freedom of the ego and its materiality go together’, an idea diametrically opposed to that of Sartrean freedom, where material facticity and consciousness are radically split. This hypostasis is the very

253 Ibid.
254 Ibid., p.56.
255 Ibid., pp.51-55.
256 Ibid., p.57.
257 It should be noted that while Sartre’s accounts of the loss of agency (e.g. *Nausea*) look to have strong *phenomenological* similarities to Levinas’s *il y a*, what Sartre *philosophically* draws from them (or in spite of them?) is a yawning chasm of nothingness, a complete lack of any essence, a quite different idea from the *il y a*. This lack of essence has no sensibility of any kind – it is a pure consciousness in this lack. By contrast the sensibility of the *il y a* is taken up into the materiality of the ego, indeed infuses it with its sensuous element, which importantly ‘later’ links it with other selves in a primordial way. This way is not available to Sartre, where facticity, the dyadic twin of negating nothingness, has no such ‘medium’ within which to move towards or be claimed by the other. In ‘God and Philosophy’ Levinas says that ‘it is always true that because of consciousness nothing can be dissimulated in being’, that ‘consciousness is a light that illuminates the world from one end to the other’ (see *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1996, p.134). While Sartre can move via commitment towards an illuminated other, both the illumination and the commitment emanate from a nothingness, a pure consciousness, a radical freedom, which lacks the ethically-charged vulnerability of the sensuous element, an element which itself provides a constituting ‘other-regarding’ aspect of the self. Sartre’s facticity (his ‘thrownness’ into the material world) is a product of the negating work of pure consciousness. Levinas’s hypostasis (the emergence of a material identity from the *il y a*) by contrast is a process immersed in the vulnerability inherent to the sensuous element. This provides a ‘naturally normative’ base to the ethical relation, with there being a kind of sensuously vulnerable, common solidarity between selves in place. The sensuous element is that which Levinas’s transcendence of the other ‘hooks into’, and this fundamental ‘flesh and blood’ aspect helps the ethical relation resist false spiritualities, artificial polarities between souls and bodies etc. For a useful account of the parallels and differences between
presence of the present. It is understood as a ‘rip in the infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existing’. It ‘rips apart and joins together again; it begins, it is beginning itself. It has a past, but in the form of remembrance. It has a history, but it is not history’. The operation by which an existent takes over its existence, apart from any conserving impulse (the struggle for future existence etc.), is a continual birth, instant by instant. The phenomena of fatigue and indolence provide Levinas with clues as to the nature of this continual rebirth. Indolence reveals a being ‘fatigued by the future’, ‘holding back’ from it. The effort required (action itself) in materializing each instant is not an occasion for joy in new birth, but rather constitutes a ‘weary present’. To be sure, there is joy and pride in the virility and sovereignty of the very accomplishment of freedom in materiality, the mastery of the existent over its existence, but this by no means cancels out the weariness of presence, for the joy and pride only come after, as a reflective attitude taken up towards effort. ‘It is never in the labor itself that joy resides’. From the perspective of this version of indolence, the effort (fatigue) of getting out of bed in the morning can be linked to a fundamental hesitation or anxiety (equivocation). This hesitation has nothing to do with anxieties about how the meeting might go today, or what one might say or do in relation to some problem one is facing, but is experienced even when one is full of confidence, with every reason to believe that the day will go well, or even great. The lying in bed reminds us of the purely sensuous contentment of the il y a, complete freedom from being so to speak, and so it tugs at us to linger.... and yet simultaneously there is a horror of remaining in this state, as we know we cannot remain without dissolution (to linger is one thing, to remain is to return), being condemned to be. And so we get up.


258 Ibid., p.52.
259 Existence and Existents, op.cit., p.10.
261 Existence and Existents, op.cit., p.17.
262 Ibid., p.22.
In summary, there is the horror of anonymous existence, which ‘one’ flees from, or rather from which in materialization itself (hypostasis) one’s very self is created. This creating/presencing of oneself, this mastery of the existent in relation to its existence, is necessarily a continually repeated event (effort/act). And this continually repeated effort constitutes the pain of a weary present, from which there is no escape: ‘one must go on’, ‘it’s an effort just to get through the day’ etc. Claimed mystiques of labor always involve other reflective considerations: the pleasure of duty fulfilled, the sense of heroism or achievement in overcoming difficulty, even the body’s own sense of ‘reflective’ well-being after exercise. Sisyphus’s scorn of the gods in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a kind of heroic accomplishment, separate from his actual instant-by-instant labor in pushing the rock continually back up the hill. Sisyphus’s punishment is paradoxically at the same time his ‘salvation’, for the task he is condemned to undertake actually saves him from a fate like the anonymous wanderings of those in Hades. Sisyphus repeatedly defines his very self against the resistance of the materiality of the rock. This pain (effort) in materializing one’s self ‘announces the end of [pure] sensibility’, the end of the purely ‘primal ego’ (discussed hereinafter in ‘Sensibility’). The creation of the private ego involves a ‘savoring [of] the materiality of things’, a savoring in which ‘sensibility has the taste of its own mortality’. Strictly, the horror of the *il y a* is only experienced retrospectively, from this ‘savoring of materiality’ perspective, because from within the purely sensuous element there is a kind of anonymous bathing, a pure, limitless enjoyment, the prospect of which only turns to horror when this is seen as the fatal threat to materiality that it is. (Of course these levels of analysis are not necessarily to be understood as marking separate realms of experience; they rather mark different structural strands within one’s experience of subjectivity.)

263 Ibid.
265 Ibid.
At this point in the discussion an obvious (?) question might occur: why on earth emerge out of the purely sensuous element into the materiality of pained private existence, only to then be caught in that mode courtesy of its perspective producing a horror at the prospect of returning? Levinas says there is no answer possible, but perhaps one could respond to the question by pointing to the way that humans love and cling to their individual identities, despite (and apart from) any calculus of pains and pleasures. Sensibility as the purely sensuous element is care-free (the totally content infant, being fed by its mother), actually a kind of insensibility, whereas sensibility as materiality cares for its own identity. From this latter position mortality as death is not primarily the bogy, but rather mortality as the extinction of our material identity, evidenced by the horror-inducing indolence emanating out of our (‘non-identitied’) existence in the il y a. Mundane examples of this may be seen in the universal anxieties experienced by workers laid off, by people who retire, by people who lose their family roles, by teenagers in attempting to work out ‘who they are’, and in general by anyone thrown into new and strange circumstances where they have to negotiate new roles or identities for themselves. The issue is not to do with particular identities, but rather with having one at all. Before any questions of particular identities (and their ethical status), the deeper (ethical) relation requires an attunement to the above-mentioned equivocation in relation to being, the constant effort in maintaining any identity - in short, of being a being. To be a being is to be engaged in this fundamental equivocation between existence and existent, between the sensuous sensibility/indolence of the il y a and the pained identity of material sensibility.

This picture of Levinasian anxiety perhaps appears tiresomely grim - a kind of grinding, fatigued existence. Indeed, at the level of the solitary subject, this existence involves a fundamental

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266 ‘There is no physics in metaphysics. I can simply show what the significance of hypostasis is’ (*Time and the Other*, op.cit., p.51.). The question treats the issue in the terms of an already existing subject, and in this sense is misconceived, but indeed many of the ways in which one discusses this general area seem to necessarily involve artificial constructions; speaking as if there were causal forces, agents, links; separating out processes as if they were happening apart from one another, and so on.
powerlessness. This is because the effort of each instant does not bring about a sense of connected, enduring time, where the world and its future, its pride and its hope, can enter in. Instead, each instance of an instant involves an evanescence of itself, a pure, non-enduring present, eschewing anything of the past, a constant taking up of a material position, a here, the very constituting of a subject. Despite the mastery over existence gained by the existent in each instant, ‘this stance of an instant is not yet equivalent to the abstract position of the idealist ego, nor to the engagement in the world of Heidegger’s Dasein’. For Levinas, traditional philosophies of existence fail to get to grips with the question ‘what is it to exist?’, and therefore they insert solitary ‘solutions’ – Sartre’s original free choice, and Heidegger’s resoluteness towards death – which already assume an ego or an engagement which is too advanced.

267 Existence and Existents, op.cit., p.103.
268 Ibid., p.104. Some have compared Heidegger’s Es Gibt (‘It gives’) with Levinas’s il y a (e.g. Mark Taylor’s Altarity, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p.211.), but with Heidegger it looks as if the ‘gift’ comes to a being already advanced beyond the state that Levinas is describing in relation to the il y a.
269 Building on Bergson, Edward Casey puts forward an interesting account of the ‘time of the glance’, distinguishing it from the ‘punctual’ instant, but also distinguishing it from the duration of Husserlian time in its retention and protention. Levinas thinks that Husserl and Heidegger have moved too quickly in regard to the instant, missing its particular dialectic. Casey, in situating the ‘glance’ differently from both the instant and duration, makes a case for its own dialectic, one of an outflow and influx, but where this is not to be understood in Levinasian terms of an assimilation (a return to the same), but rather as a constant renewal of the subject in relation to the also ever changing world. The glance (all glances involve exchange, of one type or another) ‘punctures the durational subject from within just as it perforates the enduring world from without: a case of double leakage’. Not a ‘return to the “same” but constitution of the “different”’ (E.S. Casey, ‘The Time of the Glance’, in Becomings, Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures, ed. Elizabeth Grosz, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1999, pp.95-96). Casey is not necessarily opposing his view of the glance to that of Levinas, but arguably merely attempting to outline a largely unnoticed ‘phase’ or ‘time’ of the subject. Nevertheless, there is in his essay the implication of a counter-posing of the glance to the totalizing gaze that Levinas takes to be central to traditional philosophy (and more broadly, western thought itself). The glance does not stare, is not concerned with establishing an abiding presence, and seems to allow for a reciprocation (exchange) that avoids Sartre’s duelling ‘looks’. This affords a creative evolutionary space for both the same and the other. However, in the absence (in Casey’s short essay) of any direct ethical focus, it remains to be seen just how the glance could be situated in relation to the ethical. In Casey’s essay it looks more like an artistic, creative notion, one that already has a certain ‘virility’ built into it, including the ‘entire pyramid of the glancer’s past, a whole heritage of previous perceptions, thoughts, desires, etc.’ (ibid., p.90). And so, the glance begins to resemble a species of ‘mastery’ over one’s existence, a mastery that Levinas opposes with his ethical relation (this mastery of the glance not being the instant-by-instant mastery that Levinas outlines, needed even to become a being in the first place, but rather being a more developed version).
There is a kind of pre-figuring of an exit from this grim picture in what Levinas calls the ‘salvation of everyday life’, a non-instrumental nourishing through the previously-discussed contents of life (good soup, air etc.). However, the real solution or liberation from the weary present is the other, and the sense of time ushered in by one’s relation to their alterity. In *Time and the Other* Levinas outlines the category of the other as not involving another existent (another being), but rather as essential alterity, as a meaning on the same level, yet nevertheless ‘opposed to consciousness’. The erotic relationship illustrates this for Levinas, as internal to it is a refusal of attempts of mastery, of possession, but not because of a relation to (some standard notion of) a power greater than ours, but rather in relation to the mere ‘modesty’ of sheer alterity. The existent’s erotic ‘pursuit’ in relating to this modest movement or withdrawal involves a movement inverse to its own (that of the instancing of the material ‘here’), a movement towards the elsewhere of the other, towards what is never there (or here), a movement into time. It involves a relation with a ‘pure future [avenir], without content’, which opens up ‘hunger, ever richer promises, new perspectives onto the ungraspable’. In a much later work from the seventies (*Proper Names*), Levinas talks of ‘the daily death – and the death of every instant – of other persons, as they withdraw into themselves’, as being precisely that which nurtures love, which constitutes:

Eros in all its ontological purity, which does not require participation in a third term (tastes, common interests, a connaturality of souls) – but direct relationship with what gives itself in withholding itself, with the other *qua* other, with mystery.

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270 ‘The morality of “earthly nourishments” is the first morality, the first abnegation. It is not the last, but one must pass through it’ (*Time and the Other*, op.cit., p.64). This ‘abnegation’ is an initial forgetfulness or separation of the subject from itself, a kind of freedom from being brought about by the (enjoyed) luminosity of the contents of life. This is a luminosity which ushers in the separation of space (soup as soup and not air, air as air and not ideas etc. - that is, not yet as instruments of Dasein), but which does not have a fundamental strangeness, and ultimately is merely a counterfeit transcendence, immanently generated. ‘The exteriority of light does not suffice for the liberation of the ego that is the self’s captive’ (ibid., p.65).

271 *Time and the Other*, op.cit., pp.87-90.

272 Levinas’s calls this ‘diachronic’ time, the basis for synchronic time.

273 Ibid., p.89.

It may now be seen how Levinasian anxiety leads directly to, or is of a piece, with an ethics of the other (and also how his early works prefigure the later). Here also the role of *eros* in its relation to ethics is introduced, a role I revisit in much more detail in the remaining parts of this section.

To look ahead a bit: while the ethical is always lurking in Levinas’s early writings, it is not emphasized there as in his later works, and so the above account perhaps runs the risk of being read too chronologically, or developmentally. With the movement towards a full-blown ethical emphasis in *Totality and Infinity* and (even more so) in *Otherwise than Being*, the material on the *il y a*, on the emergence of the material ego in the instant, on indolence, fatigue etc. recedes somewhat, is overtaken by the ethical urgency of the analysis, with the proximity of the other flooding into all these areas. This is as it should be, for Levinas realizes that his rethinking of time is not yet radical enough, that it still leaves sequential and separate selves, vulnerable to ethical skepticism that points to the persisting ontological chasm between them. One way of continuing to think about this in at least some sequential sense, and yet faithful to Levinas’s later thought, is to see the good (transcendence, the other) *always* calling us out of the primordial, anonymous, sensuous element into the pained materiality of private existence, in order to exist *for the other*. Parents call their children into existence in order for them to be able to respond to others; the state calls its citizens from the anonymous private realm into public service in order for them to be able to respond to the polity; god calls his elect out from the peoples in order for them to be able to respond to mankind as a whole; and we – all of us – are called everyday by the sheer existence of vulnerable others to emerge from our indolence into material and economic being which is responsive. This offers an answer of sorts to the above ‘why on earth emerge into pained private existence?’ question, to be sure an ethical answer through and through (*sui generis*), but one that nevertheless consistently links Levinas’s early and later works. This integrated overview conceives of an energizing quality of the transcendent call infused into all aspects of the journey of the self - its anonymous origins, its
materialization, and its response to the other. Unsurprisingly, this energizing quality has strong parallels with Plato’s form of the good, with the sun that powers and directs all life, although as noted it is not approached or harnessed via the pursuit of knowledge.

In returning now to Socrates, my contention is that, although he exhibits a Levinasian-type ethical sensibility that offers an explanation for his famous serenity in the face of death, he at the same time fails to respond to the anxiety of others in the ‘material existent’ sense, in their fundamental embodiment. This is because he fails to embody his own mastery over existence as a material existent. He rather ‘embodies’ as a soul-based existent, which actually blinds him to his own anxiety at the material existent level. (This anticipates further parts of this section, especially ‘Embodiment’.)

(In relation to Socrates’ response to death, I bypass passages in *Phaedo* where he confidently puts forward life after death considerations regarding the prospect of abiding with ‘men now dead who are better than those in this world now’, and ‘divine masters who are supremely good’, and where he admits to these considerations lessening his ‘distress’. This bypassing is on two counts. First, the passages are somewhat inconsistent with the more agnostic tone of the *Apology*, and with Socratic ignorance in general, and therefore raise the ‘Socrates or Plato?’ question. Second, even if Socrates does suffer *some* distress - he denies grieving - I think it philosophically fruitful to proceed as if this is purely psychological, perhaps even a minor weakness on his part, at least from his own perspective that is.)

Socrates shows no signs of existential anxiety in relation to death, and yet death is a subject never far away in the dialogues. Indeed, as discussed earlier, he has a mooted philosophy of dying. Socrates is legendary for his serenity in the face of death, attempting to pacify his friends’ and family’s anxieties,

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276 An interesting side question here is that of what Plato himself might think of the particular arguments for the immortality of the soul put forward in *Phaedo*. He ‘excuses himself’ from being present in the dialogue on account of illness - is there something to be read into this absence?
and taking the hemlock with equanimity. 277 Does Socrates possess this apparently profound calm courtesy of Sartrean bad faith? (Or is bad faith only possible post-the death of god, in the ‘existential’ era? And correspondingly existential anxiety too?) Despite its promises of truth, does philosophy lead Socrates to speak of death in Heidegger’s anonymous ‘they’ sense? Is his apparent resoluteness towards death a counterfeit version? In responding to this question I begin to answer the key question formulated near the beginning of this section: how is Socrates’ ‘soul’ structured in relation to his body? Or, what role does sensibility play in his relation to the world and to others?

If Levinas is right then anxiety is fundamentally ethical, and Socrates’ serenity in the face of death can be explained by the fact that he has lived a virtuous life, understood not in traditional terms of achieving excellence, but rather in terms of responsibility to and for the other. This does not mean that Socrates has no anxiety, for ethical anxiety of the Levinasian kind is not something that one can ever be free of (it is, if you like, the real existentiale of human beings). Indeed, Socrates is constantly exercised, concerned, vulnerable to and anxious over the state of the soul of Athens, the souls of its citizens. What he does avoid however, is the doubled anxiety of one who suffers both from vulnerability to the vulnerability of the other, as well as from one’s own indifference to this vulnerability. Being free from this latter indifference, death would then only be a source of anxiety in terms of signifying an end to one’s necessary ethical anxiety, but if death itself is required by the ethical relation, then this species of anxiety would appear to be cancelled out. The only kind of death (nothingness) that would be a problem for Socrates would be death as an escape from one’s duty, and so we see him in the Phaedo rejecting suicide as a kind of desertion. 278 The non-being that lies at the heart of being only threatens where it potentially undermines one’s response to the other’s

277 See Crito and Phaedo. Also note Socrates’ calm in battle (see Alcibiades’ speech in the Symposium), and his refusal to join with illegal actions in relation to the bulk trial of the ten commanders, and in relation to the arrest of Leon of Salamis under the Thirty (the latter refusal being a particularly dangerous act on his part). (See the Apology, 32.)

278 Phaedo, 62.
vulnerability. There are many ways of being, but in Levinasian terms only one ethical way, a way which fundamentally undermines traditional notions of being. For Socrates, all the other possibilities of being not realized (non-being) contribute positively to this ethical way of being. He is therefore not haunted or traumatized by non-being. His being-for-the-other is necessitated by the other, and in this relation may be described as existentially authentic. Socrates experiences no existential anxiety in the face of death.

A contemporary example of this kind of serenity is that of Primo Levi’s response to his experience in Auschwitz. Levi describes several levels of guilt, ranging from specific things to do with his own behavior, to a general kind of survivor guilt, the feeling of being alive in someone else’s stead. The latter has nothing to do with anything Levi has done, or omitted to do, but is merely on account of his continuing to exist, as Levinas would say (citing Pascal), of occupying his ‘place under the sun’. However, despite this guilt, Levi says that he is at peace with himself because he bears witness, because he kept his eyes and ears open so that he could tell the story truthfully. He describes himself as being compelled to talk about his experience, to bear witness to it, and for him, to fail in this would be a failing of his responsibility to humanity. Levi illustrates the doubled anxiety spoken of above, the ongoing anxiety that can never be quelled, as well as the anxiety of his own responsibility to that ongoing anxiety, an anxiety that is quelled by his responsiveness to it.279

(ii) Sensibility

However, despite acquitting Socrates of the existentialist charge of bad faith, of having an inauthentically-based resoluteness towards death, there still remain questions in regard to Socratic sensibility. I contend that Socrates is moved by the otherness of the other in a Levinasian way, and this necessarily involves a sensible response on his part, but at this point a closer examination of his sensibility is needed. This is because although one can be moved by the right source, from the right

direction as it were, one can nevertheless still be moved in a restricted or distorted manner. Before attempting to focus on the nature of this restrictedness or distortion, an account of Levinasian sensibility will provide a further point of entry to it.

In *Totality and Infinity* there are apparently two fundamentally different types of sensibility to be found, which pull in different directions. There is the sensibility to the previously outlined ‘contents of life’, to good soup, air etc. (discussed in section 2), and the sensibility of the purely primal ego just discussed (in ‘Anxiety’), which together constitute a sensuality that basks in its own enjoyment, which appropriates to itself, which involves a kind of combination primal/private ego, a relation, a movement, an equivocation, between sensuous enjoyment and material pain. And then there is the sensibility to the sensibility of the other, one’s vulnerability to the vulnerability of the other. This second type interrupts, disrupts the enjoyment of the first, putting it radically into question. *Totality and Infinity* can (almost) be read in a developmental and segregated sense in this regard. Our ‘primal/private ego’ is we on our own, enjoying the contents of life individually (or collectively as aggregated individuals for that matter). The pain that comes along with this is accepted as a necessary part of our existence as separate beings; it is incorporated, psychologically assimilated. It does not wound us ethically. And ‘then’ the other comes into view... and everything is turned upside down, our whole being is put into question; we are ‘obsessed’, ‘traumatized’, ‘persecuted’, taken ‘hostage’, by the other, 280 and the very bread of our mouths no longer belongs to us, but to the other. The other cannot be appropriated, as can the fruits of our labor, or even as can the sensual delights of nature. We have no options. The other cannot be included (or not) in an economy of pleasures, or considered in a realm of (traditional) aesthetic appreciation, or even considered in some ethical calculus – the other must be obeyed in the commands of their vulnerability.

280 All terms used in a number of places by Levinas.
An historical example might helpfully illustrate something of the tension between these two sensibilities. *Schindler’s List* is the title of a book and a film, as well as being an historical list that was compiled by Oskar Schindler’s accountant, listing all the Jews (some 1000 or so) that Schindler saved from the Nazis. Because of the book and film the story is relatively well known, and so my discussion of it hopefully does not start from a base of complete ignorance on the part of the reader. Predictably, the film takes some license with the book, but I nevertheless use a scene from it as I think it dramatically captures the type of responsibility that Schindler came to feel towards the Jews in his employment, and which in an overall sense is attested to amply in the book.

Near the end of the film there is a scene in which Schindler has to leave the concentration camp where his Jewish workers reside (who he has saved from extermination because of his convincing and bribing of the Nazis that they are needed for his munitions factory). This departure is for his own safety, as the war is nearly over, Germany is beaten, and the liberators are coming. All his Jewish workers, many of whom he has known and protected right through the war, are there to see him off. They present him with a ring made of gold from their own teeth that they have melted down. He, expensively dressed, and about to hop into an expensive car to join his wife, breaks down and starts looking at his attire. He says to his Jewish accountant Stern, who is attempting to comfort him, that if he had just thought to sell something of his expensive attire – his tie pin, his watch - then he could have saved at least one more Jew. (Schindler was a capitalist, a man of expensive tastes and style, a flamboyant drinker, who right through the war had lived well.) Stern tries to reassure him that he has saved thousands, that he has no need to berate himself, but Schindler is utterly inconsolable.

The scene demonstrates something of the infinite nature of responsibility, and is a culmination of the face-to-face encounter that Schindler has engaged in with these Jews, an encounter which, little by

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little, has ethically commanded Schindler further and further out of his own ‘capitalistic’ being, to the point of foregoing any serious attempts at financial profit, and now, even to the point of being prepared to give up his personal style of attire. By the time of this final scene in the film, there is in a sense nothing left of, or in, Schindler that is not a potential candidate to be ransomed for the good of the other(s). The responsibility that he feels for the Jews at the end weighs on him – as it were – infinitely, and yet the example is all the more powerful for the fact that at the beginning of the war he was by no stretch of the imagination a saint or hero. Indeed, initially Schindler was firmly set on the road to realizing his capitalist dream of financially surpassing his father. On top of this, by any standard code of morality he was far from being a model of virtue. And yet...this transformation came about. A transformation come about not on account of a religious conversion, and neither as a product of a radical change in his world-view or something like this – indeed Schindler’s life after the war seems to have been in many ways similar to his life before 282 - but one understood as a matter of him simply responding to the ‘commanding vulnerability of the other’.

Because of the obviously radical contrast between Schindler the capitalist, and Schindler the saver of Jews, this case dramatically illustrates the two types of sensibility, dramatically illustrates the radically interrupting nature of the sensibility of responsibility. According to Levinas, this structure of tension between the two sensibilities will always be present in all genuinely ethical responses, no matter how mundane and undramatic they may appear. 283

282 In saying this I am only pointing to the ‘external’ aspect of Schindler’s life (e.g. continued attempts at business ventures etc.), for having been moved in the way he was in relation to ‘his’ Jews during the war it is well-nigh impossible to think that his inner life would have reverted to something like before. It is not as if a Levinasian-type response of that dramatic degree could be compared to something like a viral outbreak which passes through, and then exits one’s system. The question of the response’s relation to the development or transformation of various virtues is not an uninteresting one, yet regardless of how that went with Schindler, surely one must imagine him at some important level to have retained access to the sensibility under discussion.

283 Here there might be an interesting question as to just how something like an Aristotelian-type virtuous disposition might relate to this structure. Does a Ghandi or a Mandela experience something akin to what Schindler appeared to, even if only in an inner sense? Or does the ‘saint’ (the ‘habitual altruist’) become
Our sensibilities then seem to set up a radical tension between enjoyment and responsibility. However, as Levinas points out, in fact this tension is a necessary feature of being-for-the-other:

for it is in the measure that sensibility is complacent in itself, is coiled over upon itself, is an ego, that in its benevolence for the other it remains for the other, despite itself, non-act, signification for the other and not for itself.284

Without this egoistic complacency (enjoyment, enjoyment of enjoyment), the ‘very possibility of giving’285 would be redundant, the for-the-other would collapse into the for-itself, benevolence would become pure magnanimity, or largesse. From this latter perspective, the generosity of the magnanimous element of the soul is not drawn out from egoistic enjoyment but rather emanates from an egoistic self-conception. The basis of this latter is reflexive, and not sensible. It therefore ushers in acts of generosity; it does not have the ‘non-act’ aspect, the sheer passiveness that marks Levinasian ethical sensibility. It cannot be claimed or commanded by the vulnerability of the other’s sensibility -only sensibility itself can be thus commanded. Despite the fact that we sometimes say of someone that they are naturally or instinctively generous, we nevertheless say it admiringly, and this admiration is informed by our awareness of just how far removed this generosity is from their egoistic sensibility.286 It is generosity in tension with egoistic sensibility that is truly admirable.287

accustomed to this ongoing interruption, courtesy of habit? A development of an ethical disposition which enables the bearer to handle the interruption of responsibility in a ‘smooth’ manner? This doesn’t sound right though, as the disposition would be the enabler of the truly ethical response, leaving the disposition’s status as merely instrumental. Perhaps a better way of thinking about this is to say that the interruption of responsibility itself structures the disposition, creating a feedback loop where the disposition does enable, but always taking its cue from the interruption – the feedback loop is the disposition? Saints – if they exist - seem (somehow) to have this disposition continually in place. Schindler by contrast had it only for a time? By this way of thinking Aristotelian-habit is not necessarily antithetical to Levinas’ ethical relation, although of course the former’s eudaimonia-based account of virtue is. (There are many questions here for another time.)

285 Ibid., p.79.
286 Our admiration for the loyalty of a dog is I think anthropomorphic in origin, for we do not really think this loyalty to be much, if at all, removed from their (egoistically) sensible nature.
287 This reminds us of Kant’s notion that we have our best chance of identifying the genuinely moral only in opposition to inclination. Of course the major difference here is that Kantian morality is not grounded in
This account might raise the question as to just how the commanding aspect of the other (the height) commands? With egoistic sensibility there is of course enjoyment itself, and for Levinas ‘concern for the morrow’, the ‘insecurity of the world’, ‘cannot suppress the fundamental agreeableness of life’.\textsuperscript{288} This I think hardly needs to be argued for, evidenced everywhere by just how tenaciously, joyously even, people cling to life, seemingly apart from any calculus of pleasures and pains. However, with ethical sensibility we might ask why Levinas’s account should convince when it seems that a radical separation between the two types of sensibility is necessary. How do we get from the egoistic to the ethical? What does the purely egoistic ‘latch onto’ in the ethical realm? How does the vulnerability of the other get an ethical grip on a pure (separated) ego? More traditional ethical accounts do not have this particular problem, for they all understand the ethical response to the other in terms of it being either a component part of \textit{eudaimonia}, a fundamental respect for universal rationality, a desideratum in a pleasure/pain calculus,\textsuperscript{289} or an existential commitment.

\textit{Otherwise than Being} can be seen as Levinas’s mature answer to this problem.\textsuperscript{290} By contrast with, or rather in development from, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, this later work introduces fully the term ‘proximity’ into the account. Proximity shuts down the space between the two types of sensibility. Standing sensibility, but in reason. For Kant, it is the other as ‘rational agent’ and not as ‘vulnerably sensible other’, that we respond morally to.

\textsuperscript{288} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, Dusquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, pp.149-150. This insecurity is not to be identified with existential anxiety underlying enjoyment - enjoyed courtesy of ‘bad faith’ – for ‘concern for the morrow’ comes not from metaphysical nothingness, but rather from what Levinas calls ‘paganism’, that is from \textit{impersonal} gods (from indeterminate rather than no being). Enjoyment takes place in a faceless, anonymous ‘element’ (the \textit{il y a}: ‘there is’), hence enjoyment’s built-in insecurity. ‘The solidity of the earth that supports me, the blue of the sky above my head, the breath of the wind, the undulation of the sea, the sparkle of the light do not cling to a substance. They come from nowhere’ (ibid.pp.141-2).

\textsuperscript{289} Actually, utilitarianism \textit{does} have at its heart, or rather, underneath it, an unanswered question of ‘why care?’ or at least ‘what is the nature of this care?’ While Aristotle has a natural sort of appeal to common self-interest and common sociality (for him the two tend to coincide), and Kant attempts to make explicit common morality, utilitarianism appears radical by contrast, and this very radicalism presses the ‘why care’ question. Levinas delves deep into the nature of suffering. Utilitarianism by contrast, having posited the ‘can they suffer?’ question as the master ethical principle, then abstracts out from this starting point, and from a distance calculates an imperative arguably every bit as stringent as that of Levinas, but additionally one that seems far less human (inhuman even?), at least in its full-blown version.

\textsuperscript{290} With all Levinas’s works, there is a common thread running through them, and \textit{Otherwise than Being} can be seen as a continuation or further development, not just of \textit{Totality and Infinity}, but also of his very early works (briefly discussed in the ‘Anxiety’ part of this section).
apart from, and prior to, the physics of space/time, Levinas says of proximity that ‘its absolute and proper meaning presupposes “humanity.”’\textsuperscript{291} He describes it as ‘approach, neighborhood, contact’,\textsuperscript{292} as ‘suppressing the distance of consciousness of...’ as ‘a disturbance of the rememberable time’.\textsuperscript{293} And further:

One can call that apocalyptically a break-up of time. But it is a matter of an effaced but untameable diachrony of non-historical, non-said time, which cannot be synchronized in a present by memory and historiography, where the present is but the trace of an immemorial past. The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me; it concerns me before or otherwise. Such is the sense of the non-phenomenality of the face.\textsuperscript{294}

In keeping with the central idea of ethics being prior to ontology, Levinas in \textit{Otherwise than Being} pushes language to the brink of non-sense, but not over the edge (or at least I think it plausible to hold).\textsuperscript{295} I said that proximity shuts down the space between the two types of sensibility, yet apparently paradoxically, it \textit{simultaneously absolutely preserves} a fundamental difference between them. ‘This difference is my non-indifference to the other’.\textsuperscript{296} The paradox is resolved by taking seriously the idea of ethics as \textit{sui generis}, a realm truly of its own kind, not necessarily subject to the physics of space/time, and nor to rules of phenomenology. How does the proximity of the neighbor, his face, concern me before or otherwise than in the measure of the images he gives me? How do I have \textit{anything} to do with him \textit{before}? I won’t rehearse the earlier discussion in relation to Socrates’ subjectivity and its formation by Athens, but with that in mind, here it suffices to note that proximity

\textsuperscript{291} \textit{Otherwise than Being}, op.cit., p.81.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid., p.89.
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{295} His language is seen as hyperbole or even as a paroxysm according to some (see Caputo’s \textit{Against Ethics} and Ricoeur’s \textit{Oneself as Another}), but this characterization is in keeping with \textit{Otherwise than Being}’s self-conception, that of ethical expression (a Saying), as much if not more than exposition (a Said).
\textsuperscript{296} Ibid.
presupposes humanity (for Socrates the polis), another non-physical/biological, non-phenomenological term.\textsuperscript{297}

Some commentators at this point think that Levinas is veering into religious territory, leaving philosophy proper behind or to one side,\textsuperscript{298} or alternatively, writing still within ontology, albeit straining to break its apparently unbreakable bonds.\textsuperscript{299} If Levinas is veering into the religious realm, it certainly is via a rather original and creative pathway, one that arguably bridges between philosophy and religion (and how to characterize the bridge: philosophical, religious?\textsuperscript{300}). On the other hand, if he is still within ontology, straining at its limits, then this straining is a very worthwhile effort, as it helps to clarify ontology’s limits in a way that I think efforts firmly within the field cannot hope to match. At any rate, my method of proceeding is to see whether something makes sense, and I take Levinas’s interpretation of proximity to make sense, linguistic/ethical sense. It may not

\textsuperscript{297} Attempts to square notions such as ‘being at one with humanity’ with autonomous individuality founder to the extent that they proceed using physical, biological, or purely psychological models of thought. They fail in that they are forced to interpret the ‘at one’ non-literally, robbing it of its proper ethical force.

\textsuperscript{298} For example, Caputo’s Against Ethics, and Badiou’s Ethics.

\textsuperscript{299} The best known case is Derrida’s Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.

\textsuperscript{300} In relation to a number of thinkers, including Levinas, a later Derrida writes: ‘it can be said....that a certain Kant and a certain Hegel, Kierkegaard of course, and I might even dare to say for provocative effect, Heidegger also, belong to this tradition that consists of proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma, a philosophical and metaphysical doublet, in any case a thinking that “repeats” the possibility of religion without religion’ (The Gift of Death, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p.49). For a quite recent attempt at an articulation of this possibility, see Simon Critchley’s The Faith of the Faithless (Verso, London, 2012).

Studies reconsidering the very nature of reason itself become relevant at this point. This is a reconsideration which Levinas can be seen to have been involved with, primarily from the philosophical side of the ‘divide’, along with others from the religious side (e.g. John Milbank). An example of an explicit attempt to bridge the divide between reason and religious revelation is D. C. Schindler’s ‘Surprised by Truth: The Drama of Reason in Fundamental Theology’ (Communio 31, Communio: International Catholic Review, Winter 2004). Schindler tries to show that revelation (‘surprise’) is actually built into the very heart of rational understanding or intelligibility. This version of rational understanding is dynamic, in that reason itself is considered to be a deed, an ecstatic response to otherness, whether this be the otherness of ‘natural’ or ‘transcendent’ entities. Accordingly, we ‘surprise’ ourselves in our rational grasping of that which is other, where this surprise is simultaneously intelligible and transcendent; intelligible because it gives a larger or deeper meaning to all that went before, and transcendent because that meaning can by no means be deduced from the past.

In general, I think these kind of ‘religious’ accounts can be understood as contributing important philosophical work, relevant to Levinasian themes, both in terms of (at least indirectly) making him more accessible, as well as in offering a charitable critique of what might be seen as a kind of lopsidedness in Levinas’s thought: namely that, despite his formulation of ‘transcendent immanence’, there seems to be a refusal to ‘compromise’ transcendence? There is little if any attempt by Levinas at an intelligible account of the ‘intersection’ of the two concepts? (This is understandable perhaps when seen in the context of Levinas’s life and times. Cf. Sartre’s radical emphasis on freedom amidst the heart of totalitarianism.)
make ontological sense, but as seen that does not necessarily count against it. To the extent that philosophy is primarily identified with ontology, then Levinasian proximity might not be (philosophically) convincing, but to the extent that philosophy is identified primarily with ethics, then it might be totally convincing.³⁰¹ Levinas himself says that when he invokes the face of the other (proximity, the trace of the infinite), he conceives of himself as searching for a certain kind of ‘meaning’, the significance of which is ‘neither theme nor object of a knowledge, nor the being of a being, nor representation’, but which nevertheless can still constitute a kind of ‘rationality’, or ‘intelligibility’, a transcendence that is a manner of signification that never becomes an immanence.³⁰²

So, we take up our lives in the midst of humanity, proximate to it. In this sense we are not separate, autonomous egos. Yet my neighbor is nevertheless the other, and my relation to him consists of absolute difference from him, constituted by absolute non-indifference to him. My ‘obsession’ with, my ‘persecution’ by, my ‘trauma’ at the hands of my neighbor, is what the common phrase ‘being at one with humanity’ amounts to. This is where ‘diachronic’, ‘non-said’ time becomes crucial. The soul or psyche is understood to be:

a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from its rest, between sleep and insomnia, panting, shivering. It is not an abdication of the same, now alienated and slave to the other, but an abnegation of oneself fully responsible for the other. This identity is brought out by responsibility and is at the service of the other. In the form of responsibility, the psyche in the soul is the other in me, a malady of identity,

³⁰¹ There is potential here of course for a real divide within philosophy. Derrida’s particular originality used to divide philosophy. Arguably Levinas is more radical than Derrida.
both accused and self, the same for the other, the same by the other. Qui pro quo, it is a substitution, extraordinary.\textsuperscript{303}

Levinas employs the image of the psyche as ‘the maternal body,’\textsuperscript{304} as ‘gestation of the other in the same’.\textsuperscript{305} These images and terms (‘obsession’, ‘persecution’, ‘trauma’) are not intended figuratively, but as literal features of the ethical relation.\textsuperscript{306} If it appears that the image of the psyche as ‘the maternal body’ can only be taken figuratively or metaphorically, this is only initially so, for we can think of the psyche (anyone’s psyche, male or female) as actually gestating the other. The maternal metaphor becomes literal. In ethical/phenomenological terms, we are all mothers.\textsuperscript{307} Only in the physics of space/time - in synchronic, ‘said’ time - would these images and terms have to be interpreted figuratively or metaphorically. Because they can be taken literally (phenomenologically), and at the same time non-psychologically/pathologically, Levinas’s account of how the other commands us ethically can make sense.\textsuperscript{308} It is the proximity of Levinas’s ethical sensibility that makes it truly a sensibility and not anything reflexive (let alone intellectual). ‘Insomnia’, ‘obsession’,

\textsuperscript{303} Otherwise than Being, op.cit., pp.68-69.
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid., p.67.
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., p.75.
\textsuperscript{306} A number of these terms appear to be interchangeable, but this appearance does not necessarily detract from their literal power. Perhaps it is better to see them as variations on a theme, much like multiple descriptions which all capture something essential, sometimes overlapping, but at the same time adding subtle richness to the overall sense intended.
\textsuperscript{307} I do not in this work address the feminist debate over the use of gendered terms in Levinas’s writings. Despite my point regarding the possibility of taking ‘maternal’ in a literal sense, this does not necessarily establish that Levinas’s writings or ideas are not in some sense sexist. They may be so, but this does not necessarily compromise the use that can be made of them. Examples of authors who may be usefully consulted on this controversy are Tina Chanter (Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas, and Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger), Stella Sanford (‘Levinas, Feminism and the Feminine’ in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas), and Claire Elise Katz (Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca).
\textsuperscript{308} The creative virtue of Levinas’s account is that it actually starts from common notions and intuitions of goodness, and using everyday terms such as proximity, obsession, trauma, persecution, insomnia etc., is true to those notions and intuitions by locating the ethical relation in a description simultaneously down to earth and totally transcendent. In doing so, he engages with the ontological tradition, claiming something more originary (a claim of course that finds precedent within that tradition itself), and pushes language to (plausible) limits not seen previously. This pushing of limits may be suggestive of the religious, but it is firmly grounded in language, in intelligible discourse, and certainly implies nothing in terms of mystical inner experience as such. If it is mystical, it is because language, discourse itself, is mystical, and this applies no less to the sense of the apparently transparent, crystal clear, speech of analytical philosophy, than it does to the speech of Levinas.
‘trauma’, ‘persecution’, ‘malady’, are all expressions of immediacy, expressions which place or fuse one’s ‘identity’ absolutely with the experiences indicated by them. Of course, the phenomena associated with these terms manifests psychologically/pathologically, but the essential understanding or sense of them is not in that mode. To draw the right kind of distinction here we only need think of people whose whole being is driven by some cause, where in no way would they necessarily manifest ‘psychological symptoms’ that would attract the attention of therapeutic approaches. For example, the psychological manifestation of being ‘traumatized’ or ‘obsessed’ in the Levinasian mode might simply show in one’s almost total preoccupation with a cause, in not being able to ‘let it go’, in coming back to it in one’s thoughts over and over, in one’s ongoing attempts to address it etc. None of this necessarily equates with anything that we would think of as especially ‘psychological’. To be sure, this preoccupation manifests in the psyche, but this is the ordinary, everyday way, that anything manifests in the psyche. (Obviously the preoccupation can also become pathologically psychological, and then it might be an appropriate issue for a therapeutic approach, although in cases like these it is an interesting question as to whether these approaches would have the effect of eliminating the underlying ethical relation along with the pathological symptoms!) Levinas himself tells the story of a meeting with Latin American students, who he describes as ‘well versed in the terminology of Marxist liberation and terribly concerned by the suffering and unhappiness of their people in Argentina’. He tells of them impatiently asking him whether he has ever actually witnessed the ‘utopian rapport with the other’ that his ethical philosophy speaks of. His answer is ‘Yes indeed – here in this room’.309

Before returning to Socrates, I first draw from literature a candidate example of Levinas’s ethical sensibility. Hopefully this will help to clarify its nature further, as well as acting as a kind of frame or

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pointer with which to indicate the type of intelligibility that connects with the type of sensibility in question.

In ‘Good and Evil in Action’, Roy Holland discusses Joseph Conrad’s short story *The Duel*. The story involves a sense of responsibility between two duelists (D’Hubert and Feraud), a sense the fineness of which Holland thinks cannot be captured in terms of any ‘intention to benefit’ which would be located in the psychological make-up of either of them. This responsibility manifests in the form of a particular sense of honor between D’Hubert and Feraud, a sense that runs a unique and un-plottable course. Although originating in a conventional enough sense of offence taken by Feraud at the way D’Hubert intervenes in front of others to arrest him (for dueling and seriously injuring a civilian), this sense of honor, as it develops through a series of duels between them spanning 15 years, becomes unfathomable to all others. I will not rehearse Holland’s take on the intelligibility of the course of this particular sense of honor (suffice to say that in this regard it is intelligible as a case of genuinely fine honor, that is, in Holland’s terms an honor underpinned with a genuine and wondrous sense of responsibility). Instead, I focus primarily on the nature of this intelligibility. It is not something that can be understood in terms of any appraisal of the two protagonists’ motivations to act responsibly (let alone any calculation of consequences, effects on others etc.), but is rather understood by an appraisal of a number of various factors: the fact of them being soldiers in the time that they lived; their varying, respective attachments to the Napoleonic reign; their cooperation in the retreat from Moscow; their shared disgust at what becomes of the government after Napoleon’s exile; and the specific role that Feraud unwittingly plays in bringing proof to D’Hubert of his fiancée’s passion for him. And still, these factors are not enough, for the intelligibility also crucially depends upon what D’Hubert makes of them. Despite Feraud’s sense of honor clearly becoming distorted and corrupted (he becomes obsessed with what he takes to be his honor), Conrad portrays D’Hubert as taking these factors as virtually determinant of his growing sense of responsibility for him. This sense of
responsibility leads him to save the emperor-loving Feraud from the ‘restoration’ firing squad (only to be challenged yet again to another duel by him), and to keep Feraud from the poorhouse for the rest of his life when he loses his pension, with both of these acts being done secretly. Without these listed factors there would be no ‘course’ for this sense of responsibility to develop into, but in an important sense the responsibility must be logically prior to the factors, for by themselves they cannot ‘dictate’ (or create) responsibility, but only set out its path. This responsibility is not something that D’Hubert intends beforehand towards Feraud, but rather it emerges in him in response to these factors; he becomes radically responsible for Feraud in a way that simply cannot be accounted for in some forward-looking manner. Holland thinks there is something necessarily mysterious about it.

There is a flow that occurs between D’Hubert and Feraud. Initially this is a flow of Feraud’s sense of honor (he being the initially offended one) into D’Hubert’s, and correspondingly a return flow of D’Hubert’s honor in attribution to Feraud, albeit generous well beyond evidence. (Obviously there needs to be something legitimate to work upon, and this is where the offense that triggers the whole affair is genuine enough, otherwise it all begins to look somewhat artificial). This flow allows for two things: an open, uncontainable aspect to the relation between them, and an obscurity as to where one’s honor ends and the other’s begins. Holland thinks it important that this obscurity as to ‘whose exactly is the honor’ be preserved, as D’Hubert’s honor is tied in with Feraud’s, his sense of honoring Feraud being internal to his own sense of himself as being honorable. Although judgments of distortion and obsession can, and indeed are, made in relation to Feraud’s sense of honor (in this way it lacks the depth of D’Hubert’s), Holland maintains that the ‘concern of both of these men with

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310 I do not address here the question of the practice of dueling, for the kind of responsibility at issue can be manifest without taking on 2nd order questions at the same time.

honor is equally intense. D’Hubert’s honoring of Feraud, going well beyond what is reciprocally required, recognizes this intense concern, and at the same time refuses to judge and dismiss Feraud on account of him manifesting it in a distorted fashion. Through his relation with Feraud, D’Hubert moves from a conventional sense of honor to a highly interpersonal one. This sense cannot be foreseen, cannot be seen apart from the various factors listed above, and the interpersonal responses to them, that mark out the course of its development. The interpersonal sense of honor transcends conventional judgments and mores, although it may of course be triggered by and take its initial cues from them. It is not an a priori that ‘exists’ apart from the empirical world, but rather is something the meaning of which is learnt only in its empirical and contingent development. Another way of saying this is to say that the meaning of honor is not fixed, but can be infinitely deepened. To be sure, traditional virtues such as courage and self-control are needed for D’Hubert to stay attuned to this transcending trajectory - courage in the duels and in the anticipation of them, self-control in refusing to succumb to the animosity that partially drives Feraud - but the manifestation of these is not a matter of cultivation, of ‘working on one’s character’, but rather a by-product of holding to the trajectory itself. This has a circular air about it, but not viciously, as the traditional virtues themselves have a symbiotic relation with the trajectory.

This example can now be fitted more explicitly into the terms of Levinas’s ethical sensibility. As separate individuals D’Hubert and Feraud have the sensibility of what I termed earlier a primal/private ego. Both enjoy and bask in the contents of life, the nourishments of the world; both forge a material identity for themselves; both are subject to the indolence that speaks of the anonymous realm of the il y a, a realm that, although providing the enjoyment, also threatens to

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312 Ibid., p.125.
313 This view would see the fineness of the virtues as being internally connected to the fineness of the trajectory. Can we see those who flew the planes into the twin towers as being truly courageous? Certainly, from one point of view there must have been a certain kind of physical courage in play, but if we see this courage as a by-product of their particular trajectory, then its fineness (its reality as being a genuine case of courage?) would be radically compromised, at least for the western world.
undo their identities. So far there is nothing whatsoever particular to their story here – this is merely a recap of one level of the human condition. However, when D’Hubert and Feraud enter into each other’s lives, they begin a process of being transported out of these ‘humdrum’ egos into a transcendent realm, the realm of infinite responsibility.\textsuperscript{314} The particular mode of transport in their case is honor, but it is a sense of honor that develops in the milieu of a kind of ethical sensibility that proximately grips them. The time and space of material existence (themselves as existents) is closed down, and in Levinas’s terms they relate to each other in absolute difference, yet constituted by absolute non-indifference. They are absolutely other (to each other), and yet at the same time absolutely at one (with each other). This proximate sensibility is I think the only thing that can philosophically explain the (ethical) intelligibility of D’Hubert being non-pathologically compelled to follow the course he does in relation to Feraud. Holland describes the development of this responsibility as that of a parent to a dependent child.\textsuperscript{315} In Levinas’s terms this is ‘the psyche as the maternal body’, as ‘gestation of the other in the same’.

It is the art of Conrad that renders the story as one of poetic justice as well as of remarkable fineness. In the final duel between the two D’Hubert foregoes his right to kill Feraud, and instead binds him by his (Feraud’s) word of honor to give up the right of challenge, which he (D’Hubert) then takes sole possession of. This masterfully leaves Feraud with dignity intact, for he has not been humiliated with condescending generosity, but is rather condemned to be ever vigilant for D’Hubert’s challenge (which of course the reader knows will never come). Though contributing to the artistic completeness of the story, this poetic justice may also partially blind one to the sheer, ethical fineness of D’Hubert. While his consummate regard for Feraud’s sense of honor is further proof of D’Hubert’s absolute sense of responsibility towards him, it at the same time artfully coincides with a

\textsuperscript{314} The story only dramatically illustrates a process of transportation that potentially occurs at all levels of human interaction.
\textsuperscript{315} Holland, op.cit., p.122.
justice that allows himself and his fiancée to get on with their own lives, free from Feraud’s constant threat. In life there simply may not be such poetically just solutions available. The exercise of this brand of responsibility by no means guarantees such endings.

It emerges that there is a contingent factor at work in just how a Levinasian ethical sensibility will manifest, will develop, and will end. Proximate to others it may be, yet this proximity is merely the platform on which many different forms can spring from. Intelligible - as something genuinely ethical and not pathological – it must be, but this intelligibility is connected to factors that are unforeseeable, factors the interpreting of which cannot be connected in any straightforward way with pre-existing, psychological dispositions. The story of D’Hubert and Feraud might remind the reader, and usefully connect with, the earlier discussion from section 1 of the course that Socrates’ particular pathway took in relation to Athens. I now return to Socrates with the two types of Levinasian sensibility in mind.

If Levinas is right, then without egoistic complacency (enjoyment, enjoyment of enjoyment) the very possibility of giving becomes redundant (the for-the-other collapses into the for-itself, benevolence becomes pure magnanimity or largesse). Only in the measure that sensibility is an ego (in the above sense) does its benevolence for the other remain truly for the other and not for itself. With this in mind, I now examine Socrates’ relationship with his own ego (psyche or soul), and then examine his relations with others in the light of this.

For Levinas, all human relations just are based upon the ethical relation expounded above. Accordingly, there is no ethical choice for Socrates or anyone else in this regard. However, the particularly interesting question here is that of a restricted version of this relation, and how that manifests in a life. The Levinasian ethical relation lies at the base of all human relations, but what layers might be built on it, how these layers might manifest, distort, or obscure the underlying
relation, and also how the latter influences and shapes the layers – in short, the relation between the two - is what is at issue. Socrates is particularly interesting here, in that he exhibits a tension between: on the one hand a Levinasian response to the otherness of the other, and on the other a self-conceived, non-sensible soul. For Socrates, dialectic (in ‘ascension’ mode) plays the role of formally setting out in opposition to, or at least taking a different tack from, this Levinasian response to the other. Yet ironically, dialectic (in ‘deck-clearing’ mode) helps clear the way for the response to be seen for what it is. By contrast, the non-sensible soul emphasis pulls away from the Levinasian response to the other in a stronger and more persistent fashion. My contention is that Socrates is moved by an *intellectualized* version of sensibility, and that this compromises both the egoistic and ethical components of his soul.

Perhaps the most sensibly – as in *sensuously* – informed of all Plato’s dialogues is the *Phaedrus*. The setting is idyllic, the form is ‘theatrical’ in terms of the initial task being that of producing rhetorical speeches, the topic of the speeches is *eros*, and the overall tone is highly poetic. In the earlier discussion of the *Phaedrus* it was an inkling of the overflowing infiniteness of the other that was in evidence, but not philosophically realized because of the emphasis on dialectic. In the present discussion it is the particular notion of *soul* (that informs and steers the second speech) that is examined for the role it plays in suppressing sensibility.

**(iii) The Soul Emphasis**

Cornford writes that Socrates’ discovery was that the true self is not the body but the soul. And by the soul he meant the seat of that faculty of insight which can know good from evil and infallibly choose the good’. 316 While one can question whether Socrates actually thought he had reached this lofty conception in his practical knowledge (as opposed to him holding this as a firm conviction or ideal), this discovery was to shift the understanding of soul or psyche from that of a wispy,

unsubstantial, double of the body, towards a *robustly ethical* entity.\(^{317}\) This understanding of the ethical is one potentially radically at odds with the bodily/earthly virtue connected with conventional norms and ideals. It is an understanding ultimately connected to and guided by a realm of absolute goodness. In the *Phaedrus* we see this realm depicted in poetic form. (It is interesting to note that in the two chief places in the Platonic dialogues where the mode of approach to this realm of absolute goodness is discussed in terms of love, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, Socrates speaks not in his ‘own voice’ but, respectively, in the voice of one constructing a rhetorical/poetic speech, and in the voice of Diotima. Does this speak of a kind of ‘embarrassment’ for Plato? A way of articulating something without fully endorsing it?) At any rate, even within this most sensual mode of approach to the absolute realm, the Levinasian sensibility-suppressing role of the soul emphasis is seen. This role is all the more interesting for how it can be interpreted as giving rise to a combined suppression/manifestation phenomenon.

‘For all body which has its source of motion outside itself is soulless; but a body which moves itself from within is endowed with soul, since self-motion is the very nature of soul’.\(^{318}\) This metaphysical notion of the soul precedes that of the charioteer figure in the *Phaedrus*. It is also a notion at work in

\(^{317}\) Socrates relates in the *Phaedo* how he eschewed metaphysical theories about origins and constituents in favor of a direct ethical focus. In the *Republic* Socrates reasons that ‘unless bodily evil can produce in the soul the soul’s own specific evil, we cannot suppose that it will destroy it, as that would imply that the specific evil of one thing could destroy another quite different thing’ (*The Republic*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1955, 610). Here the clear distinction between soul as ethical entity and soul as body double is evident. The argument for immortality in the *Phaedo* depends upon this distinction, but the suppressed premise is that an ethical entity, because it cannot be destroyed while embodied, is therefore immortal. *Must* this be so? I think this involves a confusion of the metaphysical with the ethical. Kant argues for immortality, but he reasons purely from within the ethical, claiming that an ethical movement towards perfection implies a framework for the continuance of that movement, which the finality of death contradicts. Whatever one makes of that, I see no reason why an ethical entity may not be conceived of as indeed being dependent upon embodiment, and at the same time conceived of as being immune from destruction by bodily evils, but not thereby conceived of as immune from a kind of finality or end that comes with bodily death. (The ethical entity may in some sense continue in the bodies/minds of others, till their death.) The key distinction here is between bodily evils and bodily death. Bodily evils do not harm or destroy the soul, bodily death doesn’t harm it either, but does ‘destroy’ it, as in ending its existence. If the soul is conceived of purely as an ethical entity, with no metaphysical presuppositions necessarily involved, then – despite its dependence upon embodiment - there is no necessary contradiction in holding that it ceases at some point, at least in the Platonic/Socratic terms of the argument.

the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Republic*, where the myths of judgment depend upon a body/soul split that enables the previously-discussed ‘philosophy of death’ to be supported. However, what if this metaphysical notion is reversed? ‘All body which moves itself from within is soulless; but a body which has its source of motion outside itself is endowed with soul, since other-motion is the very nature of soul’. This formulation, rather than the first, actually aligns with Socrates’ practice in life. A further reformulation could be attempted: ‘All soul which moves itself from within is non-ethical; but a soul which has its source of motion outside itself is fully endowed with the ethical, since other-motion is the very nature of the ethical’. I offer these reformulations as a way of attempting to reflect what kind of a shift it is that Cornford actually refers to (not that Cornford necessarily had this notion of the ethical in mind). The shift does not emerge from any inner logic of the original formulation, nor from any metaphysical reflections that Socrates might have engaged in, but rather (mysteriously and un-mysteriously) from an ethical life led. Yet understandably there is confusion, with the first formulation still active in the dialogues, thereby complicating our view of the actual life Socrates leads.

The pre-Socratic notion of the soul, that of a ‘wispy, unsubstantial double of the body’, is actually much closer to Levinasian sensibility than the notion that Socrates formally works with. This is because of its weakness, its propensity to wounding. An utter poignancy of bodily suffering and death in *The Iliad* is captured by Simone Weil’s description:

> ... this bitterness, issuing from its tenderness, and which extends, as the light of the sun, equally over all men. Never does the tone of the poem cease to be impregnated by this bitterness, nor does it ever descend to the level of a complaint. Justice and love, for which there can hardly be a place in this picture of extremes and unjust violence, yet shed their light over the whole without
ever being discerned otherwise than by the accent. Nothing precious is despised, whether or not destined to perish.319

In the *Iliad’s* sensibility there is an attitude to others – to all others, whether Trojan or Greek – that centrally takes into account their particularly human capacity to suffer, and together with this a kind of respect joined with pity, owed to unfortunate beings in their supplication. Beneath the destinies dictated by the capricious gods (and behind them Fate, or if you like, the cosmic order), all men are equally pitied, victors as well as vanquished. The *Iliad’s* idyllic poetry is reserved for scenes of sensual enjoyment; suffering and death are depicted in terms of harsh realism.320 The idyllic scenes bathe the reader in elemental pleasures; the enjoyment is instinctive, non-reflective, sensible in the ‘enjoying the enjoyment’ or primally-egoistic manner. The scenes of suffering and death are by contrast shocking in their stark reality and finality. In their poetic sensibility these contrasting scenes are inextricably linked, each providing for, or feeding sensibility into, the other.321 The *Iliad* is ‘great art’ because it captures these two aspects side by side, as they are in life. (Admittedly one of the *Iliad’s* main themes is that of war, which in the context of the nine-year Trojan campaign is perhaps not so typical of life.)

This universal, pity-based respect, with its tenderness-based bitterness, is arguably a forerunner of a more fully, self-conscious ethical stance. But the players of the *Iliad* are resigned to their fate. The capriciousness of the gods reigns, and so, despite the quality of the poem’s sensibility, for the most part this pity-based respect fails to rule their actions. And so, Achilles responds to Hector’s supplication with the fatalistic words (for both of them):


320 This realism is of course poetic too, but nonetheless real for that (perhaps even more so?). As in fixing our attention on this aspect of life in a way that few other things can.

321 Regarding the *Iliad’s* depictions of death in battle, Raimond Gaita says that ‘each – the horror and the sense of the soldier’s preciousness to his loved ones – deepens our sense of the other’ (*A Common Humanity*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1999, p.45).
Even over me hangs death and a dark destiny.
Whether at dawn, in the evening, or at noon
My life too shall be taken by force of arms...  

Such is the dominance of the gods that the sensibility on display in the poem cannot come fully into its own as an ethical force, but must remain as a mere poignancy. Achilles’ response to Priam’s supplication for the return of Hector’s body is an exception to this, and one of the few examples where this sensibility breaks through into a new possibility.

My second reformulation of the notion of the soul (above): ‘All soul which moves itself from within is non-ethical; but a soul which has its source of motion outside itself is fully endowed with the ethical, since other-motion is the very nature of the ethical’, might fit quite well with the *Iliad*. The players themselves are overwhelmingly moved by the ‘other-motion’ of the gods. But herein lies the problem. This ‘other-motion’ is nothing less than the designs, the loves, and the jealousies of the various gods. It is not human sensibility that moves them, but rather some combination of human *emotion* and divine sensibility (as is only fitting to the genre). So, perhaps a *third* reformulation is suggested: ‘All soul which moves itself from within is non-ethical; but a soul which has its source of

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322 *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, op.cit., p.44.
323 ‘It’s the impossibility of having a beautiful life that gives artistic beauty its particular impact and poignancy’ (John Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, Penguin Books, London, 2004, p.85). The *Iliad’s* scenes of rural or family life are *idyllically* depicted, and it is this contrast with the brutal realities of war that gives the poem such impact. In a sense both are extremes that are not so typical of life, but this is how the artist achieves a condensation of that which matters most to humans. In this way the extremes are all too true of life. The ‘impossibility of having a beautiful life’ takes its sense from the impossibility of an artistic creation being what it presents itself to be - a work of smooth necessity, developed out of a pure and natural sequence. It is the combination of this sense of impossibility with the self-representation of the completed work, or rather the tension, the contradiction, between the two, that is the wonder of art - ‘how is such a work possible?’ That a messily put together creation, possibly involving a good deal of anxiety and doubt, can seem so transcendent to that very process, is a marvel that speaks quite naturally to us of past golden ages, as well as of future utopias. Just how necessary this kind of thinking is to the upholding of the ethical nature of humans is a question worth pursuing.

324 Alexander Pope describes the writing of the *Iliad* as showing ‘the most animated Nature imaginable; everything moves, everything lives, and is put in Action’, adding that ‘no man of a true Poetical Spirit is Master of himself while he reads [it]’ (Sam Goldberg, *Agents and Lives, Moral Thinking in Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.237).
motion in human sensibility is fully endowed with the ethical, since human sensibility is the very nature of the ethical. ‘In human sensibility’ does away with the inside/outside gap, in line with the proximity of Otherwise than Being. It also achieves more fully the ethical movement of the shifting notion of the soul, for while the formulation remains solely in terms of the metaphor of spatial movement, it looks too metaphysical, in a (meta) physical sense. (These reformulations of the soul, going ‘back’ from Plato, past the pre-Socratics to Homer, to some extent echo in a reverse manner Cornford’s study of the transition from religion to philosophy. Or, more accurately, the transition from a primal sociality to religion to philosophy, from the ‘group soul’ as a divine and ‘supersensible extended substance’ to the individual soul of the Western tradition.325)

The fluidity of ‘in human sensibility’ is seen in the exceptionable encounter between Achilles and Priam. The vulnerability of Priam to both the loss of Hector, and to the vulnerability of his broken body, links up, flows together with, or better – into - the vulnerability of Achilles to the vulnerability of Priam, with this fueled by his (Achilles’) own vulnerability to the loss of Patroclus.326 The wonder of the encounter is seen in the totally natural empathy that flows from Achilles towards Priam. This empathy’s power is seen all the more clearly on account of what it has to overcome - namely the totally fate and vengeance-primed mentality that prevails. Achilles is moved by human sensibility, both his own and that of Priam’s. But ‘his own’ here in fact means Priam’s. It is Achilles’ own sensibility’s passive receptiveness (fluid openness) to Priam’s that allows Priam’s imperative - to honor Hector’s body - to become his own. In Levinasian terms, Achilles’ psyche becomes ‘the maternal body’ - it ‘gestates the other in the same’. (Well, at least for this encounter; there is nothing to guarantee that this type of responsiveness necessarily continues.327)

326 David Malouf imaginatively explores this encounter in Ransom.
327 ‘Here, for a brief, inimitable moment, pitiless anger and bitterness are relieved by common grief. .. if it is wishful thinking indeed, misguided sentimentality, to speak of character change in Achilles, here or anywhere, we must nevertheless acknowledge that Achilles’ sympathy for Priam and his willingness to suspend his
There is, quite naturally given the philosophical/ethical motivations of the Platonic dialogues, a self-consciously ethical air about them, an air quite removed from that of the *Iliad*. Yet it is this very self-consciousness that is the problem, for in effect it attempts to substitute an intellectualized, metaphysical realm of the soul for the capriciousness of the gods. In doing so, the human sensibility of the *Iliad*, in its potential ethical significance, is obscured. Despite the fact that Socrates often quotes Homer and the poets, there is very little if anything of the pathos of the *Iliad* in the dialogues.

By contrast there is something of a *clinical* air, with a kind of medical inspection of the health of souls as the main game. A clinician’s sensibility, with poetic accompaniment as a useful aid. While Socrates allows himself to be charmed into the poetic setting of the *Phaedrus*, he is firm in his conviction that ‘fields and trees won’t teach me anything’. Even the fulsome description of the setting (‘the finest possible fragrance’ of the air, the ‘beautiful coolness’ of the water) is topped by the ‘perfect comfort’ of the angle of the grassy slope offered to the head of one who lies at length, one who lies with the aim of *learning* (from dialogue). Nevertheless, within this sanitized context, the second speech of the *Phaedrus* displays a sensibility that in a sense quite closely approaches the interpenetrative or fluid kind being discussed in connection with the *Iliad*.329

While the topic is formally *eros*, there is no doubt that the speech is ultimately designed to exalt the ‘higher elements’ of the soul.330 *Eros* is formally designated a kind of ‘madness’, a wonderful madness even, but this designation occurs because of its enabling role in the growth of the wings

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bitterness temporarily shadow forth a profound and authentic humanity’ (W. Ralph Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil’s Aeneid*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015, pp.73-74). Hopefully by now I have begun to show how the notion of Levinasian sensibility can contribute to a deeper understanding of how the phenomenon of common grief and the sense of an authentic humanity can bring humans together in the way that they do.

328 *Phaedrus*, op.cit., 230e.

329 This sensibility may actually be inspired by the setting (Socrates humorously refers to this possibility at 238c-d), but the point here is that to the extent that this might be so, it happens despite Socrates’ more intellectually-based intentions. (For a slightly different emphasis see Tanja Staehler’s discussion ‘The Body in Plato’s *Phaedrus*’, from *Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-side of Ethics*, Routledge, New York, 2010.)

330 Ibid., 256a.
needed to lift the soul to the heights of the sacred, the beatific vision.\textsuperscript{331} Recalling the earlier
discussion (from the ‘Ascending Dialectic’ part of section 2), this envisaged realm is ‘a reality without
colour or shape, intangible but utterly real, apprehensible only by intellect which is the pilot of the
soul’.\textsuperscript{332} In extolling \textit{eros} for its empowering or nurturing role in the soul’s ascension, the \textit{Phaedrus} is
more fecund than the \textit{Republic}, with the latter work tending to place \textit{eros} in the ‘irrational appetite’
category, an impulse needing to be firmly kept in check.\textsuperscript{333} This fecundity of the \textit{Phaedrus} is double
though, for in the description of the awakening of the soul to the beauty of the beloved there is a
sensibility that, if allowed to shed itself of the preoccupation with an ascension to an intellectualized
realm - that is, if stripped of the formal notion of soul operating in the background – exhibits
symptoms of a genuinely ethical human sensibility. In the next two parts of this section I further
articulate this sensibility by developing a notion of ‘proximate beauty’.

\textit{(iv) Eros, Beauty, and the Ethical}

In the following discussion I bring together four ideas or elements: the first is the suggestion by
Levinas that human sexuality is a prime example of access to the alterity of the other; the second is a
couple of aspects of the account of beauty that Elaine Scarry provides from \textit{On Beauty and Being
Just}; the third is an idea drawn from Kant; and the fourth is Socrates’ story of the soul’s awakening in
relation to the beloved from the \textit{Phaedrus}.

Levinas says that:

\begin{quote}
I have access to the alterity of the Other from the society I maintain with him, and not by quitting
this relation in order to reflect on its terms. Sexuality supplies the example of this relation,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 250b, 256b.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 247c.
\textsuperscript{333} \textit{Republic}, part V, ‘Justice in State and Individual’. The difference in emphasis need not necessarily point to a
tension in Plato’s thought here. The \textit{Republic} is a manifestly ‘political’ work, and therefore different ways of
describing the same approximate areas may be compatible. The \textit{Republic} is usually dated before the \textit{Phaedrus},
which may for some support a developmental view.
accomplished before being reflected on: the other sex is an alterity borne by a being as an essence and not as the reverse of his identity; but it could not affect an unsexed me.\textsuperscript{334}

I cite Levinas’s idea here as a kind of frame for the discussion, examining Elaine Scarry’s account of beauty first. In \textit{On Beauty and Being Just} Scarry puts forwards the idea of beauty as \textit{unprecedented}. Beauty comes to us always as new, as if for the first time. The only precedents we find for present experiences of unprecedented beauty are \textit{other} unprecedented instances of beauty, which only serve to reinforce the unprecedented nature of the present one. This is unlike the classifying of a strange object, where the right hint or clue places it in a recognizable category (e.g. ‘oh, it’s an ancient bottle opener!’), because the pursued quality – beauty – remains unprecedented no matter how many previous instances are invoked. The sought after quality of the strange object is its function, which can be firmly established within humanly instrumental terms. The full account that Scarry gives of beauty - it being unprecedented, welcoming, enlivening, life-saving, an ally of truth, demanding of preservation and distribution - may look providential, as if beauty were especially designed for us, yet her contention is that:

what happens when there is no immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing is just what happens when there \textit{is} an immortal realm behind the beautiful persons or thing: the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world.\textsuperscript{335}

The metaphysical realm is taken by some to justify the weight and attention that we pay to beauty, which alone might seem too single and self-centered, ‘too fragile to support the gravity of our immense regard’.\textsuperscript{336} For Scarry, beauty does not need this metaphysical backdrop: ‘plenitude is built in [to it]’.\textsuperscript{337} The short-lived existence of many examples of beauty (the rainbow, the flower, the human form) by no means undermines the significant regard we pay it. In our immediate perception

\textsuperscript{334} Levinas, Emmanuel, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, Dusquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, p.121.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid., p.47.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., p.48.
of even its most fleeting instances our regard for the world is enlarged. From this perspective the
danger is seen more in the metaphysical backdrop notion, for this notion potentially distracts the
perceiver from the immediacy of this world in its particularity, from a sense of preciousness that
needs no justification from another world. For the positing of a metaphysical realm to truly justify
the regard we pay beauty, it would need to be shown how eternal (and laterally distributed)
longevity, or even eternal majesty, adds a single atom to its weight. For example, certainly these
metaphysical properties may be thought of in terms of ‘beefing up’ the above-mentioned
preservation and distribution aspects of beauty - life-saving to the nth degree as it were - but for this
point to be valid it would first have to be shown that these aspects or qualities of beauty are
intended to reach beyond this world, that their failing to do so is a failing, a shortfall. This I think is a
difficult position to hold. Indeed, there is a very real question as to what negative effect these
metaphysical properties – if taken as necessary supports for it – would have on our experience of
beauty. It’s fleetingness? It’s preciousness? For Scarry, her list above of beauty’s virtues (welcoming,
enlivening, life-saving etc.) comes as a built-in plenitude within the immediate perceptive experience
of beauty.

The structure of our immediate response to beauty involves a preservation-vulnerability sensibility.
Because of its vulnerability we instinctively dwell on beauty, to preserve it, to continue it, but this
response is reduced to a reductio when extended to the point where its vulnerability ceases.\(^{338}\) This
response is fundamentally different from that to injustice, where redistributive practices may rectify
things, eliminating the injustice. It is not the vulnerability of beauty that we wish to eliminate, but
rather the evils or injustice that vulnerability is subject to. This echoes Levinas’s order of things -
questions of justice come after the fundamental ethical relation. While Levinas’s third is always
implicit in the face of the other (the humanity in every other), the primary ethical relation is always

\(^{338}\) This has been well shown by a number of science fiction films illustrating the horrors of immortality.
with the otherness of the other, with the question of justice consisting of the problem of how to balance the unbalanceable, how to divide up infinities. By contrast, considering others within a totalizing structure enables justice to be primary, for then responsibility to the other can be finite, and therefore calculated arithmetically in relation to the third. The primary relation here is with the totality, and then individual others are counted, subsumed within this context. This order is advantageous in that it eliminates Levinas’s insoluble division of infinities, but it occurs at the (infinite) expense of the otherness of every other. In a Levinasian vein, Scarry thinks that rather than being just an analogy of justice, beauty is actually (and in a sense ethically) prior to it, leading us to attempt to institute it (as justice) in social forms, institutions etc.  

However, it is not so much on what might be called the reflectively realizable phenomenological aspects of beauty (outlined thus far) that I wish to focus, but rather on what Scarry describes as its ‘radically decentering’ effect. For it is this effect that might appear to have the strongest affinity with Levinasian sensibility/responsibility, that gets closest to the purely ethical. Making use of Simone Weil, Scarry writes:

> At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to Weil, requires us ‘to give up our imaginary position as the center…. A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions.’ …. Her [Weil’s] account is always deeply somatic: what happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things …. they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space; or they form ‘ladders reaching towards the beauty of the world,’ or they lift us (as though by the air currents of someone else’s sweeping), letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we

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339 Scarry, op.cit., pp.97-109. In this regard she emphasizes beauty’s traditional quality of symmetry as playing a crucial exemplary role for just arrangements.
cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.340

From the midst of this encounter with beauty it would take a willful act to return to the ‘center of the world’. Our ‘willingness to cede our ground’ is perhaps slightly misnamed, for it might imply that one has strong desires or good reasons to cede, a kind of reflective process, whereas in the encounter with beauty this ceding is already past; the decentering is not a matter of willing, but rather of a transformation ‘at the very roots of our sensibility’.

Scarry describes radical decentering as an ‘opiated adjacency’. This is because beauty appears as one of the only things in the world that brings about a feeling of being adjacent (decentered, ‘lateral’), and a state of acute pleasure, simultaneously.341 For Scarry, this simultaneity is the key to the practical instantiation of justice, for it ‘effortlessly incites in us the wish to create’, as well as familiarizing us with our own powers to do so through repeated decentering experiences.342 In the spirit of Iris Murdoch, Scarry goes on to complete her picture with a feature of this ‘wish to create’ that she calls ‘unself-interestedness’. This feature wishes the preservation and creation of beauty for others regardless of one’s own share of it. This wish extends well into future generations, with concern for (the beauty of) the environment being a prime case.

Is there a parallel in Levinas to the mooted ethical, motivational power of Scarry’s ‘state of delight in [one’s own] lateralness’?343 Stronger than a mere denial, Levinas might well criticize this formulation, for the combination of ‘effortless incitement’ and a genuinely ethical ‘radical decentering’ might for Levinas approach something of an oxymoron. The criticism would hold that the level of analysis

340 Ibid., pp.111-112.
341 Ibid., p.114.
342 Ibid., p.115.
343 Ibid., p.114.
involved in Scarry’s radical decentering (and Murdoch’s ‘unselfing’) is still firmly within the realm of the ‘same’, because an adjacency, a lateralness that brings with it a ‘state of acute pleasure’, is by virtue of that very fact, suspect. This is not because of some kind of ethical puritanism, that sees pleasure as being inherently problematic, but because the primary ethical response is responsibility to the other, where this response is called, commanded, from beyond being, from the other whose proximity consists not in ‘the measure of the images he gives me’. For Levinas, the face of the other is not an aesthetically beautiful face. It does not take up its ethical relation with us from within the world of images, but rather by breaking through or disrupting this world. It commands via a sheer ethical ‘force’, not by its inciting beauty. Indeed, in Totality and Infinity Levinas describes the essence of the beautiful as ‘indifference, cold splendor, and silence’. In that section he compares beauty to an artistic façade, all light, with no ‘darkness of matter’, a façade which ‘gleams’, which ‘captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveal itself’. In an earlier work, in even stronger terms, Levinas asserts that ‘there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague’. It appears then, that Scarry’s and Levinas’s accounts are, despite some apparent affinities, fundamentally at odds at a most important point.

This conclusion is unsatisfactory however, for when one reads Scarry’s account (and with Weil and Murdoch in support) there is something intuitively right about it. Many do respond to beauty in the

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346 However, Levinas’s relationship with the aesthetic realm is more complex than might appear at this point. He has a long and enduring engagement with it, using many illustrations from literature in his writings (e.g. Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare), and exploring alterity in the poetry of Celan, Laporte, Agnon, and in particular Blanchot (as will be seen shortly). What does seem clear is that to the extent that art privileges the visual, stresses the play of figura, then Levinas continues throughout his writings to be critical, holding this emphasis as creating an oblique approach to the other, an approach which thereby loses the uprightness of the face-to-face. (For a nuanced discussion of Levinas’s relationship with literature throughout his career, see Jill Robbins’ Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999. For an account that sees Levinas’s ambivalence towards art as a reflection of the real ambiguity of the aesthetic, see Tanja Staehler’s Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-side of Ethics, Routledge, New York, 2010.)
way described, and in regard to the desire to preserve and distribute beauty more widely, it is
difficult to interpret this as an essentially egoistic concern, an assimilation to the same. Is there some
reconciliation possible between the two accounts? The solution I wish to explore involves a
conceptual separation of Levinas’s ‘access to alterity’ from Scarry’s ‘acute delight’. Within the
experience of beauty – notwithstanding Scarry’s simultaneity - the adjacency may be separated from
the delight. Beauty may appear as one of the things in life that has the capacity to instinctively
provide us access to alterity, that naturally decenters us, that automatically places us adjacent to our
more normal sense of self, but the delight that accompanies it can be connected with its intrinsic
nature – its grace, magic etc. - and not with its supposed radically decentering effect. There are
three elements here: the beauty, the delight in that beauty, and the decentering effect. It may only
be a happy coincidence that the latter two occur together, for there are many other things in life that
also seem to decenter - sexuality, drugs, the sublime, pity, empathy, maternity, emergencies, and so
on, none of which necessarily come accompanied by an automatic state of acute delight.

Recalling Levinas’s example of sexuality: it involves a pre-reflective, an essential alterity, one that
‘could not affect an unsexed me’. Humans are ‘ready-made’ sexual beings; in this sense alterity is
built-in, constitutive of what it is to be human. In societal interaction we are automatically
decentered by the other sex, given access to their alterity. We may find this pleasurable, disturbing
etc., as the case may be, but the fundamental relation is prior to our reflective or psychological
reactions to it. This is a structural example of the ethical relation. Levinas is not saying that sexuality
as such provides us with an example of the ethical relation, but only of its structure. I have sexuality

347 Kant’s account of beauty speaks of a delightful match or combination of the free play of our own inner
capacities triggered by the external beautiful catalyst. For Kant, the dwelling on beauty comes about in order to
preserve and continue this free play, a delight in one’s own powers of contemplation (see ‘Analytic of the
Beautiful’ from The Critique of Judgment). Kant’s account lacks Scarry’s radical decentering, and in this lack
helps to separate out the inner delight from the outer displacement. The price Scarry thinks Kant pays for this
separation is the taming, and demotion of beauty, via cordonning it off from the sublime, a diminishing of its
power to astonish, a reduction of it to a mere counterpoint to the genuinely metaphysical (Scarry, op.cit.,
p.84).
in common with the other, but the other sex is at the same time absolutely other from me. This alterity ‘commands’ me sexually because I am sexed differently, but also necessarily in relation to this alterity. This is what it is to be sexed. Levinas says that I cannot ‘quit this relation in order to reflect upon its terms’ without losing access to the alterity. Alterity can only be accessed in relation.

Contrary to sexuality, it appears that Levinas would not concede that our experience of beauty might be likewise understood as providing us with an example of the ethical relation’s structure. Because of its ‘artistic’ element it looks to be not fundamental enough, too ‘plastic’, not sufficiently ‘essential’, still operating in the domain of the same. This means that beauty does not truly grant access to the alterity of the other, but only appears to do so. An example of this apparent but counterfeit alterity is where Scarry discusses Odysseus’s encounter with the young girl Nausicaa on the beach as a prime example of the unprecedented aspect of beauty. Levinas would see this encounter within a broader context of Odysseus’s return to Ithaca, a return to his previous self. There is something plausible in this, as the context is one of self-interest; Odysseus is washed ashore, in personal danger, in need of nourishment, security etc. While Scarry shows how Homer captures something of the astonishing, the unprecedented nature of beauty, Levinas need not deny this, but only query its potentiality to fundamentally shift the overall trajectory of Odysseus’s movement. For Levinas beauty is remarkable, yet it seems to remain an accidental experience within the world, within a return to the same. Beauty does not ethically command, and neither does it offer a good structural example of the ethical relation, for it is too artistically conditioned for this. (Perhaps Levinas could understand Odysseus’s encounter with Nausicaa in a sexual/aesthetic sense? For him this could account for the power of the encounter apart from the above-mentioned self-interest.) Scarry’s decentering (that

348 ‘Essential’ here is parenthesized to distinguish its sense from essentialist theories of human nature; Levinas’s ‘essential alterity’ is meant to capture the other’s fundamental otherness from reduction to any such theory.
349 Scarry, op.cit., pp.21-29.
350 ‘.. a movement of Odyssey where the adventure pursued in the world is but the accident of a return’ (Totality and Infinity, op.cit., pp.176-77).
beauty brings about) is rendered by Levinas as a captivating, magical ‘aesthetic experience’, not fundamentally different from some ‘spaced’ experiences that have no necessary connection with the alterity of the other; drugs, sleep deprivation, religious experiences etc. The unprecedented/alterity parallel is denied.

Yet this is still unsatisfactory. What of the many who do in fact seem to have the experience that Scarry describes; of being decentered, of simultaneously experiencing acute delight, of being effortlessly incited towards preserving and creating beauty/justice? Or do all those examples of Nazis & co., who love classical music, who apparently appreciate the fine arts, who adore physical beauty, automatically refute Scarry’s account? Scarry does not pretend to give some exhaustive account of why it is that some are affected in this way and others are not. She does allow for the fact that people can get it wrong (see the ‘On Beauty and Being Wrong’ section of On Beauty and Being Just), although the scale and type of ‘error’ at issue in the case of the beauty-loving monster is beyond the scope of her short book. I think the way to save Scarry’s account, consistent with that of Levinas, is to ‘seat it’ into the prior ethical relation. Indeed, if Iris Murdoch’s approach may be used as an example here, it is where one’s basic orientation is already ethical that all these instances of encounters with beauty, both natural and artistic, release or incite creative energies in a justice-creating direction.351

This is not to deny that encounters with beauty can be the catalyst for a conversion experience, it is just that the demands on beauty need not be anywhere near that high in order for it to be seen as an important ethical aid. While accepting Levinas’s strong reservations regarding the dangers of the beautiful as actually seducing one away from true alterity,352 I think he may fail to do it justice in terms of its value as an aid. If Odysseus was not on a return-to-self journey, but was, as per the earlier Achilles/Priam example, truly vulnerable to the other in a shared human sensibility, then his encounter with the beauty of Nausicaa would be seated into this deeper context, potentially assisting

351 See Murdoch’s The Sovereignty of Good.
352 Is there a correlation between beautiful cities and just arrangements for their inhabitants?
its fuller realization both internally and externally, within himself and the world. (As it is, the encounter assists Odysseus on his way home, and its remarkable aspect is as it were subsumed in the overall trajectory of the tale. How the encounter might have developed without this trajectory is an interesting question. Another book idea for David Malouf?353) Might it be that the unprecedented nature of beauty, while itself not necessarily connected to the ethical, nevertheless through its ‘gleam’, its brilliance - which just because of this dazzles us, decenters us intellectually/psychologically - reminds us of the decentered nature of our prior ethical relation with alterity? A reminder as well as a seducer? Possibly, which would mean that one might be entitled to conclude that Levinas is too harsh on beauty, or at the very least, could be more even handed.354

So, on this view beauty, while not indicating alterity in the exemplary manner of sexuality,355 nevertheless potentially acts as seducer from, and reminder of, the alterity already in place, and in its reminding role can be said to aid access to it. Scarry’s effortlessly inciting creativity towards justice comes not directly from the acute delight of decentering beauty, but rather from a combination of the prior ethical relation which this decentering delight reminds us of, and the delight itself. Scarry is right about the importance of simultaneity, but it is the simultaneity of delight and the power of the already decentered relation with alterity which provides the effortless incitement. The encounter with beauty is one of the few experiences in life where delight and responsibility may totally align.

Might it be that the encounter with beauty provides us with an ‘anesthetic of delight’ (Scarry’s ‘opiated adjacency’), an anesthetic that paralyzes the pain - Levinas’s trauma - of the ethical relation,

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353 Scarry’s account of Odysseus’s encounter with Nausicaa can stand in its own right, separate from the overall trajectory of the return, and so can Levinas’s general point about the Odyssey. I have merely attempted to apply the logic of Levinas’s take on beauty to Scarry’s example.

354 Plato’s stance towards art comes to mind, and he is vulnerable to the same charge, with the banishment of the poets from his republic being supported by one-sided arguments. Certainly a republic without poets will be less ‘messy’, more clinically philosophical, but thereby also robbed of motivational reminders, catalysts. In this regard Socrates’ reference in Phaedo to the recurring dream exhorting him to ‘practice and cultivate the arts’ is most interesting.

355 Sexuality actually constitutes part of the essence of the alterity of the other, as well as an example par excellence of the relation to this alterity. It is not as if the sexuality of the other is separate from their essential otherness, being merely an example of this.
not in a seducing manner away from it, but rather in a positive embracing of it, with the ‘centered’ self silenced courtesy of the decentering reminder/anesthetic that this delight affords? For Levinas, this could never be a complete silencing, for the centered self is infinitely called into question. No answer, no life lived, can ever respond completely – indeed, as one responds to the other one is called upon to respond even more. However, (at least) in the realm of practical ethics, of ‘becoming better’ as Murdoch would say, Scarry’s view of beauty has its place.

For Levinas, the main deficit in Scarry’s account of beauty and justice, that which pushes her to ask too much of beauty, is the lack of the other. Perhaps she asks too much of beauty because she lacks any other motivational force which explains human passion for justice. Scarry locates within beauty virtually the entire push towards justice. While her account is enticing, with interesting etymological links between the terms ‘beauty’ and ‘fairness’, with the sensible quality of beauty’s symmetry acting as a natural template for the equality of justice, and with beauty’s liberality – it being widely present to almost all peoples at all times, in nature as well as in human artifacts – acting as a constant reminder, the account nevertheless remains only suggestive of something deeper. This is the prior, decenteredness of the relation with alterity that already lies at the heart of subjectivity. The decentering aesthetic experience takes on genuine ethical status to the extent that it connects with the prior relation with alterity. While the mystery of human passion for justice is not lessened in any way by Levinas’s account (Scarry’s linking of beauty with justice is a temptation because of its mooted explanatory power), his account does have the advantage of seating this passion at a level that leaves the above-mentioned dual role of beauty – its seducer/reminder aspect – in place. This is truer to the combined phenomena of beauty and human responses to it. For people do have varied responses to beauty. For some it is as Scarry describes, but for others their natural response is a much more possessively insular one. Here the preservation aspect of Scarry’s account stands, but the push towards lateral distribution is hardly evident at all, is even perhaps actively resisted for various
reasons – e.g. fear of contamination, elitism. Or, more complacently, or contemplatively, there may be merely a kind of self-compartmentalized, Kantian inner delight, accompanied by a built-in expectation of universal agreement in judgment, but no impetus at all towards creation or distribution of the phenomena. (This Kantian delight has I think some promise as an ethical motivator, although not in the terms of pure rationality that tend to dominate his account. More on this shortly.)

However, my contrast between Levinas and Scarry is perhaps a touch too strong, or at least having drawn it, I can now bring out something hitherto not focused on in the latter’s account. This will hopefully connect fruitfully with this section’s theme of the concept of the soul at work in Platonic/Socratic sensibility.

I said above that Scarry locates within beauty virtually the entire push towards justice. (At least in On Beauty and Being Just this is the main theme.) Yet, there is an important aspect of her discussion where there is space for something foreign to beauty to enter into the picture, or perhaps, as Scarry might express it, for the concept of beauty to expand and spread over all life. In speaking of the phenomenon of ‘lateral disregard’, Scarry says that:

> The benefit of the extraordinary is twofold: first, in the demands it (without our invitation) places on us on its own behalf; second, in the pressure it exerts toward extending the same standard laterally. This pressure toward the distributional is an unusual feature of beautiful persons or things.356

Speaking of a beautiful vase, ‘the extraordinary vase involuntarily introduced me to the recognition that vases are fragile, and I then voluntarily extended the consequences of that recognition to other objects in the same category’.357 For Scarry, beauty sponsors both involuntary and voluntary forms of

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356 Scarry, op.cit., p.67.
357 Ibid.
recognition. But what of fragility? Yes, beauty alerts me to the fragility of all vases. And because of
beauty I care about the fragility of the extraordinary vase. But why do I care about the fragility of the
ordinary one? Scarry thinks that ‘through its beauty, the world continually re commits us to a rigorous
standard of perceptual care’, 358 and that ‘one’s daily unmindfulness of the aliveness of others is
temporarily interrupted in the presence of a beautiful person, alerting us to the requirements placed
on us by the aliveness of all persons’. 359 Here a gap opens between the work that beauty itself does,
and the work that the ‘aliveness of others’ does. Is it the beauty or the aliveness that places
requirements upon us? (Or both?) Does beauty act on behalf of all, including the non-beautiful? And
with what aim? To spread itself among all? Or to preserve and promote a perceptual attentiveness to
the aliveness of all, regardless of its own prevalence? Or does aliveness work through beauty? Are
aliveness and beauty two sides of the same coin?

Scarry does not ask these questions in this manner, although as her account moves towards the
instantiation of democracy, with this seen as a lateral distribution of beauty’s symmetry across
humanity, her concept of beauty begins to stretch out to embrace something approaching a quality
of attention rather than a purely aesthetic quality. (Which might provide a clue as to the use that can
be made of the ancient connection between beauty and goodness, as well as the cue to shortly
return to Socrates.) It may be that Scarry unwittingly brings together classical beauty and aliveness
(fragility), by treating the latter with a similar reverence to the former. If this is so, then far from
being critical I prefer to take this running together as a pointer to an internal link between the two, a
link I explore in the next part of this section.

Without stating it as such, Scarry’s account implies that there is something beautiful about the
‘aliveness of others’. Kant may be analogically useful here, with his account of beauty describing

358 Ibid., p.81.
359 Ibid., p.90.
what looks to be a kind of intrinsic delight in contemplation. ‘We dwell on the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself’.\textsuperscript{360} This delight is neither pathological, nor based upon any intellectualized (represented) good, but is rather on account of what Kant describes as an ‘inherent causality, that, namely, of preserving a continuance of … the active engagement of the cognitive powers without ulterior aim’.\textsuperscript{361} This approaches pure reason, the ultimate for Kant - free from pathology, from representation, \textit{a priori}. The formal finality of the activity of cognition \textit{in general} is an end in itself. The ‘quickening’ of the cognitive powers involved in this finality, this end, the activity of preserving a continuance of a state of activity without ulterior aim, is somehow intrinsically delightful.\textsuperscript{362} In very general terms, it might be said that Kant sees the beautiful \textit{in law}, \textit{in necessity, in pure reason}, with external beauty being merely an aid to realizing this.

This is not the place to enter into a detailed exegesis of Kant, for I am using his account as a structural analogy, although I do offer the suggestion that Kant’s account has a lacuna or opening that might be exploited in a non-Kantian direction.\textsuperscript{363} Apart from its possible analogical use, I include Kant’s account for two reasons: first, he has played a fundamental role in changing (at least) our philosophical view of beauty, in shifting it towards the beholder\textsuperscript{364} (it is therefore at least not unfitting that he be brought into the fold of the discussion); and second, because Levinas himself hints in several places that the ultimate value (the categorical imperative) that lies at the heart of

\textsuperscript{360} Emmanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, trans J. Meredith, Clarendon Press, 1961, p.64.
\textsuperscript{361} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{362} While there may be something circular here, this does not necessarily count against it, for the circularity as an \textit{activity} does at least suggest a projection forward in time, usefully keeping the concept of ‘life lived for its own sake’ separate from reductive accounts?
\textsuperscript{363} Schelling (in Kant’s time), and more recently Lacan, are two examples of thinkers who have seen the key to the whole of Kantian philosophy as lying in the aesthetics of the third critique. For Schelling it is a bridge between the epistemology and ethics respectively of the first two critiques. For Lacan it is a key to understanding how desire can persist in the midst of tragedy. (See Simon Critchley’s \textit{Infinitely Demanding}, Verso, London, 2008, pp.74-75, and Lacan’s \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1992, p.261.)
Kant’s schema springs from a sense not measured by being or not being, but which on the contrary actually determines being.\textsuperscript{365}

In some ways, like Levinas’s example of sexuality illustrating the structure of alterity, Kant’s view provides an account of an ‘ultimate value’, or an ‘absolutely constituent part’, that relates us non-reflectively, immediately, to something both within ourselves and others that is essential, necessary. The preservation and continuance of pure, law-like activity, of rationality, is something presumably delighted in regardless of who or what instantiates it. Indeed, for Kant it is the communicability of the mental state attending the beautiful representation itself that is the fundamental thing required for genuine judgment of taste, which enables the judgment to escape the merely private realm. The delight in the beautiful object is somehow a consequence of this communicability. I earlier described this delight as intrinsic to contemplation, but now this ‘somehow’ in connection to the delight and to the communicability poses a question. Not (immediately) in terms of the origin of this delight, but in terms of what place it occupies in Kant’s overall scheme. Does the delight contribute to the \textit{summum bonum}, or is it a mere bonus, a lucky break for humanity, but of no greater significance? I think the latter must be the answer, as there is apparently no place for delight as any kind of constituent part of the Kantian ethical perspective. This is because Kant cannot conceive of a species of ethically-connected delight that is without ‘interest’. The intrinsic delight in the presence of beauty is the closest Kant comes to the above-mentioned purity outside of the formally articulated categorical imperative, yet because it remains firmly in the aesthetic (not ethical) category, it must inevitably be downgraded to a contingent consequent.

The lacuna or opening I mentioned above involves – as per the method of looking for evidence of Levinas’s ethical relation breaking through in the tradition\textsuperscript{366} - seeing Kant’s view as not just

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{365} For example, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, op.cit., p.129.
\textsuperscript{366} See quotation below (p.165).
\end{footnotesize}
providing a possible analogy, but as informed by a different species of delight, a different kind of ‘quickening’ (or ‘aliveness’?) than that of rational nature. This different species of delight is indeed disinterested, but is not understood along the passionate/dispassionate scale, and the quickening or aliveness is understood in connection with a species of vulnerable sensibility that avoids the a priori/a posteriori division of Kant’s, and that involves a ‘communicability’ based upon the flow of vulnerable sensibility itself between people. (There may be extra reason here for considering this reading in relation to Kant, for if one accepts that Kantian rationality does not establish morality as he requires it to, then one might wonder whether his aesthetic philosophy has some potential in this regard.367)

(v) Proximate Beauty (and Particularity)

The discussion can now connect back with Scarry’s ‘aliveness of others’, and with a hereby-proposed species of beauty that, while realized through the aesthetic, has its essential presence beneath the aesthetic’s alerting surface. It consists in its aliveness, in its quickening, ‘experienced’ within oneself and others. ‘Experience’ here is a kind of ‘suspended’ term, neither a priori nor a posteriori in the traditional understanding, yet retaining connotations of both. For Kant, it is ‘utterly impossible’ to derive the beautiful a priori, for that would involve realizing a causal relation (distinct from his ‘inherent causality’) between some representation and the inner delight, something which can only be known a posteriori.368 In keeping with Kant’s overall approach, we dwell on the contemplation which ‘strengthens and reproduces itself’ (the perseverance of the a priori) through experienced beauty (the a posteriori) - without the latter the former is empty. But the species of beauty being proposed here is one that does not depend upon Kant’s particular emphasis on a harmony of inner

367 Von Schiller attempts to address this in his Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man, although the discussion is somewhat restricted by the traditional terms which he understandably employs. (More broadly, thinkers such as Jaspers and Adorno can be understood as seeing Kant’s philosophy as both containing and suppressing a vision of transcendent experience.)

368 Critique of Judgment, op.cit., p.63.
cognitive faculties. It is rather an ‘experienced’ aliveness, a quickening, where this quickening can be articulated in terms of an internal connection to vulnerability. This vulnerability is not a cognitive faculty, but a sensibility that as it were slides ‘between and around’ the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. It is neither sensual in the empirical sense, nor sensible in the cognitive sense. It is rather *prior* to, or as Levinas might say, on the *hither side* of being and its traditional categories.\(^{369}\)

Richard Cohen writes that the closest Kant comes to a real solution to (as he, Cohen designates it) the problem of Cartesian dualism, is his concept of imagination, which he locates between sensibility and reason, providing order for the sensations and flesh to the intellect.\(^{370}\) For Kant, it is through imagination that human sensibility desires the ideal of happiness, and so in this way inclination can be linked to reason, albeit it in a subservient manner. Cohen says that 'perhaps nothing in the whole of critical philosophy is more puzzling and controversial than the nature and role of imagination'.\(^{371}\)

Kant attempts to use imagination as a 'third term' to bridge the gap set in place by the dualism in question, but it is notoriously problematic in this role. Imagination (*imaging*) is naturally closer to sensation than to reason, and the question of how it gets its instructions from reason is a thorny one. In light of this, it might be possible to re-conceptualize the whole schema, rethinking sensation as something which is neither mental (obvious for Kant), nor material (not obvious for Kant), but rather a flow of intersubjective, ethical vulnerability. This flow, when approached from a Cartesian perspective, pans out into dualistic notions of mind and matter, the former the seat of all intelligence, the latter subservient sense-data. Yet without the distortion of this perspective, which dates back to Plato and even Parmenides, this flow has the intelligence not of reason with its pure concepts, but rather of a shared sense of beauty between humans, with the ethical spinning itself out from this sense. The conclusion here is that, while Kant engages in some fascinating and promising

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\(^{369}\) *Otherwise than Being*, op.cit., pp.38, 92.


\(^{371}\) Ibid., (footnote 9) p.329.
work focusing **around** this shared sense of beauty, his account as it stands fails to penetrate to its heart, and remains within the dualistic framework.

So, a key question emerges: minus Kant’s particular emphasis on the cognitive faculties, yet retaining his general idea of a law-like activity consisting of an active engagement, a quickening, can the species of beauty proposed above be articulated in terms that accord with Levinasian alterity? (Sexuality is not a cognitive affair as such, but it has its own *raison d’etre*, its own ‘laws’; we can make (some) sense of it.) Understanding the other as a ‘rational being’ of course will not do; here the *disanalogy* with sexuality becomes obvious, with universal rationality ruling out genuine alterity. But aesthetically beautiful qualities have also been ruled out. Kant sees them only as an aid to realizing inner ‘beauty’; Levinas sees them as ‘plastic’, as a seducer (although I maintain they can also be seen as an aid, a reminder of the ethical relation); and Scarry sees them as centrally related to justice, but I think shifts at points towards the reminder view, with the ‘aliveness of others’ carrying more weight than is formally acknowledged. Is there a version of the ancient link between beauty and goodness that might stand in here, embracing aspects of all three thinkers, as well as shedding light on the concept of the soul at work in Platonic/Socratic sensibility?

Weil provides a clue here. As Scarry notes, Weil’s account is ‘always deeply somatic: what happens, happens to our bodies’ (p.150). Despite Scarry’s traditional emphasis on *visual* beauty, with its associated contemplative pleasures and lessons, Weil’s ‘transformation [that] takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions’, is suggestive of a **different** order of beauty. Gerald Bruns suggests that ‘in Levinas both materiality and the beautiful are reinterpreted in terms of the proximity of things, taking proximity to be something like an alternative to visibility’.\(^{372}\) In the ‘Sensibility and Proximity’ section from

Otherwise than Being, Levinas asks whether expressions such as ‘enjoying a spectacle’ and ‘eating up with one’s eyes’ are purely metaphorical.\(^{373}\) In ‘Language and Proximity’, an earlier essay, he says that ‘the visible caresses the eye’, that ‘one sees and hears like one touches’.\(^{374}\) He claims that ‘the poetry of the world is inseparable from proximity par excellence, or the proximity of a neighbor par excellence’.\(^{375}\) What is this ‘poetry of the world’? A poetic proximity, prior to the beauty that ‘gleams’?

In Otherwise than Being Levinas speaks of the ‘essential beauty of a face’, where this ‘beauty’ is something which breaks through the face of phenomenology. As a ‘plastic form’ phenomenology ‘defects into a face’,\(^{376}\) away from true proximity, even while exhibiting a certain self-awareness of this very defection which sets it apart from the self-satisfied philosophy of presence, of the same.

This phenomenological appearing is:

broken by a young epiphany, the still essential beauty of the face. But this youth is already past in this youth; the skin is with wrinkles, a trace of itself, the ambiguous form of a supreme presence attending to its appearing, breaking through its plastic form with youth, but already a failing of all presence.\(^{377}\)

In a 1970 paper entitled ‘No Identity’ Levinas describes youth as ‘prior to essence’. He sees this youth breaking through in places in the tradition:

Marvelous moments: the One without being of Plato’s Parmenides; the I that breaks though in the cogito when all being is in shipwreck, but before the I is rescued into being; as though the

\(^{373}\) Otherwise than Being, op.cit., p.67.
\(^{374}\) ‘Language and Proximity’, in Collected Philosophical Papers, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987, p.118. Might the paintings of Mark Rothko provide an example here of an art form where the work is manifestly and materially proximate? In looking at a Rothko one’s eye is taken physically by the texture of the painting into the very materiality of the work? In presenting a surface to be looked at, at the same time the work undoes that surface, ‘presenting’ proximity? (See Levinas’s discussion of ‘the red reddens’ in Otherwise than Being, pp.38-39.)
\(^{375}\) Ibid., p.119.
\(^{376}\) Otherwise than Being, op.cit., p.90.
\(^{377}\) Ibid.
shipwreck had not taken place; the Kantian unity of the ‘I think’ before its reduction to a logical form, which Hegel will reduce to a concept; Husserl’s pure ego, transcendent in immanence, on the hither side of the world, but also on the hither side of the absolute being of the reduced consciousness; the Nietzschean man shaking the world’s being in the passage to the overman, ‘reducing’ not by parenthesizing, but by the violence of an unheard-of word...  

Youth, which Levinas claims ‘the philosopher loves’, is the ‘before being’, the ‘otherwise than being’. Contrary to the ‘cult of youth’, this youthful beauty is something central to humanity, to all faces, no matter the age. It is in its ‘surplus of meaning over the being that bears it and claims to measure and restrict it’ that its genuine sincerity, authenticity, and responsibility lies. ‘No Identity’ was written not long after the events of Paris 1968, and Levinas sees in that protest something genuinely youthful (despite it being quickly extinguished by ‘a language as conformist and garrulous as that it was to replace’). Not rebellion against age, but protest against being, against ‘totality’, something which might be seen as clearly in a 90 as in a 9 year old. But the love of the philosophers, although genuine, is a distorted love, distorted by a preoccupation with being, and so when Levinas claims that they love youth, I think he means this in this distorted sense. The preoccupation with the presence (the being) of even the biologically youthful beauty of the face ignores the skin with its wrinkles, a ‘trace’ of what Levinas elsewhere calls a ‘time immemorial’, that is, a time that never was, a past that has never been present. Humanity is constantly, instantly, ageing. This is not an heroically creative, artistic becoming (Nietzsche), that is opposed to being and non-being, but rather a pure vulnerability, a pure sensibility, that is prior to all becoming, prior to measured time, an infinity that

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379 Ibid.
380 Ibid., p.151.
381 Ibid. Much later, in an interview, Levinas commented that the 1968 Paris movement seemed rather ordinary, without much nobility or great ideas (Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, p.196). The reason for noting this is merely to doubly emphasize that the ‘genuinely youthful’ upsurge, far from being a biological phenomenon, is also not related either to brilliance of ideas or worthiness of cause - it is pre-intellectual, pre-philosophical. (Whether Levinas is right or not in his assessment of the movement is of course a different matter.)
'shows itself enigmatically, like a blinking light'. This blinking light metaphor speaks of an alternation, an ambiguity, an equivocation, which Levinas calls an ‘alternating of sense, the ambiguity of a phenomenon and its defect’. The breaking through of a ‘supreme presence’, a ‘youthful epiphany’, but at the very same time a withdrawal, a ‘failing of all presence’. In his discussion of the caress, Levinas posits the tenderness of the skin as the: very gap between the approach and the approached, a disparity, a non-intentionality, a non-teleology. Whence the disorder of caresses, the diachrony, a pleasure without present, pity, painfulness. Proximity, immediacy, is to enjoy and to suffer by the other. This simultaneous alternation of a sense of presenting and withdrawing, without this indicating any metaphysical scale for the plotting of such phenomena – that is, completely apart from any account of the philosophy of presence, of being, or becoming – constitutes an integral part of what might be termed sensible beauty par excellence for Levinas, the ‘poetic proximity of the world.’ In relation to Maurice Blanchot Levinas discusses this poetry in terms of a ‘language of scintillation.’ This is the ‘saying that let’s go of what it grasps’, the ‘word that contradicts itself’, a ‘beauty (an almost tangible beauty) of a contradictory alternation of verbal exchanges in his [Blanchot’s] works’. ‘Scintillation’ has the connotations of a trace and a spark, the blinking light metaphor again. For Blanchot and Levinas, poetry ‘transforms words – indices of a manifold, moments of a totality – into signs set free, that break through the walls of immanence, disrupting order.’ This is language as something like pure expression, or pure exposure, or ‘Desire’, where the words, although saying something

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383 Ibid., p.90.
384 Ibid.
386 Levinas’s ‘trace of the other’ is the residue of a withdrawal, but a residue which cannot be used to track or locate the absent other. It is the other in their withdrawal - the other is this withdrawing. Therefore the current account of proximate beauty cannot be traced with the trace operating as a copy of some ideal (Platonic) form of beauty.
387 Ibid.
388 Ibid.
(Levinas’s ‘said’), in this very *saying* signify beyond, indeed *from* beyond, a ‘scintillating modality of transcendence – of that which truly *comes to pass*.’\(^{389}\) Levinas’s italicization again emphasizes diachronic time, a time where no moment can ever be recovered. Whether conceptual or phenomenological, all recovery attempts end up in a horizon, ‘defecting away’ into accounts or images.

I now attempt to bring further order to these elements. Loosely listed, there is the tenderness of the skin, the caress, ambiguity (the equivocation of presence and withdrawal), youth, infinity, transcendence, scintillation, with proximity as a guiding theme. As alluded to once or twice, I think the blinking light metaphor to be key here, as it speaks of some kind of infinite rhythm (or pulse?). An infinite rhythm which, despite disrupting the order of being, retains an ‘order’ of its own, enigmatically persevering in its blinking (Kant’s law-like, active engagement, his quickening?). This persevering is a constant transcending, yet not a transcending into anarchy, or at least not into the anarchy of sheer meaninglessness or madness.\(^{390}\) (At this point it might be useful to note that Levinas’s two major works are titled ‘*Totality and Infinity*’ and ‘*Otherwise than Being*’ - my italics. Totality/being is the base beyond which infinity/otherwise transcends.) Although ‘escaping being’ is put forward as a guiding theme of Levinas’s thought (from *On Escape* in the 1930s onwards), the very language of being is needed to even express Levinas’s sense of beauty. Indeed being is needed as one of the ‘poles’ from (or around) which the above-mentioned rhythm or pulse pulsates. The language of being, in its poetic expression of that sense of beauty, transforms itself from the said to the saying as per the discussion of Blanchot above.\(^{391}\) This is where for Levinas ethics and beauty come

\(^{389}\) Ibid.

\(^{390}\) For a differently expressed take on this, see Knud Løgstrup’s discussion on the distinction between poetic openness and fanaticism in *The Ethical Demand*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1971, pp. 203-215.

\(^{391}\) ‘... a rhythm of alternation is substituted for the unity of discourse, from the said into the unsaid and from the unsaid into the unsaid anew’ (Levinas, *Of God Who comes to Mind*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p.78).
together. It is only in poetic/ethical language, the language proper to saying, that beauty can be properly approached. And here the caress actually coalesces with the ethical saying:

In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying. The mode in which the face indicates its own absence in my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language.  

To summarize: in response to the youthful upsurge into being - or better, through the crust of being - and the simultaneous, ‘ageing’ withdrawal beneath being (where these two ‘movements’ cannot be understood in the mature terms of the language of being), the caress is the primordial language (saying), constituted (guided?) as ethical in and by its infinite attending to this ‘blinking light’, this beautifully transcendent rhythm or pulse (or ‘trace’) of... life? This speaks of a beauty incapable of being aesthetically captured by even a Da Vinci or Rembrandt, even though at the same time their works ‘speak’ of it.

This beautiful rhythm, pulse, or ‘order’ of life is notably distinct from conceptions of beauty that heavily depend upon notions of order conceived along clean, ontological lines. Whether it be the cosmic beauty of the Greeks (developed by Plato into his metaphysics of perfect forms), or the more modern Kantian conceptions of free and dependent beauty (the former conceived in terms of pure cognition, the latter in terms of perfect kinds of things), there is apparently no room for a sensibility to the beauty of the rhythm of life as it is before us, in its ‘order’ of equivocation....its blinking light. In discussing the distinction between the two conceptions of beauty that the West has inherited (the Platonic/Kantian and the Christian), Christopher Cordner cites Marilyn Robinson’s use of the term ‘incandescence’ in her novel Gilead. It is applied to people in their ‘grief and guilt and joy and

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392 Otherwise than Being, op.cit., p.94.
393 At this point one might throw one’s hands up and simply acknowledge that words begin to fail, although this might be to undersell the word ‘life’ itself?
394 Although of course not necessarily to an equal degree. Different artists will speak of this beauty to the extent that they show both ‘movements’.
whatever else.’ It is described as a ‘loveliness’, like a ‘flame on a wick’. Incandescence speaks of a heated element, emanating light. The flame on a wick speaks of an inherent transience. Our sun is a self-consuming, incandescent being, white hot in its activity. Plato’s sun by contrast is frozen perfection itself. In a similar spirit Kantian free beauty, his ‘quickening’, is conceived of as a purely rationally appreciated experience, essentially disinterested. I suggest that Kant’s free beauty need not be conceived of in this manner, that it may be thought of as having parallels to the aliveness of Scarry’s beauty, which may also be thought of as having parallels to Levinasian beauty (as I have tried to articulate it). This appreciation of beauty involves an essential response to fragility, to vulnerability, to transience (for Levinas a response ‘interested’ to the point of trauma). As Levinas is fond of saying, it is a response to the other consisting of an absolute difference constituted by an absolute non-indifference. Kant’s ‘free’ beauty, its necessary ‘disinterest’, is preserved through absolute non-indifference, a non-indifference fundamentally apart from (prior to) the reason/inclination division of his schema.

(Particularity)

Before returning to the main line of discussion I here take a brief detour into the question of the relation of particularity to this Levinasian sense of proximate beauty. At the end of this detour I return to Socrates.

There is a school of thought that holds Levinas to be primarily concerned with infinite transcendence, and only secondarily with the particularity of the other (their particular grief, guilt, joys etc.). The particularity of the other seems to be irredeemably bound up with being, something that Levinas is concerned to escape or transcend. C. Fred Alford puts forward an ostensibly decent case for this view of Levinas, making use of psychoanalytical concepts to critique the latter as putting forward a

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(typically philosophical) metaphysical dichotomy of being or infinity, with little room for the Murdochian world of messy, contingent being – in short, particularity. On this reading, Levinasian vulnerability is not tied up with the particularity of being, with all its infinite variations between individuals in their characters, personalities, and situations. Instead, it is tied up with the general condition that all humans find themselves in, caught in the earlier-outlined ‘weary present’ (from the ‘Anxiety’ part of this section), trapped as it were between the anonymity of the il y a (existence), and the effortful/painful instant-by-instant existing that is the lot of private existence (the existent). Furthermore, being concerned over particularity can be seen as a temptation, for it involves a preoccupation with a rearranging of the furniture, where what is really needed is a complete renovation. The particular circumstances pertaining in any instance will not add anything of import to the basic issue at hand, which is to deal with the underlying condition, a condition realized phenomenologically (or transcendentally), and not via attention to particular, contingent facts.

However, although there is a sense in which I agree with this school of thought - this sense being the overall logic of it in relation to the general architecture of Levinas’s understanding - there is also a sense in which it misses something important. I trust that by now I have staked out a plausible notion of Levinasian beauty, and it is with this idea, of a fragile rhythm or pulse that somehow moves between being and infinity, that particularity automatically takes up its proper place. This is because the universal human condition of entrapment between anonymity and private existence manifests in lives in particular ways. The fragile rhythm of the blinking light can only be approached through a taking into consideration of unique individuality. The particular way that an individual ‘blinks’ their ‘light’, or to use other terms from earlier, the way that they manifest their youth and their aging, the way they present and withdraw, cannot be captured in universal categories of understanding, but

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only through a ‘proximately poetic’ approach (which is what the ethical amounts to). Levinas’s general understanding provides the right insight as to the type of being that the human is, and correspondingly the right insight as to the appropriate approach to this being, but because this can only be a poetic (ethical) approach, intrinsic to it must be an attunement to the particular rhythm of the other. It is not that the fragile rhythm of a particular individual has nothing in common with that of another – if that were the case then Levinas would have very little to say in any general sense – but rather that if particularity is not automatically taken into account, then this manifestation of fragility is easily missed, mistaken for something else. Then one’s response to the other is not to their actual vulnerability, but to them as a type (even perhaps the type that is vulnerable in a Levinasian sense!), and their otherness is subsumed into the same, into a totality. Vulnerability, as discussed earlier in this work, says two fundamental things: I am vulnerable, and you shall do me no violence. In this sense vulnerability is of course common to all humans. Yet there is an infinite variety of human vulnerabilities, from the hunger of the stranger who plainly needs bread, to the subtly diagnosed anxiety that is perhaps only realized through years of attention to particularity. Beyond the more obvious senses of violence, obedience to the command to refrain from it involves a good deal more subtlety than might first appear.

In ‘The Other, Utopia, and Justice’ Levinas speaks of a kindness which, ‘emerging from the infinite resources of the singular self, responding without reasons or reservations to the call of the face, can divine ways to approach that suffering other – without, however, contradicting the verdict’. While the verdict in this passage refers to juridical matters which may not be contradicable (e.g. a justly convicted murderer), Levinas goes on to say that the work of justice is not exhausted by a just

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397 Recall the discussion of Conrad’s story of D’Hubert and Feraud from the previous section.
398 This is not at all to undersell Levinas’s emphasis on the absolute importance of the ‘death of the other’, the decisive ethical universal regarding all others. It is rather to spell out what this actually amounts to. It is a fundamental concern over the other’s absolute vulnerability to death – i.e. their essential mortality as it manifests in their life, in the way they live, always on the way towards death.
verdict, but absolutely requires in addition the possibilities of after-verdict charity. 400 This is an example of a kindness covering both universal notions of justice and the particularities of the other. It provides for a potentially infinite expansion of justice, for the kindness ‘illuminates’ the individual sufferer (the judged individual) as it ‘welcomes’ them, as well as being the source of an infinitely ongoing review of the universal notions as well, for justice ‘knows it is not as just as the kindness that instigates it is good’, 401 knows that it is ‘always to be perfected against its own harshness’. 402 And so, as the good is the guide to justice, the particular is the guide to the universal. I do not engage here with the question of the many different senses of the term infinity Levinas employs in his writings, but I contend that none of them need be taken in a way that obviates the requirement to track the particular vulnerabilities of the other. 403

Alford might concede this, but would alter its emphasis, stressing that for Levinas the aim of this (my) claimed necessity of focus on particularity is the infinite, and not the actual, contingent presence of the other (much like Plato’s use of eros in the Phaedrus). This aim ultimately leads to infinity being interposed between others, rendering Levinasian proximity a kind of emaciated contact. 404 However, in the absence of Alford taking into account Levinas’s version of proximate beauty, I think his discussion looks somewhat incomplete, as this version of beauty, with its accompanying necessary focus on the particular, arguably demands a superlative such as infinity to do justice to its ethical ‘height’. This height, or transcendence, is what keeps proximate beauty from collapsing into eros

400 In an interview with François Poirié Levinas cites the rabbinical treatment of two apparently contradictory verses from the Old Testament, where a deliberate blindness to the face in initial judgment, and a subsequent divine turning towards the face of the (now) judged, are reconciled. ‘Kindness’ originally requires justice to be ‘blind’, that is to treat the accused as strictly equal with all others, for otherwise this is to ignore (to be ‘unkind’ to) the face of all others (which justice, as justice, cannot do), but kindness equally requires the accused, regardless of their deeds, to be approached as a unique other, unto death (‘Interview with François Poirié’, in Is It Righteous To Be, ed. Jill Robbins, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, p.69).


402 Ibid. p.229.

403 This does not necessarily mean treating all vulnerabilities as equally important, although even to be aware of which (of two) to rank as more important means taking account of both.

404 C. Fred Alford, op.cit., p.146.
understood classically, that is either in its flesh or its (opposite) spiritual sense (or in some combination of the two). Neither of these support the kind of sensibility outlined earlier, a sensibility fundamental to the kind of ethical responsibility at stake in all Levinas’s thought. In a reverse sense it could be said that the concept of contingent being is what keeps proximate beauty from ascending into the ether, into an infinite abyss or emptiness, and there is logic in this, but we proceed, especially from within traditional philosophy, with an understanding dominated by concepts of unequivocating being, and so Levinas’s emphasis on the concept of infinity is I think justified.

In a similar vein, Richard Cohen (in the context of defending Levinas against criticism from Alain Badiou), argues that it ‘because the other is first other, irreducibly different and beyond appropriation, that I can take seriously and respond to another’s social, cultural and historical differences in their specificity’. It is only because the irreducible difference is infused with the ethical that the particular differences matter; otherwise they collapse into difference for the sake of difference, in other words a thing of fashion or taste (something that Cohen charges Badiou with failing to realize in the latter’s inclusion of Levinas with many of the allegedly hypocritical ‘self-declared apostles of the “right to difference”’, who he takes aim at). It is all very well to celebrate the otherness of the other, their ‘right to difference’, but if I meet someone who I have ‘nothing in common with’, who in their particular circumstances, interests, predilections etc., seems so far removed from me that they may as well be an alien, then I might understandably ask why on earth I should take any interest in them. A response might be that I need not take a positive interest in them, but rather merely respect their right (give them space etc.) to be themselves, to be different – difference is a good in itself. The problem with this is that it comes too close to making a virtue out

406 Ibid., p.194.
407 The language here might bring Kant to mind (respect for the other’s difference as an end in itself), but Kantian respect focuses exclusively on the rational nature of others, and this universalizing approach, while respecting all others regardless of their specific differences, achieves this by being regardless of these
of indifference, an attitude which must be blind (at least) to the many subtle vulnerabilities of the other. While this kind of respect provides a necessary bulwark against an interfering and (worse) moralizing approach, without the addition of anything more positive it remains severely limited in its ethical resources. If, to branch out from this limitation, the difference of the other is put forward as part of some classically conceived aesthetic category, which it is claimed I could/should learn to appreciate, then I ask: what is the (ethical) status of this aesthetic category? Unless difference is understood in terms of Levinas’s radical (ethical) alterity, then apparently my interest in the other (who I may have nothing in common with) is merely up to me and my aesthetic taste. If, on the other hand, the aesthetic category is conceived of in conjunction with - indeed of a piece with - the non-classical articulation of proximate beauty, then this category now transcends my taste, my sense of fashion. At the heart of the aesthetic category of proximate beauty is ethical alterity, rendering all human difference, at all times, ‘in fashion’.

There is obviously much more that could be discussed regarding this issue. However, with this consideration in place, together with the immediately following discussion that seeks to seat classical beauty into Levinas’s proximate version, Alford’s charge that ‘because he distrusts attunement and differences, which play no necessary role in mediating universal rationality (something we have an appropriating grasp of before we even encounter difference).

408 Another way of discussing this issue is to contrast particularity with singularity. In The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (Stanford University Press, 2008, pp 44-9), Diane Perpich defends Levinas against charges by Dominique Janicaud (amongst others) that he betrays phenomenology by departing from the patient task of description of particulars. While Levinas certainly breaks with phenomenology, Perpich maintains that it is rather the latter (or at least Janicaud’s interpretation of what the latter must be), in its focus on particularity, that fails to realize the singularity of the other. On my reading the particularity of the other would only (ethically) matter because of this singularity. Without singularity particularity descends into an endless, descriptive abyss, resulting in either a celebration of diversity for diversity’s sake (the merely exotic), or a wild goose chase after some neutral vantage point from which ‘bare perceptions’ can be accessed. Whether phenomenology is conceived either in terms of Husserl’s ideal of a ‘presuppositionless science’, or as necessarily taking up its place in Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle, the singular ethical command of the other ‘appears’ to be something beyond its powers to describe.
rhythm, Levinas does not dance'\(^{409}\) can be, if not dismissed altogether, at least qualified. I now return to the main discussion.

With the Levinasian concept of proximate beauty in play, Scarry’s preservation/vulnerability concept, together with those of fragility and aliveness, can be more fruitfully understood. In relation to Scarry, I asked earlier whether it is the beauty or the aliveness that places requirements upon us, whether aliveness works through beauty, or whether they are two sides of the same coin. Levinas’s poetic proximity, the sensibility that non-intentionally, non-teleologically, simultaneously senses beauty in its youthful upsurge and its ageing withdrawal modes, that enjoys and suffers (where these two are separate, yet cannot be separated), offers an answer to this question. Recalling Scarry’s idea, it is the presence of a beautiful (yet fragile) person that somehow alerts us to the requirements placed on us by the aliveness (and the fragility) of all persons. I put forward the suggestion that beauty, consistent with Scarry’s idea of its decentering role, somehow reminds us of the prior ethical relation that already obtains between humans. This reminding might appear to rely on a kind of likeness – this is like that – and so the attention is shifted from this to that, but is this likeness strong enough? After all, it has already been conceded that there is no necessary connection between certain decentered experiences and the alterity of the other. Beauty would non-accidentally remind us of alterity only if we were already predisposed towards realizing this; otherwise it might simply remind us of other decentered experiences – e.g. drug, religious-related etc. However, if Levinas’s sense of proximate beauty is introduced, then Scarry’s concepts of beauty and aliveness (and fragility) can actually coalesce, with this proximate beauty underlying and giving the true meaning to these concepts, two sides of the same coin. This coalescing dissolves the separation or gap between the concepts of beauty, aliveness and fragility at the deepest level. (This dissolving is perhaps intimated, but not brought out by Scarry’s account.) Scarry’s emphasis on traditionally perceived beauty, the beauty

\(^{409}\) C. Fred Alford, op.cit., p.71.
that ‘gleams’ aesthetically, possibly lends itself to this gap, although need not necessitate it, for a vertical structure is possible here, instead of a horizontal one. Certainly at the aesthetic level some things gleam and others do not. There are extraordinarily beautiful people who clearly stand out from the rest – a clear gap in the horizon of vision. But if conceived of vertically, then at the deepest level indeed all people – no matter what biological age - are both youthful and aging, proximately beautiful in Levinas’s poetic sense. At a ‘higher’ level some of these additionally gleam, but this gleaming beauty is weighted, supported by the deeper sense, a sense that if omitted leaves the former frozen in infragility, without youth, without age, firmly ensconced in being. This ensconcing in being actually robs beauty of its meaning for us, for the meaning and value we invest in this gleaming only persists in connection with its fragility, its vulnerability.410

With this understanding established, I now finally begin to return to the question outlined at the beginning of this section, that concerning how Socrates’ ‘soul’ is structured in relation to his body, and what role sensibility plays in his relation to the world and to others.

(vi) Embodiment

In two footnotes from the ‘Proximity’ section of Otherwise than Being, Levinas suggests that Socrates’ account of the awakening of the soul to the beauty of the beloved in the Phaedrus can be read as a version of a pre-erotic, proximate responsibility. Levinas translates Plato’s term фρίκη from the Phaedrus as a ‘shuddering’ (of neighborly assignation), 411 and suggests that the libido at play here can be situated in:

410 The fixed stare of modern models on the catwalk speaks of this fundamentally deficient, gleaming beauty.
411 Otherwise than Being, op.cit., p.87, footnote 22.
the more elementary and more rich significance of proximity, a possibility included in the unity of the face and the skin, even if only in the extreme turnings about of a face. Beneath the erotic alterity there is the alterity of the one-for-the-other, responsibility before eros. 412

In the earlier ‘Phenomenology of Eros’ from Totality and Infinity, Levinas analyzes the voluptuosity of eros in terms of an ‘inverted signification’, an expression which ‘expresses its renunciation of expression and speech’. 413 He describes the erotic relation as a ‘dual solitude’, a ‘closed society’, the ‘supremely non-public’. 414 In the Phaedrus too the lover, when gazing upon the beauty of the beloved, completely forgets his mother, brother, friends, scorns the conventions of civilized behavior, and is negligent towards his possessions and property. 415 This may appear unpromising in relation to the above passage quoted from Otherwise than Being. It may even suggest queries as to whether Levinas has shifted in his thinking here. I introduce this (apparently) profoundly non-social conception of eros to evoke something of what we all know concerning lovers, to resonate this knowledge with both Levinas and Plato, and to thereby better establish the erotic/ethical link when the continuity between the earlier and later Levinasian conceptions is articulated.

One way of looking at the two conceptions is to simply see – as per Levinas’s own words from the passage cited - the ethical relation as existing ‘beneath the erotic alterity’, with it being ignored, suppressed even, underneath (and perhaps even by?) eros. The lovers live in a ‘world of their own’, unconcerned with any responsibility outside of their duality. Levinas’s third never gets a look in. The face of the lover does not speak of humanity, and in this sense is only seen in its purely erotic mode. This kind of separation of the two conceptions is not inconsistent with a segmented reading of Totality and Infinity. The format of that work lends itself to being read in this way, it being written in a far less holistic way than Otherwise than Being. The segmented reading lends itself to a conceptual

412 Ibid., p.89, footnote 27.
413 Totality and Infinity, op.cit., p.263.
414 Ibid., p.265.
415 Phaedrus, op.cit., 252.
separation of different areas of analysis, and so eros is analyzed, then fecundity, then paternity, and so on. In this respect fecundity can be read as the solution to the erotic ‘problem’ (that of it looking to be fundamentally non or even anti-ethical); accordingly, fecundity is the ethically creative purpose of eros. However, this is to make a similar move to that of Plato, the move of splitting eros off from the essentially beautiful, and reducing it merely to a means of its realization. In line with the discussion of the relation between Scarry’s and Levinas’s respective conceptions of beauty, which concluded that the latter is partly constitutive of the former, and also in line with the general theme of proximity from Otherwise than Being, it is better to see eros as a mode, or particular kind of manifestation, of the ethical relation. Before focusing directly on this, I first examine this issue in the terms of Totality and Infinity.

In that work Levinas interprets eros as having an essentially negative reference to the social, to the face. Eros involves a caress which attempts to grasp the ungraspable, the ‘not yet’ of the future (which in a sense fecundity does grasp), but in this attempt it carries a sense of the face that it ‘disrespects’. It is in approaching the other as an ‘erotic nudity’ that this disrespect occurs, for nudity here speaks of the face (or the body) of the other stripped of its signifying otherness, and reduced to modes alternating between obscenity and chastity. For the beloved’s face to inspire lust it must already have been ‘apperceived for nudity’. (It is important here to note the way that Levinas uses familiar terms, with different but of course related connotations. ‘Disrespect’ is not necessarily here a pejorative, but more a phenomenological descriptor, and the same applies to terms like obscenity and chastity.) Yet while eros in a sense abstracts away from signifying otherness, from the

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416 In Alphonso Lingis’s introduction to Otherwise than Being (Otherwise than Being, op.cit., xxi-xxii), he describes the construction of Totality and Infinity as ‘stratified’. By contrast, Otherwise than Being abandons this construction in favor of an approach that runs much closer together the ethical and the erotic. It does this by way of a sensuous responsibility that emphasizes contact, the caress, and which takes the contestation between the other and the ego from the first work to be actually constitutive of subjectivity, constitutive of the openness to the other that was supposed to lead to the contestation in the first place.

417 Totality and Infinity, op.cit., p.262.

418 Ibid.
ethical face, from any sense of the third, it simultaneously involves a voluptuosity between the lover and the beloved that exhibits the structure of alterity in an exemplary form.

..voluptuosity is not a sentiment to the second power like a reflection, but direct like a spontaneous consciousness. It is inward and yet intersubjectively structured, not simplifying itself into consciousness that is one. In voluptuosity the other is me and separated from me. 419

Levinas calls this the ‘acuity of voluptuosity’. 420 Voluptuosity here indicates an excess, an ‘over the top’ aspect of the erotic relation, where the aim is ‘not at the Other but at his voluptuosity; it is voluptuosity of voluptuosity, love of the love of the other’. 421 The structure of non-ethical alterity is exemplified here. The particular, erotic face of the other is privileged over their human face, the face of humanity, and together with the erotic response of the other in return constitutes a ‘closed society’. Yet within this society of two there persists both an absolute connection and absolute separation, recognized by both. This is antithetical to the terms of possession, for nothing is desired less than to dominate or control the other, which would immediately extinguish the kind of voluptuosity at issue. Nor is it to be understood in the terms of complementariness (Aristophanes’ Symposium speech, where the lovers make each other whole again), for this would be to domesticate eros into a kind of harmonious calculus. In the stratified analysis of Totality and Infinity this voluptuous desire looks past the other towards the ‘not yet’, the future. In this sense Levinas describes it as ‘profaning’ the face of the other. 422 And yet this profanation is then redeemed in fecundity, in the relation to the child, a relation, according to Levinas, that is already a formative part of voluptuosity. 423 For Levinas (in Totality and Infinity), fecundity involves a relation with the other (the child) that establishes the I and the other as absolutely separate, yet absolutely connected.

419 Ibid., p.265.
420 Ibid.
421 Ibid., p.266.
422 Ibid., p.265.
423 Ibid., p.266.
Fecundity renders voluptuosity as accomplishing a desiring being, independent and yet transcendent in the desire for the other, for the desire of the other. This combination or structure makes possible ‘the gift of the power of giving’, a ‘fecundity engendering fecundity’, the very ‘goodness of goodness’. 424

It emerges then, that – despite the stratified or segmented analysis of Totality and Infinity - in the erotic relation profanation seems to exist side by side with fecundity, indeed seems to be necessary to it. Without a certain kind of attention given to each other, an attention which must look past the humanity in the face of the other (the third), that is, must necessarily exclude all others, fecundity would not occur. This is an interesting outcome, for it is suggestive of a useful insight into the relationship between the erotic and the ethical.

In the film Triumph of the Spirit, William Defoe plays Salamo, a prisoner in Auschwitz who boxes other prisoners to win extra bread from the Nazis. There is a scene in which he takes his chunk of bread to his bunk, and shares it with his father and a couple of others. As he is breaking it, hands appear from other bunks, hands which Salamo at first ignores, but which, at their persisting, he relents and doles out small portions to. It looks as if the larger portions go to himself, his father, and his immediate companions. The scene ends with all the hands appearing - perhaps seven or eight pairs - having received bread. This provokes the question: what if more and more hands keep appearing, indeed what if more and more - and more - hands appear, at the beginning? If Salamo had a camp hut of, say, a thousand pairs of hands, and if he were to divide up the chunk of bread a thousand equal ways, what would each prisoner get? A tiny crumb is the answer, or at least you can easily tweak the case to get this result. Is this goodness? What does responsibility to humanity require in such concrete situations? One answer is to say that at least on many (if not all?) occasions some exclusion of others is required in order to achieve anything. Levinas’s infinite ethical

424 Ibid., p.269.
responsibility cannot practically be justly divided up between humans. Someone, some group, must be ‘profaned’ (disrespected) in order for the necessary time and attention internal to ‘fecundity’ (goodness) to actually occur.\textsuperscript{425}

It emerges then, that in the patently non-erotic relation there is a somewhat similar profanation/fecundity structure to that of the erotic. One result of this might be to put both relations on a continuum, and to rethink them on this basis. And indeed, this is consistent with the approach of Otherwise than Being, which runs much closer together the ethical and the erotic (than does Totality and Infinity). It achieves this by way of a sensuous responsibility that emphasizes contact, the caress, a kind of blurring of the lines between the erotically sensuous and the ethically sensible. The type of inner conflict or tension that is inevitably associated with this profanation/fecundity structure (see footnote 423) is fundamentally different from that which I contend is seen in Socrates (and Plato). The former tension comes about because the face of the others who must be excluded are seen, or - better in the current context - sensed in that exclusion. The latter tension occurs because of two elements, a sensibility that sees or senses, and a different sensibility that does not. I now turn to this latter tension.

My contention is that in the Phaedrus Socrates’ account (in the second speech) of the development of the relationship between the lover and the beloved involves two elements that are in tension: the element already outlined in this section, and directly suggested by Levinas’s footnotes quoted above - that of a Levinasian type erotic/ethical sensibility to beauty - and the element of a philosophical sensibility to beauty, a sensibility that has a conceptual movement of return. Accordingly, when the beloved finally awakens to the love of the lover, we find Socrates describing him as experiencing a

\textsuperscript{425} It may appear that ethics based upon theories of the greater good (various forms of consequentialism) must come into play even at this very basic level, but this does not follow, for regardless of what theory one might favor here, the ethical relation with all others persists. Even in necessarily excluding others, they are acknowledged in that exclusion as having a face. Hence we see torment, trauma etc., over decisions that must be taken for the greater good.
love of himself, as ‘seeing himself in his lover as in a glass’.\textsuperscript{426} The beloved actually falls in love with a ‘reflection of the love he inspires’.

If we return to the discussion of the definitions of soul earlier in this section (pp. 141-144), we recall that Socrates begins with the notion of the soul as self-moving. This is of a piece with the accompanying notion of the soul’s immortality, and this accords with the subsequent notion of the human soul as that which ‘by its very nature has beheld true being – otherwise it would not have entered into the creature we call man’.\textsuperscript{427} It enters into the creature called man because this is its best chance of returning to its true home, for man is the only creature that can philosophize its way back towards the true, beatific vision, the only vision which provides the necessary nourishment for the re-growth of the soul’s wings, and its subsequent ascension to the heavenly realm from whence it originally fell. Beauty (as well as truth and goodness) calls the soul \textit{home} – it speaks of a \textit{return}. It could be put this way: the soul is (eternally) in love with beauty, somehow falls out of this love, and then - courtesy of the call of beauty through philosophy - returns to this same love. This return occurs strictly through the movement or pathway between the soul and the heavenly realm, a pathway that apparently completely bypasses the material, empirical realm. Although in this world beauty appears to the creature man in the form of the human body (the beloved of the \textit{Phaedrus}), it is strictly as this bodily beauty is used to assist in transition to the absolute beauty of the ‘world above’ that the soul makes any real progress on its return home.\textsuperscript{428}

Is the actual body of the beloved beautiful? Or does it merely act as a reflection of ideal beauty? The myth of the cave from the \textit{Republic}, the account of love from the \textit{Symposium}, and textual support from the \textit{Phaedrus},\textsuperscript{429} might all seem to support the latter and not the former. However, what about

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{426} \textit{Phaedrus}, op.cit., 255.
\item \textsuperscript{427} Ibid., 250.
\item \textsuperscript{428} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{429} ‘...when he beholds a god-like face or physical form which truly reflects ideal beauty’... ‘he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a divinity’ (Ibid., 251).
\end{itemize}
the ‘Forms’? More specifically, what of the idea of somehow partaking of them? If the beloved’s body actually partakes of the form of ideal or absolute beauty, is this not something more than mere reflection? After all, how can the form of a beautiful human body be one of, if not the, most exemplary reflections of the form of ideal beauty if there is not some essential similarity between the two? To be sure, a mirror need not at all be similar to what it reflects - it may be reflecting something totally different in shape, size and material substance to itself – but if the beloved’s beautiful body is merely a mirror, then why extol the madness associated with the lover’s approach to it as being a divine gift, something above mere human ‘sober sense’? What makes the beloved’s body a better mirror than, say, the institutions of justice, something which Plato also thinks reflects the world above? His answer lies in bodily beauty’s perceptible accessibility. Bodily beauty offers itself to our sight in an immediate and undeniable way, and so in this sense may be said to act as a superior, a clearer mirror? Or perhaps it is not this, but merely that the perceptive accessibility of the body’s beauty is so widespread that it is the most natural place to start in the ascension towards the ultimate realm? And so in principle it is no better a mirror than the law court? While Plato does not formally answer this question, I think it fruitful to proceed as if he does take the human form to be somehow special in its role as a mirror of ideal beauty, and special beyond its mere ubiquity, for this way of proceeding aligns with the overall theme of this work. This theme is that Socrates, in a fundamentally Levinasian way, responds to the human other, that the human form of the other is the site of his responsiveness, and that in his response’s distortion he tends to look past this form. This way of proceeding also accords with my following reading of the Phaedrus.

According to this reading bodily beauty, in its reflective activity, somehow concentrates in a pure form the ideal form of beauty, in a way that other earthly entities (such as the institutions of justice, law courts, buildings etc.) do not. Bodily beauty’s associated madness indeed suggests that this is

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430 Ibid, 244.
431 Ibid, 250.
what Plato thinks, for the madness is divine precisely on account of it coming about via (courtesy of reflection⁴³²) a fullness of dose of absolute beauty that other earthly entities cannot match. But what is it about the form of the body that gives it this potential to act as the superior mirror, to deliver this fullness of dose? Does it have superior symmetry to drawn geometric shapes, for example? Does it have more perfect proportions than the classical temples? Smoother surfaces than the marble statues? A greater harmony of parts than other natural and man-made designs? If the answer to these questions, and any others that come to mind in this regard, is no, then it may remain a mystery why the human body has been focused on by Plato to act in this exemplary, reflective role. One suggestion neatly solves the issue. Might it be because in the heavenly realm of ideal forms there is a human body form? And so in an almost straightforward way the earthly human body will reflect this better than anything else? This is to touch on the notorious topic of the forms and how to conceive of them (what to include, exclude, and so on), but even if a human body form is included in the heavenly realm, does this help us to understand beauty any better? Doesn’t this inclusion simply remove the above set of questions into the heavenly realm, without answering them? Given that – at least in traditional terms⁴³³ – we apparently cannot conceive of the human form exemplifying beauty better or even as well as the other above-mentioned entities, then the question regarding the human body focus remains.

Has Plato succumbed to the temptation to try to harness the massive energy source of the erotic relation to his purposes? To beautify it in his own metaphysical terms? This would explain why the particular kind of body/soul split that we see in Plato exists, for he needs this energy source to be both reflective of ideal beauty, and yet the same time firmly set apart from it. Hence the occurrence in the same passages of both an extolling and a contempt. In the Phaedrus the noble and the vicious

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⁴³² There is no necessary problem here in imagining a genuine dose of something that is ‘merely’ reflected. For example, light is just as real when reflected in a mirror.

⁴³³ In terms of the outlined Levinasian version of beauty, the issue is of course transformed.
horse are yoked together, and in the *Symposium* *eros* seems to provide the motivating energy towards beauty, yet its bodily and active aspects are quickly discarded as being ‘base’ and ‘mean-spirited’. Plato elevates the status of erotic energy by seeing it as a crucial avenue to a purely spiritual realm, and at the same time downgrades it by seeing it as ‘bodily’ and therefore essentially imperfect. He extracts *out of* erotic energy the soul as spiritual, and the body as non-spiritual. His particular metaphysical requirements dictate this split. In bypassing the empirical and particular other, in seeing this other as merely an example of ideal beauty, Plato links his soul component of *eros* directly to the spiritual realm, a realm which calls the soul, and from which the soul now draws its energy. This amounts to *self-movement*, the definition of soul which Socrates is working with in the *Phaedrus*. Erotic energy is transformed into self-moving spirit, the soul. The appeal of this move is enhanced by the fact that erotic energy is something that lies within us, latent at times, but inherent, and always potently strong in its inner stirrings. It makes a good candidate for Plato’s purposes.

At this point it may be remiss not to note that there is another way of interpreting Plato, a way that some commentators have taken (e.g. Iris Murdoch, more recently David Robjant). This way puts the emphasis firmly in this world, with Plato’s metaphysics being a metaphorical, poetic, even hyperbolic expression of the weight or depth that we attribute to beauty, *here and now*. On this interpretation, talk of the immortality of the soul, of its having beheld true being by virtue of its very nature, and of a journey which returns to this ‘home’, is designed to indicate the difficult task of actually realizing the wondrous beauty which is the reality of *this* world. The other, ‘metaphysical’ world is actually this world realized in a certain light. There is no necessary split between a real and a shadow world, only a split between different possible visions within the one world. The empirical

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434 *Symposium*, op.cit., 211a.
realm, far from being downgraded, is actually upgraded from the mere empirical to the spiritual/empirical, which involves seeing the perfect in the midst of the imperfect, seeing the beautiful in the midst of the plain. (We need not see Plato as being consistent in this regard across the dialogues, or even within the one work. For example, he might not have always been clear himself as to just what role the forms played.) This is an attractive way of reading Plato, for it obviates the need to pull apart the highly questionable and various dialectical-style arguments for the immortality of the soul, firmly places the myths into the purely poetic category, and in general arguably renders Plato more accessible to a ‘post-metaphysical’ age.

However, this alternate reading of Plato does not materially affect the issue at hand. As I trust I have already (at least) partly shown, whether addressed in terms of two worlds, or only the one, it is the kind of approach to beauty that is problematic in Plato, an approach which I further highlight a bit later in relation to Socrates’ particular sensibility to embodiment.

To resume the discussion regarding Plato’s splitting of eros into the self-moving soul and the body that houses it - and to situate this now in the context of a Levinasian-type sensibility to beauty - it is telling how well Plato’s description of the lover’s awakening to the beauty of the beloved in the Phaedrus accords with Weil’s somatic account, with Scarry’s decentering effect, and with Levinas’s notions of trauma, obsession, and substitution. If the description of the effect of the beloved upon the lover is separated from the explanations for that effect, we find a ‘shivering’, a ‘dread’, a ‘worshipping’, a ‘sacrificial’ impulse, a ‘ferment’, a ‘throbbing’ (of the soul as it begins to grow wings), a ‘mingling of pleasure and pain’, a ‘perplexed’ state of insomnia by night and restlessness by day436 – in short, a total capture by the beauty of the beloved. The soul of the lover is estranged from itself, turned inside out, moved by it knows not what. For Plato, what makes this ‘madness’ divine, rather than mere madness, is the explanation that he supplies as to its purpose, the home-returning role

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436 Phaedrus, op.cit., 251-252.
that it plays. Plato sees these various phenomena of the madness as *symptoms*, symptoms to be cleared up: ‘if the higher elements of their minds prevail ... they [the lover and the beloved] will pass their time on earth in happiness and harmony ... and they will become masters of themselves and their souls will be at peace’. For Levinas by contrast, the ‘symptoms’ are never be cleared up. They are part and parcel of the ethical relation, of the exteriority lived in ‘the strange desire of the other’, an infinite desire, beyond being. There is no return, whether this be conceived in terms of another world, or this one.

Does this mean that I maintain that a Levinasian perspective here is committed to the view that these symptoms of *eros* *simultaneously* speak of the erotic and the ethical? Or rather, that the erotic is somehow dependent upon the ethical? Or, that the erotic is merely an analogue of the ethical? There is a sense in which I think the answer is affirmative to all these questions (excepting the ‘merely’ of the latter). In similar vein to the discussion of the relation between Scarry’s notions regarding beauty and the Levinasian proximate version, there is a vertical-type structure available here as well. This structure involves Plato’s symptoms of *eros* as somehow being a *further extension* of the ethical version of these symptoms. Of course we do not actually exhibit the symptoms from the *Phaedrus* in many ‘non-erotic’ ethical relations; e.g. teacher-student, friend to friend. The lover of the *Phaedrus* is in love ‘for all the world to see’, and at this spectacle people knowingly shake their heads, smile to one another, remember their own youth, and so on. Yet, for example, the mother-child relation *does* exhibit many of these symptoms - the sacrificial, the worshipping, the mingling of pleasure and pain, the insomnia. Bodily lust is not involved as with the lover and his beloved, but this is not because of taboo, or because of some kind of psychological sublimation of the mother’s libido. The suggestion is that this is rather because the primary sensibility to the child is prior to both bodily

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437 Ibid., 256.
lust and spiritual desire. Depending upon what kind of relationship we are considering, this prior sensibility manifests in various forms. One of those forms is *eros* as traditionally conceived, but in the case of the mother this form is ‘silenced’, or rather, it never gets off the ground, for the particular nature of the mother-child relation (from its very origins) directs this sensibility into the form of maternal love. This is not the place for further discussion of how that ‘directing’ process works in all the various types of relations that humans have, suffice to say here that the lover’s symptoms can be understood as an ‘erotic’ manifestation of the prior (ethical) sensibility that this work has been attempting to elucidate.\(^{439}\) Furthermore, the lengths that the lover is prepared to go to in attending to the beloved cannot be explained purely in terms of lust. Perhaps some cases of attraction might be explainable in just these terms, but not the one under discussion. For the lover knows not what he wants from the beloved; there is a surplus of desire that seems to burst beyond the bounds of what the beloved actually has to offer.\(^{440}\) Plato has an explanation for this surplus of desire - the lover is longing to return home to absolute beauty. By contrast, Levinas’s explanation is that of a longing for the absolute otherness of the other, or - in the terms that I have been attempting to draw from his

\(^{439}\) I am aware that this is a somewhat controversial reading. Many commentators on Levinas might well question, or even deny, that the erotic could be a manifestation of the ethical, instead holding that for Levinas the erotic is rather a *precondition* of the ethical, understood as part of the ‘feminine’ facilitation of the ‘dwelling’, from within which one indeed *first becomes* a subject, able to give, and only *then* to be interrupted by the genuinely ethical face-to-face encounter with the other. However, without further arguing my case here, I merely note that within Levinas’s writings there is more room to move than these commentators might suppose, for if one reads him across the decades - from the 30s to the 80s - he is not linear, not exactly consistent on the place and role of *eros* (or the closely related ‘feminine’). I cite Tina Chanter in support here, and she gives this issue a good airing in *Time, Death, and the Feminine, Levinas with Heidegger*, see especially the conclusion (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001).

\(^{440}\) Levinas references Aristophanes’ story from the *Symposium* of the lovers being mute when asked by Hephaestus as to what they hope to gain from each other beyond physical enjoyment. Despite Hephaestus’s answering for them that they wish to become one, that they are motivated by a nostalgia for the past, Levinas takes this muteness to be significant. (‘God and Philosophy’, in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1996, p.140.) Also see ‘Existence and Existents’, where Levinas says that even in the throes of possession (of the beloved) there is ‘the admission that access is impossible, violence fails, possession is refused’. It is as ‘though one had made a mistake about the nature of one’s desire and had confused it with hunger which aims as something, but which one later found out was a hunger for nothing. The other is precisely this objectless dimension’ (Levinas, ‘Existence and Existents’, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 1978, p.35).
account - for the beloved’s proximate beauty, approached by a sensibility that cannot be understood in ontological terms, rather only in the poetics of infinity.

(As the strategy of this work is to primarily focus upon Plato/Socrates - with Levinas acting as a guide and interpreter - rather than to directly focus on Levinas himself, it is not the place to thoroughly deal with an issue brought to mind by the contrast I have been putting forward between Plato’s return and Levinas’s otherness. Instead I offer another short detour, in which I briefly address some questions which may have occurred to the reader regarding this contrast, both presently and at other points in this work. How sharp (or absolute) does the contrast need to be? Does Levinas (do I) make too much of it via a contestable interpretation of return as being a return to self? Is there a ‘third way’ available, a way that overcomes the (allegedly incoherent) gap between return and otherness that some find so troubling? If the reader is content without this detour they may skip ahead to p.194.

In ‘Levinas Questioning Plato on Eros and Maieutics’, Francisco Gonzalez reprises Derrida’s point from ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, the objection (in Gonzalez’ words) that ‘because what is other is always other than, something absolutely other would not be other at all’. Christopher Cordner also asks: ‘if the other is only absolutely Other, how can he be anything to me?’ This concern also relates to a point put forward by Deborah Achtenberg, that we need what she calls the Platonic/Socratic vulnerability to form in addition to the Levinasian vulnerability to singularity, for ‘it is necessary and good both to respond to people based on what fits them and thus to play a role in enabling them to be what they are and, as well, to respond to them beyond or without reference to

what they are at any particular time, and by so doing to participate in enabling them to be or do something that is utterly new’.  

Regarding Cordner’s explicit question (which I think captures Gonzalez’ point as well), Levinas will in general answer that there is no strict, philosophical way of making sense of how the other can be anything to me (could he even transform the same question into a rhetorical one in order to help make just that point?). However, there are some things that he says that bear upon it (and to Achtenberg’s concerns), things which may or may not be considered satisfactory, with this being decided partly I suspect on grounds of philosophical temperament.

In ‘God and Philosophy’ (from 1975), Levinas discusses the separation of the desirability of the other from the desire of the subject.

> For disinterestedness to be possible in the desire for the infinite, for the desire beyond being, or transcendence, not to be an absorption in immanence, which would thus make its return, it is necessary that the Desirable or God remain separated in the Desire; as desirable it is near but different: Holy. This can only be if the Desirable orders me to what is the nondesirable, the undesirable par excellence – the other (autrui).  

This appears to be a restatement of the issue, and not an answer as such, for how does, or how can the ‘Desirable order me to what is the nondesirable par excellence’? I make two different suggestions here, one which to some readers may be just as unsatisfactory as the stated issue in the first place, the other which may be more congenial, but which I am less sure as to how well it actually addresses the concern, even though it is ‘suggested’ to me by Levinas himself.

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The first suggestion is to set the above passage in the surrounding context of what is a governing idea or theme of Levinas, that of Descartes’ thought that thinks more than it thinks (an idea which is a central part of the context of ‘God and Philosophy’). This theme is a general placement of the Cartesian version of infinity front and center in the thought life of man.\footnote{This is a theme which surfaces in many places in Levinas’s writings, but see especially Section 1A (‘Metaphysics and Transcendence’) from \textit{Totality and Infinity}.} If it is accepted that we indeed ‘think more than we think’, that it is a ‘natural’ (because common place, not thereby explainable) part of our thought life to transcend ontological concepts, that we begin from the infinite and not from the finite, then the absolute yet utterly (ethically) meaningful separation of the other may seem less problematic to us. This can be so whether one conceives of this acceptance of the role that the infinite plays as being ‘religious’ or not. (I am continually struck by how accepting non-philosophers, of varying religious persuasions, or indeed of no persuasion at all, are of just this point regarding the so-called ‘gap’ between oneself and the other. For them the gap is absolute, yet the relation to the other ‘across’ this gap is equally absolute, or ‘solid’ – it is unquestioned. Of course they do not ordinarily express this in the terms employed here!)

The second suggestion springs from Levinas himself. In the above quoted passage he says ‘as desirable it is near but different: Holy’. A bit later in the same essay Levinas speaks (somewhat tentatively) of the emergence or awakening of the I as an ‘individuation of the genus or concept of the ego’.\footnote{‘God and Philosophy’, op.cit., p.144.} It is not the I that individuates, but rather the individuation that creates the I (that ‘Ies’). This individuating awakening is called an ‘exposedness’ by Levinas, an ‘exposedness not like self-consciousness’, but rather a ‘shudder of incarnation through which \textit{giving} takes on meaning, as the primordial dative of the \textit{for other}, in which a subject becomes a heart, a sensibility, and hands which give’.\footnote{Ibid.} This individuating process looks to involve a traditionally conceived ego, a member of a genus, \textit{from which} the subject as heart, sensibility, and hands which give, awakens. In a later essay
from 1985, ‘The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other’, Levinas talks of ‘an alterity of the unique and incomparable, due to the belonging of each one to mankind, which ipso facto and paradoxically, is annulled, precisely to leave each man the only one of his kind’. It is the ‘due to the belonging of each one to mankind’ part of this quote that is key to my suggestion, the idea that the nearness of the ‘near but different: Holy’ expression is to be understood as a kind of relation in its annulment. The annulment of the genus from which the ethical subject awakens locates the site of ethical response to the absolutely other, the holy, that site being the arena of mankind as a species. This remains mysterious though, for the membership of mankind by itself cannot provide the force of this nearness. This is because the biological classification means nothing ethically. It is only in its annulment that this nearness can be related to the different (the Holy) in a way that helps us to make some sense of it.

Achtenberg’s concern, that of the need for a vulnerability to form in addition to a vulnerability to singularity, is potentially addressed here, for the annulment of the belongingness to mankind paradoxically institutes the form of man, as member of a species, as a potentially live ethical factor. The only qualifier is that the notion of ‘what fits them and thus plays a role in enabling them to be what they are’ be guided not primarily by form but by singularity. In other words, in its very annulment, form remains a relevant consideration, but ultimately is subservient to singularity. Incidentally, Achtenberg argues against Levinas’s critique of Platonic return, holding that Plato’s position is not one of a return to self, but of a desire for the good and the beautiful, where the ‘beyond’ aspect of these two is conceived of as a ‘hyper-being’, one that is importantly different from that of the totalizing hegemony of being. Achtenberg’s account is interesting, and worthy of

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450 Even political (e.g. utilitarian) responses are not exempt from this, for whatever forms they begin with (general, empirically established notions and categories regarding the form of man), singularity always retains the right to modify, to trump these forms.
discussion elsewhere. Here I make one comment. Her argument seems to depend upon the move of interpreting recollection of the eternal forms as something other than that of a return to the same (in the context of this discussion a return to self), a move which I am not sure is altogether convincing.\textsuperscript{451} Perhaps a more promising thought might be that of some combination of singularity and form, but where the latter involves unending and creative variations on a theme, rather than comparison with a fixed template? And with the variations always being ultimately subject not to the theme but to the particular (single) other?\textsuperscript{452}

Just how paradoxical the above thoughts appear in relation to the notion of the absolute otherness of the other, how philosophically problematic they are considered to be, is I think an open question in relation to Levinas’s thought, and one which I suggested above might involve one’s philosophical temperament as much as anything else. Here I return to the main theme of this section.)

To summarize the last bit of the main theme. \textit{Eros} can initially be analyzed as having three strands: bodily desire (lust); Platonic desire for absolute beauty (the return home or return to self); and a sensibility to Levinas’s proximate, poetic beauty. For Levinas, the latter is primary, prior to ontological categories, and it is because this is not realized that the first two strands are understood in the way that Plato understands them. Lust becomes a solid category from the shadow world, and absolute beauty becomes a category of the eternal world. It is the sensibility to proximate beauty that intimately links these two, and at the same time transforms them into \textit{itself}. (This describes things backwardly - for Plato extracts these two categories \textit{out of} this prior sensibility - but if we wish


\textsuperscript{452} The (unorthodox) theologian John Milbank thinks that Levinas is caught in an ultimately futile attempt to bring transcendence back into the ethical without ‘participation’, without any mediating realm (Plato’s shadow world). In this realm reflecting/reciprocating light has a crucial role to play, even if its ultimate source is essentially mysterious. Milbank sees Levinas as being subject to what he (Milbank) takes to be the widespread misconception of reason as being secular, according to which in the history of philosophy (and elsewhere) transcendence has been (mistakenly) banished, and therefore can only return in an artificial and arbitrary manner (see 2011 Stanton Lectures, Lecture 4, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Milbank).
to apply this concept in a remedial fashion, then this way of speaking perhaps has its place.) Whether
conceived of in terms of two worlds or one, the absolute/shadow split speaks of an approach to
beauty that misses this sensibility to proximate beauty. Or, at least ‘half’ misses it, for – as seen –
Plato interestingly gets its symptoms right, both in their description and also in the crucial role he
sees them playing in awakening the soul to higher realms. But for Plato, it is only via a dialectical
process of the mind, the intellect, that absolute beauty can be properly realized.453 Yet - at least in
the Phaedrus and the Symposium - it is through the energy (the ‘divine madness’) provided by
embodiment that this process is initiated and set well under way. For the soul it is reason that
bridges between the shadow and the absolute, ultimately leaving the shadow behind. For Levinas by
contrast, the ‘absolute’ and the ‘shadow’ are sensible ‘aspects’ of the other, proximately sensed
rather than aesthetically seen. They are an integral part of what it is to be a beautiful ‘being’ –
waxing and waning, surging and withdrawing, an equivocation, a ‘blinking light’. To leave the shadow
behind is to leave a fundamentally human element behind. Embodiment, despite the important role
that it plays in Plato’s approach to beauty, is denied as any essential aspect of what it is to be human.
(Rather than a denial of embodiment as an essential aspect of the human, this might be expressed
simply as a denial of the human.)

In all this the definition of soul as self-moving can be seen at work; in its denial of bodily lust inspired
or moved by the actual other as being a possible good; in its undermining of the Levinasian
significance of the ‘shuddering’ symptoms by spiritualizing them as markers of a essentially self-
motivated pilgrimage; and in its rendering of the desire for absolute beauty as a form of self-love

453 The process is more fully set out in the Symposium, which – dependent upon being seen as written after
the Phaedrus (an unsettled matter) – might be seen as evidence of a further ‘progression’ away from the
other-moving notion of the soul towards the self-moving.
based upon a self-forgetting - the beloved actually falls in love with a ‘reflection of the love he inspires’.454

The *Phaedrus* is sometimes put forward as an example of a positive sensibility to embodiment. The importance of bodily beauty is acknowledged, accepted, extolled even (it is true that in this regard it contrasts well with the *Republic*). However, when this sensibility is contrasted not with the *Republic*, but instead with a sensibility to embodiment that is not primarily visual/intellectual but rather proximate (‘tactile’), where the body of the beloved is sensed in its equivocating - with its vulnerability to the fore as an essential part of its beauty – then this sensibility is understood as being impoverished, indeed somewhat sterile. In regard to this sterile sensibility to embodiment, I think Plato and Socrates are of a piece, and in Socrates’ case it is most clearly seen not in attempting to establish that he endorses various arguments or views relevant to this, but rather in a series of related stories about his embodiment in the world.

I have already mentioned Socrates’ reaction to the physical setting of the *Phaedrus* (pp.145-146), with this reaction being considered essentially from an instrumental perspective (how well the setting assists the progress of the intellect). Not for Socrates the bodily, ‘organic’ life outside the city walls.455 Then there are the well-known stories related by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Socrates

454 Presumably the lover, in an earthly sense not possessed of the same degree of beauty as the beloved, is moved more by the latter’s than by his own reflected beauty. There is a kind of asymmetry here, but the lover, being moved more by the beloved than by himself (the lover experiences the ‘symptoms’ in a way that it seems the beloved does not, or at least not as strongly), in Plato’s view seems to be in at least a subtly inferior mode of being. (For Levinas, the lover is closer than the beloved to an appreciation of the true nature of their relation.)

455 There is however a more optimistic (and Levinasian) interpretation available here. Levinas notes that ‘technology wrenches us out of the Heideggerian world and the superstitions surrounding Place. From this point on, an opportunity appears to us: to perceive men outside the situation in which they are placed, and for the human face to shine in all its nudity. Socrates preferred the town, in which one meets people, to the countryside and trees’. (Cited from Michael Naas’s ‘Lending Assistance Always to Itself: Levinas’ Infinite Conversation with Platonic Dialogue’, in *Levinas and the Ancients*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 2008, p.100, n8.) Is Levinas, having realized an important parallel between himself and Plato, and being motivated by wishing to find more of these parallels, here reading this interpretation back into Socrates’ life? Regardless of the answer to this question, I think that both interpretations – the instrumental and the Levinasian – can find
drinks more than anyone, but is never seen drunk; Socrates apparently doesn’t feel the cold, walking
barefoot on ice more easily than his fellow soldiers in their boots; Socrates stands virtually
motionless literally for a whole day, ruminating on some question; (perhaps more prosaically)
Socrates shows admirable courage in battle; and most decisive of all (at least for Alcibiades!),
Socrates resists the physical charms of Alcibiades for a whole night, with apparent ease. In particular,
one might think that the two stories regarding walking barefoot on ice and standing motionless for a
whole day border on the superhuman. The other tales might merely indicate wonderfully developed
self-control, but these two are suggestive of one in some sense being out of one’s body, this being so
perhaps especially with the ruminating episode. What do we make of these stories? The question of
how literally to take them is not so important because, regardless of the answer to that question,
Plato chooses to tell them in just the way that he does. They are not merely incidental anecdotesthe
main game of Socratic inquiry, but important complementary aspects of a general approach to
the body; they complete a unified picture of Socratic intellect and embodiment - or should I say
Socratic intellect and its embodiment?

We have all encountered people who apparently do not feel the cold as much as others, who have a
higher pain threshold than others, who can go without food for long stretches without seeming to
experience hunger pangs as others do, and so on. Sometimes we at least partially explain these
differences between such people and others by recourse to some story of their mental
preoccupation with something or other, or their particular drive towards a certain goal. We are also
familiar with people in situations of emergency (road accidents, war, personal dramas) apparently
having a different sensibility towards the physical world than in non-emergency situations,
experiencing (or at least registering) less pain, accomplishing physical feats seemingly beyond their
normal capacities. Regardless of where the historical Socrates may or may not fit into any of these

their place, as it is the theme of this work that Socrates is a distorted, yet nonetheless legitimate, version of
Levinas’s ethical relation in practice.
categories, Plato presents him as beyond these, as otherworldly, consistent with the visual/intellectual sensibility to embodiment, a sensibility that sees embodiment as a shadow of true being. A shadow cannot be scolded, or wounded, or rendered hungry, or intimidated, or enticed. To the extent that it appears to experience these things, then this just means that it is not yet fully understood for what it is, a mere shadow.

Towards the end of Socrates’ life he has the option of prolonging it for a bit. Crito mentions the sun still shining upon the mountains, and the possibility of enjoying a last dinner and wine among friends. It is telling I believe that not only does Socrates refuse this possibility, but he takes the opportunity to critique those who would take it, implicitly describing Crito and company as ‘clinging to life, hugging it when it has no more to offer’.\(^{456}\) Life has ‘no more to offer’ Socrates because the arguments are done, his friends \textit{qua interlocutors} have been dealt with sincerely and thoroughly, and Socrates sees the rest as ‘clinging’ or ‘hugging’. Apart from the choice not to partake of a final dinner and wine with friends, do we get a more directly emotional sense of what Socrates sees as clinging or hugging in the various outbursts of grief that happen at times in the \textit{Phaedo}? Earlier on, Xanthippe (Socrates’ wife) is led away, crying hysterically; the prison officer who has attended to Socrates’ needs bursts into tears; Crito has to leave when he cannot restrain his tears; and Phaedo and Apollodorus, along with the rest, break down and are scolded by Socrates. They are clinging to, attempting to hug, Socrates’ physical presence, his \textit{body}. They all agree that the arguments are done, they just want to enjoy his embodiment for a bit more. For his part, Socrates sees this as clinging to a shadow, a phantom of the real Socrates – hence his indifference to how his body is dealt with after death.\(^{457}\) The scenes are depicted in terms of the contrast between the cool, calm, temperate philosopher, who maintains a clear vision of the true nature of the real and the shadow worlds even in a time of approaching

\(^{456}\) \textit{Phaedo}, op.cit., 116D-117A.

\(^{457}\) Ibid., 115B-E.
death, and his philosophically immature, and therefore over-attached-to-this-world (and correspondingly over-emotional) friends.

This picture can be challenged. Phaedo relates to Echecrates that ‘I covered my face and wept broken-heartedly – not for him, but for my own calamity in losing such a friend’. The reason why Phaedo qualifies himself in this way is that he wishes to make the point to Echecrates that – contrary to the normal interpretation of this type of expression of emotion – it is for himself and not for Socrates that he weeps. This weeping is followed by Socrates’ scolding, and subsequent shame and self-control on the part of Phaedo (and the others). Phaedo (and Plato) presumably endorse this episode. It is all in order that Phaedo is correctly scolded for being intemperately emotional, correctly feels shame, and correctly controls himself. Phaedo is presumably right to weep for himself and not for Socrates, right because he is still in need of such a friend to help him properly take care of his soul. This sets the scene for my challenge, which is this: is not Phaedo’s interpretation of his emotional response to the impending loss of his friend – weeping for himself rather than for Socrates – at least partly a result of the very lack of what I have termed a proximate (‘tactile’) sensibility to embodiment in the philosophical approach of Plato/Socrates? Furthermore, might not the outbursts of emotion depicted in the *Phaedo* be in part a product of a suppression of this proximate sensibility? (Which after all, if Levinas is right, is proximate in all human relations, even if unrealized philosophically.) According to this reading, Socrates is at least partly responsible for the extent of the emotional outbursts, for it is he who has conditioned his friends with the purely visual/intellectual version of sensibility, a sensibility in understandable tension with the suppressed proximate version (because of its suppression). Ironically, it is also Socrates who then scolds his friends for these outbursts! Phaedo really cares for Socrates, the embodied Socrates (or better, Socrates as embodied?), yet he cannot give himself permission to express this care with a proximate sensibility.

\[458\] Ibid., 117B.
because Socrates (Plato) does not give this permission, and the permission is not given because the proximate version of sensibility is only seen as part of the shadow world, a distraction from the true beauty. But Phaedo is not Socrates (superhuman, non-human Socrates?), and so he cannot control himself as Socrates does. The lack of philosophical permission is not integrated into his soul, and so he breaks down and weeps, but then ‘correctly’ interprets this as weeping only for himself. The ‘outburst’ nature of the emotional responses in the *Phaedo* makes it easier for Plato to depict them as ‘hysterical’, as non-manly, yet it is Plato himself who has in part created the nature of these responses by a philosophical approach that denies proximity as having any spiritual significance. Is it surprising then that proximity surfaces in an ‘outburst’ manner? Does it follow from this that outbursts of emotion in life are necessarily a result of a lack of proximate sensibility? Not at all is the answer. I merely offer the above as an interesting and plausible reading of the interactions between Socrates and his friends. It is not difficult to imagine a more ‘even’ display of genuinely heartfelt emotion towards Socrates. Even if my ‘outburst’ theory is considered too speculative (perhaps even circular), I hold that the part of my challenge relating to Phaedo understanding himself as weeping for himself (and not for Socrates) stands.

I mentioned much earlier in section 2 (‘Ascending Dialectic’) that the inclusion of the ‘feminine’ in the philosophical world of Plato/Socrates would have to significantly affect the response to the other. In the *Phaedo* it is plausible to think that this is shown clearly in the negative mode. Would it not be difficult to imagine Socrates’ dismissal of his friends’ and family’s attempts to ‘cling’ to his embodiment being un-problematically accepted as evidence of a superior philosophical temperament if the structural position of women were to be more prominent? And this even more

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459 This triggers a live question for any human situation: what is the ‘correct’ balance between the visual/intellectual and the proximate/tactile versions of sensibility? For example, in bed with the lights out might naturally evoke the latter much more strongly than the former, and other situations might be vice-versa, but presumably in no situation would a complete marginalizing of one or the other be in order? At least not philosophically that is?
so if we additionally consider Levinas’s emphasis on proximate sensibility within the frame of sexual alterity? A sensibility which the acceptance/inclusion of women and this inclusion’s natural promotion of a consciousness of an accompanying tenderness would naturally tend to bring to the fore?

There is evidence of kindness (even a form of tenderness?) on the part of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. The prison officer attests that Socrates is ‘the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all men’ that he has seen in prison.460 And Socrates, in referring to the kindness of the officer, and in some contrast with how he scolds the others, even refers to the tears of the officer at his impending death as being an instance of generosity. And earlier in the dialogue when the discussion apparently falters, he displays an ‘admiral’ sensitivity towards Cebes, Simmias and Phaedo, lifting their sinking spirits with ‘kindly’ encouragement to resume the inquiry.461 The example is given of Socrates teasingly playing with Phaedo’s (‘beautiful’) curls, playfully exhorting him to cut them off rather than fail to rejoin the fray of the discussion.462 So, a certain sensitivity is certainly evident, at least in some of the interactions described, although it might be thought that Socrates’ response to the prison officer is largely reciprocal in nature, and perhaps generously beyond or outside of his philosophical views? And the playfully tactile exhortation of Phaedo is after all an exhortation, still very much in the context of rallying him for the intellectual pursuit ahead.

(Whether these instances in the *Phaedo* can or should be thought of as constituting some sort of counter-evidence to my general picture of Socratic sensibility, or rather be considered as lending support to my account of this sensibility as being a mixed or distorted one - with flashes of a proximate sensibility occasionally shining through, intermingled with an intellectualized version - is a question which by this stage of the work hopefully answers itself.)

460 *Phaedo*, op.cit., 116B.
461 Ibid., 89A.
462 Ibid., 89B.
To very briefly summarize the picture presented: Socrates exhibits a positive, Levinasian ethical responsibility (outlined in the 1st section). Though limited by a preoccupation with dialectic (the 2nd section), Socrates’ practice of this responsibility results in a certain serenity, a freedom from the existential species of anxiety. Nevertheless, while retaining a Levinasian ethical anxiety (for the other), Socrates – because of the suppression of proximate sensibility related to the central notion of the self-moving soul – manifests this in a distorted, philosophical manner. This summary calls into question the traditional reading of Socratic serenity as a straightforward product of courage, of temperance.\textsuperscript{463} It seriously questions and challenges the type of sensibility associated with his embodiment. The very sensibility that Plato extols as the gateway to true beauty (and goodness) is posited as a sensibility that, although offering important clues – the \textit{shuddering} of the lover at the sight of the beloved – in Plato’s hands actually limits and distorts beauty’s deepest essence. In simpler terms, ‘courage’ and ‘temperance’ (and other virtues?) can be a product of insensitivity, and my suggestion is that, while not as crude as this, there is a systemic element of this production operating in Socrates’ embodiment in the world.

This conclusion connects with Peperzak’s remark at the very beginning of this section regarding ‘being-for [-the-other] being a body, having hands as well as a heart ...’, of needing to ‘enjoy the world’ in order to be ‘a self claimed by an other’, as well as with my contention that Socrates is compromised in the ethical \textit{and} egoistic components of his soul (for these of course are necessarily connected). I said earlier that there is no evidence to support the idea that Socrates is a prig or a wowser when it comes to earthly pleasures, and I reaffirm this here, but that does not mean that he

\textsuperscript{463} It might be thought that knowledge or belief is missing here, that Socratic serenity may be explained on account of his absolute conviction that he is assured a place in a blessed after-life, or at least that his true self is not his body, and that therefore he cannot be harmed by physical evils. Whether Socrates might have been attracted towards such a belief because of a certain kind of embodiment he experienced, or whether that kind of embodiment was a product of such a belief, or some combination of the two, is an open question. Whatever the answer though, it does not affect the link between the notion of soul in operation and the kind of embodiment consistent with it – if the above type of conviction (or ‘knowledge’) is bought at the cost of proximate sensibility, then it is immediately suspect, no matter how conscientiously developed it may be.
‘enjoys’ the world in the sense that Peperzak’s remark refers to. I suggest that it is the lack of Socrates’ ‘bodily’ ego in his ethical responses to others that distorts and limits those responses. My analysis of his responses to his family and friends in his prison cell leading up to his death suggests that either he cannot identify with their bodily responses to the impending demise of his own embodiment in the world, or he strongly believes that identification of that kind is a failing, a failure to keep the self-moving notion of the soul to the fore, a falling back into the shadow world. Socrates lacks empathy for others’ empathetic (and personal loss-based) responses to him, and in this sense he fails to take up his responsibility to and for others as embodied others - he remains physically unclaimed by them. This follows from a failure to take his own embodiment seriously, that is, as something solidly sensual, as real. It is his soul that moves him, his mind and his body, and not his embodiment in a sensually provocative world. This means that when he drinks and does not get drunk it is because in a crucial sense he is not there to get drunk, when he ruminates for a day in the one spot or walks barefoot on ice he is not there to get tired or feel the cold, and when he spends the night with Alcibiades it is not he that is spending the night.

Another way of describing this is to put it in the terms of the ‘Anxiety’ part of this section. In ‘not being there’ Socrates’ responses are not informed by the inherent anxiety of being a ‘material existent’, an equivocation between the purely primal ego of the anonymous sensuous element and the primal/private ego of material, individual identity (embodiment). This inherent, bodily anxiety would afford him a natural empathy for the sensuous callings of the world around him, including that of Phaedo and others’ emotional/bodily appeals. Instead, Socrates’ responses flow from a desensualized and de-materialized ego (disembodiment), a soul firmly rooted in the concept of self-movement, with all legitimate movement revolving around and returning to this. By contrast, the sensibility involved in Levinas’s proximate beauty, because it flows from the anonymous, sensuous element from which all others too ‘arise’ from, flows to and from the other in an infinitely
uncontainable manner (recall the Priam/Achilles encounter, the Schindler example, as well as the D’Hubert/Feraud story). The enjoyment (and suffering) of this also infuses all encounters in the same uncontainable way, a way that Socrates shows little if any awareness of.

In spite of section 2’s conclusions regarding his non-philosophical love of sociality, in terms of his embodiment in it there is a sense in which Socrates does not enjoy (or suffer) the world. In the previous two sections I showed that his relation with the other has something other-regarding in the Levinasian sense about it, for he is indeed claimed by others, towards the point of substitution. And yet, Socrates is not a self claimed by others, but rather a soul claimed by the souls of others, and so he remains a strictly limited, although for all that - or even because of that – fascinating illustration of Levinas’s ethical relation.

Regarding this issue of embodiment and its relationship to the ethical relation in Socrates’ life, and just to be doubly clear, the thesis is not – and of course had better not be – that Socrates somehow responds to others in a Levinasian manner, as it were purely soul-to-soul. If this were so, then the obvious question is: how this could be? A Levinasian response proceeds from an embodied, ethical sensibility, and not at all from the conceptual (or some ‘spiritual’) level. So how could Socrates be ethically claimed in this manner soul-to-soul, where this connection is mediated conceptually? The idea of this work is rather that in its distortion Socrates’ relation with others takes on the form of (is informed by) a soul-to-soul understanding. The soul-to-soul form is a distortion of the ethical relation, at the same time as being underpinned, impelled by it. Hopefully this way of putting things, if needed, clarifies and summarizes my take on the Phaedrus as exhibiting something of this layered phenomenon. (The layering is not consistent through the dialogues. Sometimes the layers are close, at other times separated, at other times again the embodied sensibility is absent altogether. This is as one would expect given the lack of a Levinasian-type understanding, together with a more or less dominant intellectual method in play.)
Concluding reflections

If Socrates is not primarily (ethically) driven by the pursuit of knowledge, of wisdom, then what implications does this have for the practice of philosophy? Socrates practices philosophy – the discipline of the *elenchus* in conjunction with others – but what does he (and they) get out of it? According to my reading, Socratic irony does not consist of concealing knowledge for the sake of others (a *strategic* reading), but occurs rather as a prompting, a cajoling, an entreat ing even (an expression of frustration?), as an attempt to expose others’ lack of seriousness, their lack of integrity, or their pretentions. I take Socrates’ claims of ongoing ignorance at face value. Yet he holds that it is the ‘finest thing in the world’ to discuss and investigate issues of justice, virtue, wisdom etc., even where there is precious little to show for it in terms of the stated aims of the dialogues. What kind of ‘fineness’ is this? Not the fineness of knowledge, but also not the fineness of a clever ‘art of conversation’, of a kind of ‘Socratic rhetoric’, where one becomes adept at speaking of subjects that one has only negative knowledge of. Given the lack of progress over the years, is it not a remarkable thing that Socrates remains adamant that the practice of philosophy is the most important, the finest pursuit that man can undertake? And furthermore, he envisages himself continuing this pursuit in the next life (if there is one).

Whether or not Socrates ever hoped to gain definitive answers to the questions posed in the various dialogues is a difficult question to answer, but what can be affirmed is that it is at least plausible to think that his particular compulsion to philosophize is not best explained by the thirst for knowledge (or at least not by that alone). If my Levinasian re-reading of Socrates’ life is a plausible explanatory candidate in relation to this compulsion, where the driver is not understood in terms of a search for knowledge but rather as a thirst or desire for the other, then the practice of the *elenchus* becomes abstracted from its knowledge context and may be understood as a discipline that emanates from
the face-to-face encounter. However, because in the elenchus the conscious content of this encounter is the search for knowledge, then the reason for the encounter in the first place is also misunderstood as a search for knowledge. Sociality, which for Levinas is prior to knowledge, is seen as instrumental rather than primary. Yet Socrates shows his primary commitment, or better, his obedience to sociality, by his responses to others, by the particular way that he practices the elenchus, by his overall devotion to this practice regardless of its disappointing outcomes in terms of positive knowledge.

Socrates does not ‘get something out of’ the practice of philosophy. He rather establishes it as a way of life (at least for himself), a way of practicing sociality, where traditional virtues such as temperance and courage are developed and maintained in relation to others in dialogue rather than, or at least in addition to, the battlefield and other traditional spheres. Additionally, the non-traditional virtue of humility comes to the fore. Socrates displays humility in regard to the contributions that others may have to offer, even where these ‘contributions’ may not positively further the pursuit of knowledge as such, but rather be ‘merely’ an offering of themselves in their limited but genuine openness. There is also humility in regard to the demands of knowledge itself, with this being crucial to the staving off of the temptations of hubris. The virtue here is not in acquiring knowledge, but rather in avoiding its pretentions, which are exhibited in the face of others rather than in the humbling face-to-face.

Perhaps just this way of life is what the ‘fineness’ consists of, a fineness that ‘instinctively’ compelled Socrates? The mystery of this ‘instinct’ is the mystery of transcendence, which is especially mystifying when located right in the midst of a self-conscious emphasis on the importance of rational

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464 The exact nature of the elenchus in relation to knowledge is much debated - whether it is to be understood as a purely negative instrument, or in some more positive manner than this. My position would be that the elenchus is not a fixed thing in this regard, but, taking its cue from the face-to-face encounter, might play different roles depending upon the particular encounter.

465 See Laches (194a), where Socrates, to the confusion of the famous general Laches, articulates this notion.

466 Some of the early Christian fathers thought of Socrates as ‘a Christian before his time’, but it is doubtful that they were referring to his humility in dialogue. They rather had in mind his avowed belief in truth and goodness, his sense of being on a divine mission, combined with his ‘martyrdom’ in relation to these.
knowledge. Plato shows a glimpse of this transcendence in his ‘beyond being’ of book six of the *Republic*, but as shown in section 2 this glimpse points towards a realm that is distant from the faces of others, that is only approached at the end of a dialectical journey, and that through this journey becomes infected with knowledge. A topic that might be taken up is that of where Socrates ends and Plato begins in relation to the question of having confidence in the power of knowledge. Is Plato’s apparent confidence in knowledge borne out of a need to philosophically explain Socrates, to explain the unexplainable? Levinasian transcendence cannot be philosophically explained, only referred to, gestured at, approached via a phenomenological route of concrete descriptions that restrains knowledge from its colonizing impulse in relation to the other. The ‘deck-clearing’ dialectic (section 2) as practiced by Socrates plays something of this role, but is this because Socrates has not developed the metaphysics of Plato? Would he be impressed by them? Maybe the answer is impossible to know, but the point of bringing up the question is to stress that a positive answer to it would potentially compromise Socrates’ relation with transcendence, his ‘instinct’ of fineness, the ‘purity’ of his responses to others. The only metaphysic that would not compromise here is an ethical metaphysic *a la* Levinas, where there is nothing in the metaphysic that does not connote the kind of ethical sensibility referred to in this work at its heart. Plato’s transcendent realm does not seem to exhibit this kind of sensibility.467

I (above) parenthesized the ‘purity’ of Socrates’ responses to others to foreshadow the current (and repeating) point that, although there is something plausibly Levinasian – that is, genuinely transcendent - about Socrates in relation to others, the manifestation of this is distorted by the notion of soul that he is operating with, and by which he understands himself. The philosophical move away from Homeric pity for the suffering creatureliness of humans, towards the self-moving notion of soul informed by pure ideas from a spiritual realm, in effect disembodies Socrates, leaving

467 Neither do Christian (or Islamic) paradisiacal realms, with all suffering and sorrow banished, perfection (of being) being restored. (I am not so familiar with Jewish metaphysical thinking to comment.)
him as it were engaged but invulnerable. This in turn compromises his capacity to respond to embodied responses of others (including his own), and leads him to downgrade aspects of life that he correspondingly understands as being distractions from philosophy. This downgrading ironically delivers to him aspects of his renowned temperance ‘on a plate’. Although in terms of ideas, Socrates’ practice of philosophy leads him to very few if any definitive conclusions, he nevertheless remains solidly committed to the notion of the soul being connected to and moved by an other-worldly realm of ... ideas? or perhaps spirit? In either case both the limitation and distortion of Levinasian ethical sensibility is achieved.

The implication of all this for the practice of philosophy is at the very least somewhat unsettling. Firstly, despite the ‘knowledge equals virtue’ formula, Socrates is manifestly not any kind of clear example of how the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge leads to a realization (in theory or practice) of the ethical relation, or more broadly, of how education in itself might bring this about. Secondly, even if one were to take a more optimistic line, one that holds that philosophy understood as the elenchus, and not as academia, does have a crucial role to play in the move towards a realization of the ethical relation - a role not connected to the gaining of knowledge but rather to Socratic humility - does this then not immediately cast a negative judgment upon the actual practice of philosophy, from the time of the Academy onwards? A practice which Marina Barabas describes as a movement away from the ‘tending of the soul’ towards that of saving it, from a ‘disciplined process’ towards a ‘structured project’. The emphasis on the face-to-face encounter in the dialogues of Plato is replaced by the systematic project of teaching, and philosophy thereby becomes structured by the demands and restraints of many knowledge-seeking endeavors – it loses its unique ethical status. For

\[468\] Regardless of what we might conclude in relation to the question of how much of Plato’s metaphysics Socrates would subscribe to, he certainly endorses a metaphysical realm that is structured in opposition to the physical. Marina Barabas writes that ‘Socrates’ intimation of the most important... while essentially logos, eludes the logos of definition and account’ (‘In Search of Goodness’, in Philosophy, Ethics and a Common Humanity: Essays in Honour of Raimond Gaita, Routledge, London, 2011, p.97).

\[469\] Ibid., p.95.
Plato, philosophy’s natural analogue is that of medicine, with the diagnosis by, and application of skilled knowledge (the wisdom of the trained Guardian class) being the treatment that the soul in need of healing (or the city in need of order) receives. However, over time this understanding is replaced by a more full-blooded emphasis on the instrumental nature of knowledge, where this becomes detached from its intrinsic (Platonic) relation to the soul, and is instead rendered as a necessary ‘completion of one’s education’, or a highly ranked ‘critical skill’. This skill is understood in terms of the ability to unmask faulty arguments, answer certain questions from the history of philosophy, and pose clever thought experiments – all this exercised with genuine creativity. The skill is in keeping with certain aspects of the dialogues, yet at the same time is entirely in keeping with an obliviousness to the humble discipline of the face-to-face encounter of dialogue, an obliviousness which renders philosophy as one brilliant human artifact amongst many. While this human artifact is one of the few that focuses directly on the ethical (others may do this indirectly), this focus tends heavily towards the theoretical, the academic, assessing knowledge of ethical theory and associated problems, and thereby prizes the ‘transcendence’ - the brilliance - of this over the transcendence of the other. Great philosophers shine for their ‘furthering of the debate’, for their ‘contributions to knowledge, to scholarship’, for their ‘creative solutions to intellectual conundrums’, even for their ‘adding to the storehouse of collective wisdom’. Yet, even where these phrases are applied exclusively to philosophers dealing with ethical questions, key questions are rarely asked regarding the discipline: Does the brilliance of philosophy further ethical character? Do people become better through their engagement with (moral) philosophy? Or, perhaps more to the point in relation to this work: Do people become better through their engagement with writings of (and related to) Levinas?  

In Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism Claire Katz puts forward an educational interpretation of Levinas’s writings. She argues that his works are: (a) phenomenologically describing the ethical subject that we all (potentially) are, but just as (if not more) importantly: (b) pointing towards the possibility of the actual
The very stating of these questions gives one the feeling of perhaps being out of order, of making some kind of category mistake. Surely one is guilty of moralizing, or at the very least of demanding far too much of a discipline which may very well have become something significantly different from the practice of Socrates, but which, like any discipline dealing with time and numbers, has had to organize, to systematize, and to institutionalize in order to survive, to keep its accumulated knowledge alive? This consideration, taken together with the additional grant that philosophy (especially in modern times?) does not claim anything so grandiose as bettering people, surely means that it cannot thereby be credibly charged with a failure of this kind?

This issue goes all the way back to Socrates himself, for in the Gorgias he makes the claim that perhaps he is the only person practicing the art of true statesmanship. 471 He directly

creation of this ethical subject through a ‘Jewish/Talmudic’ type educational model, where the success of instructional methods is inseparably tied to responsibility for the other. ‘Levinas situates Jewish education as that which simultaneously inflames the mind and cultivates an ethical subject who is responsible for the Other’ (Claire Katz, Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2013, p.163). Levinas himself took part in many Talmudic discussions, offering his own interpretations of the Torah, and saw this very process itself as epitomizing the ethical. The Torah, of all traditional texts (according to Levinas), is the most focused on the ethical, gesturing towards its transcendent aspect in a way that ‘Greek’ writings and thought do not, and the tradition of infinite Talmudic interpretation produced through conversation and debate is thereby a model of community engagement and responsibility, which in its instantiation creates ethical subjects. Questions which Katz takes up are: What is the relationship between Levinas’s philosophical and his ‘Jewish’ writings? What are their respective aims? What is the ethical relationship between Jews and Gentiles? What is the ethical meaning of the ‘chosen-ness’ of the Jewish people? What possibilities are envisaged for non-Jewish texts/literature in terms of the creation of ethical subjects? What role does Levinas see for education here?

While this work does not deal with Levinas’s Jewish writings, or with any of these questions, it might be suggested that Levinas’s philosophical writings, because of their unique emphasis on the ethical/transcendent (unique in their insistent focus over the long term, as well as in their originality), constitute a ‘Talmudic’-type contribution in relation to the ethical texts of humanity, and so in this sense add to, as well as potentially transform the meaning of, the ethical canon of the ‘Greek’ (the non-Jewish, ‘secular’) world. The interaction in relation to this canon might not in general have the single minded community focus of the actual Talmudic model, but there is no reason in principle why this might not occur (and indeed it does in places) - Levinas does not think there is anything magical about the Talmudic tradition. So the reader of Levinas’s philosophical writings can engage with something akin to the Jewish ethical tradition. As per her title - ‘the Crisis of Humanism’ - Katz is interested in the possibility of institutionalizing the creation of ethical subjects in an educational system, and is not at all denying the possibility of the creation of individual ethical subjects here and there (even within the academy!). To what extent a secular-based process/project of ethical subject-creation might approach the Talmudic model remains a somewhat open question, although Katz is hopeful in this regard. (One finds scattered references to Western literature – e.g. Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Proust - amongst Levinas’s philosophical writings, as well as the more common Jewish references.)

471 Gorgias, op.cit., 521d.
challenges Callicles with questions such as ‘has any citizen hitherto become a better man through the influence of Callicles?’ and ‘what example will you give of a man who has been improved by associating with you?’ The context here is political, with the question being to do with what kind of concerns a public man should have as his priority, but for Socrates the aims of true statesmanship are of a piece with the aims of his personal practice of philosophy. Is there any doubt that he would examine the discipline of academic philosophy in the same light? Especially the branch called ethics?

I do not point to Socrates here as some clinching justification for placing academic philosophy under this kind of spotlight, because it might be thought to be an open question as to whether Socrates himself improved anyone! If we were to take Socrates at his claim of being a true statesman, then by his own standards he fails, for the citizens of Athens turn on him and condemn him. But perhaps this is unfair, as he does not aspire to political power, and so his sphere of influence is somewhat circumscribed. If Socrates had a position of political leadership then perhaps his statesmanship would have improved the population in such ways that he would have had a better chance of being accepted? Let us allow this, but still ask: does Socrates even improve any of his friends or interlocutors? In his own time, in empirical terms, this appears a difficult question to address, but surely the answer must be yes, even if this depends upon a kind of a priori affirmation; anyone setting that kind of example must have a salutary effect on (some) others? In, or near to his own time, we do have words of admiration, statements of convictions of revealed inadequacies (e.g. Alcibiades), and of course the works of Plato, along with the Academy and the other schools of philosophy (although these last two items might be queried in the same spirit as this present discussion). And over the centuries, many have claimed Socrates as inspiring them towards self-knowledge, towards a personal search for wisdom, for the good, towards exercising greater temperance in the face of adversity etc. These are exercises of energy connected – if not to the direct

472 Ibid., 515a-b.
practice of the humbling *elenchus* – at least to the improvement of one’s character, where this can clearly be understood as standing quite *apart* from academic philosophy. And to return this discussion to Levinasian terms, presumably at least some aspects of this improvement of character – even if perhaps only the necessary answerability of the self to an external reality – are conducive to being more responsive to the transcendence of the other?

At this point a distinction needs to be made: between example and conscious ‘teaching’. It is the example of Socrates that inspires; his example in the *elenchus*, his example in battle, his example in politics, his example in death, where these form a unified whole. But what of his attempts at ‘teaching’, his *actual words* directed towards the ethical realm? As shown in section 2, the effect of ‘Socratic’ dialectic is to clear the field of vision, so that the ethical relation is more clearly seen. The practice (of the words) of dialectic here is akin to a spiritual discipline engendered by and engendering of humility, a humility that tempers the temptations of the pretentions of knowledge. This aspect of Socrates’ ‘teaching’ has a positively negative effect, it is more of a *non-teaching* or *undoing* of knowledge (in Levinasian terms it is the saying of the said by way of an unsaying of it).

Then there are the stories, the soaring language of the myths and the poetry, and the various speeches that occur. (And I suppose I should also mention the bad arguments!) If this latter teaching or speaking is assessed *apart* from the example of Socrates’ life as a whole, it results in something of a mixed bag; soaring images, stirring speeches, illuminating arguments, with speculative musings and sloppy arguments as well, but if assessed *within* the context of that example, then this mixture is not subject to assessment in the same way that (for example) a piece of academic work would be. The example/teaching distinction is not in play in Socrates’ life, or at least not in the way that it is in academic philosophy. A sloppy argument, despite being recognized as such, may carry weight

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473 The term ‘teaching’ for Levinas refers to teaching being a function of the unique otherness of the other in relation to the I (the original teaching). In this sense *everyone* in the *elenchus* potentially ‘teaches’, although Levinas sees Socrates and Plato as primarily being involved in maieutics (*Totality and Infinity*, p.51).
because it is expressed by Socrates. A sound argument from a basic textbook or lecture may not carry weight in the same way.474

This distinction between example and teaching can also be viewed from the perspective of the exemplar. In her original paper ‘In Search of Goodness’ Marina Barabas suggests that ‘goodness is not “known” by the one who “has” it’,475 but is rather known by the recipient or observer of it. Following this thought, if Socrates has goodness then it is something that he manifests without his ‘left hand knowing what his right hand is doing’.476 This is easier to think of in reference to exemplifying goodness, than in reference to speaking of, or attempting to consciously pursue it. However, it had better also be thinkable in relation to the latter, at least in some sense, for otherwise it appears that anyone who attempts (indeed, anyone who has ever attempted) to knowingly pursue (or teach) the ethical is thereby automatically disqualified from having access to the mode of goodness while being so engaged. Unless…. goodness is cleaved from ethics? Something which Barabas contends has actually happened in the history of philosophy. It would be nice to think that direct references to goodness are largely absent from the history of ethical instruction within philosophy because of a deep understanding of Barabas’s point – that is, that philosophy has always known the truth that goodness cannot be directly taught, with this by no means being a downgrading of it. Yet Barabas’s contention is that rather than being downgraded, or rightly ignored, goodness has

474 Regarding the bad or sloppy arguments, there are different ways of looking at them. For example, in the Phaedo the argument for the immortality of the soul has many flaws (which there is no need to rehearse here), but more interesting might be the ideas thrown out along the way - e.g. the ‘soul as attunement’ idea, which I think has significant ethical resonance and promise. Also of fascination is a consideration of the possible driving motivations for the argument in the first place - e.g. an exercise in consolation for Socrates’ friends (Phaedo, 115D)? An argument giving expression to a ‘subjectivizing interiorization’ of the soul, to its complete separation from the ‘orgiastic’ realm (Derrida, The Gift of Death, op.cit., pp.12-13)? (Of course multiple motivations are possible.) More generally, engaging in bad arguments might simply be a way of engaging with others, where they are at.


476 Ibid.
been absent because it does not even appear in the visual field of ethics.\(^{477}\) This is because it only appears in the ‘actions, responses and demeanor of good men and women’, and in this regard it is ‘essentially a “phainomenon”’.\(^{478}\) This idea denies and defies definitional attempts at grasping the essence of goodness, a lesson that Socrates learned by experience (although he persisted in the attempt), but a lesson which philosophy took to heart in an especially distorted manner, by shifting goodness into the category of non-philosophy (perhaps of religion), and elevating definitional ethics as the guide to the highest end (while Plato played his part in this shift, it is more firmly reinforced by Aristotle). Goodness thereby becomes a luxury, supererogatory, a gracious boon, and is not something which can be studied in a disciplined way, not something upon which one could base character, ethical codes, or systems of justice. It therefore disappears from, or rather never even gets started in, the tradition. However, Barabas along with thinkers such as Murdoch, Holland, Diamond, and Gaita, contends that goodness can be approached within - or at least in relation to - the tradition, but it must be approached through proper depiction of it, which only happens through description (and not through definition or argument), whether this be courtesy of real-life or literary examples.\(^{479}\)

Can the phenomenon of goodness appear in the midst of conscious attempts at pursuing it in a definitional way? That is, not just in the midst, but in the conscious attempts? A pursuit which purportedly the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues is engaged in? Or is this pursuit necessarily self-...

\(^{477}\) Ibid., p.102.

\(^{478}\) Ibid.

\(^{479}\) A query might arise here as to whether this runs foul of Levinas’s critique of theology with its ‘monstrations’; its ‘witnessing’ of god, its ‘appearances’. In that sense ‘...the essential thing is not to appear, not to show itself, not to be thought, not to be witnessed. It is to go towards the other human being who is God’s divinity’ (Edith Wyschogrod, ‘Interview with Emmanuel Levinas: December 31, 1982’, Philosophy and Theology 4, no.2, 1989, p.107). However, this form of ‘idolatry’ is not to be confused with literary or personal depiction/examples, which while ‘appearing’, can do so in an attenuated, tentative sense, providing a glimpse of light as it were, very different from creedal theology (or rational or propositional philosophy). Levinas himself describes or depicts the ethical relation with the language of transcendence, or more accurately, with a language – a saying – that transcends as it gestures towards the beyond of the other. (He of course also employs many depictions from literature.)
defeating, so that goodness appears (if it appears at all) despite these attempts? The answer of this work is that to the extent that Socrates’ pursuit in this regard is ‘directed’ by the face of the other (primarily in the ellenchus), then this is equivalent to the disappearance of the self in great art, it is the disappearance of any self-consciousness of goodness in the actual activity of a disciplined, detailed depiction of it. 480 So, Socrates can set out with a broad and guiding sense of attempting to pursue true virtue, goodness, both in a definitional and character sense (the left hand), but in his actions and responses he does not see or know what he is doing, but is directed or commanded by the height, the transcendence, of others (the right hand). In this way of speaking his conscious attempts transform into a pure ‘consciousness’ of the other. He can become aware that he manifests goodness, but only through the responses of others to him - indirectly. The thought here is that the thought ‘I am good’ (or ‘I am manifesting goodness’) is just so dangerous in terms of its temptations to hubris, that it can only legitimately occur as a ‘gift’ from others, like an act of grace, which must be received in that spirit. ‘I am good’ a priori cannot be a 1st person, observational statement of some state of affairs. It is always either a temptation to be resisted or a completely unself-conscious thought gifted to one by others (and even then only for a moment!). The most common example of this phenomenon is the genuine embarrassment of people who do not know what to say or how to respond to compliments along these lines. 481 If in response to ‘why, that’s wonderfully kind of you’ someone were to respond with the affirmation ‘well, I am a very giving person’ or some such, then we would immediately be rightly suspicious. By contrast, the statement ‘well, she is a very giving person’ regarding another, is entirely appropriate. It is almost an ethical/logical truth that the

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480 ‘Self-consciousness is kept breathless with tension or relaxation, in the before or the after. In the meanwhile the event expected turns into the past without being lived through, without being equaled, in any present’ (Levinas, ‘Phenomena and Enigma’, Collected Philosophical Papers, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987, p.68). The ‘event’ here is the interruption by, and response to the other, so in this sense the common (and naturally appealing) description of Socrates as being ‘absolutely present’ to his fellow interlocutors coincides with him being absolutely absent in his ‘presence’ to them. The ellenchus would thus not be a ‘lived experience’ for Socrates (or for others who join him in his spirit), but rather a disciplined response to the other, which is then ‘experienced’ in ‘relaxation’ (reflection).

481 There is of course phoney embarrassment, with an underlying relishing of the compliment being far more prominent than is meant to be obvious.
moment that feeling good about ourselves for being good is separated from feeling good about ourselves because of the good that ‘our’ good has achieved for others (where ‘our’ is understood as a vehicle through which goodness occurs rather than a possession or achievement), we begin to slip towards self-righteousness.

These reflections can now be applied to the writings of Levinas (and even perhaps to this work itself). Socrates can be heard to ask: Do people become better through their engagement with the writings of (and related to) Levinas?

Does not Levinas in some sense self-consciously set out to elucidate what he takes to be first philosophy - ethics, and the ethical relation at its heart? What example does this apparently self-conscious effort set? Does it not have the effect of consciously focusing readers’ minds on the ethical, on the nature of goodness, and this in a kind of de-fined sense, with the ethical relation separated out from all other knowledge-based accounts? What status does this elucidation and its effect have? Is it a kind of ‘knowledge’, a thing or experience of the intellect? Or is it rather a kind of transcendence? If only the former, then doesn’t it fail to escape the orbit of the self, the same, and therefore only speak of transcendence in theory, in a theme? Regarding Totality and Infinity, Derrida (‘Violence and Metaphysics’) thought that Levinas could not achieve transcendence by engaging with the ontological tradition. Levinas ‘responded’ with Otherwise than Being, perhaps the ultimate attempt to say the unsayable by unsaying the said as it is being said. This can be taken as a motif

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482 Parentheses here because it is unclear just how much of Levinas’s movement in thought between Totality and Infinity and Otherwise than Being was directly influenced by Derrida’s critique of the former work. However, short of explicit confirmation by Levinas himself (which we do not have), it is as certain as can be that he was influenced by it, this being attested to by his overall relationship and respect for Derrida. (For discussion of this specific issue see Salomon Malka’s chapter ‘The Double and the Opposite’, from Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 2006.)

483 Tina Chanter says that ‘to reduce what Levinas’s texts say to a content, a theme, or a thesis is to refuse to acknowledge the efficacy of the distinction between the said and the saying. Of course, as Levinas often reminds us, such a reduction is unavoidable − thematization is “inevitable”. Indeed, it is not merely inevitable; it is also necessary. The saying calls for the said’ (Time, Death, and the Femine, Levinas with Heidegger, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, p.226).
for Levinas’s entire corpus of writings, for from the earliest to the latest he is always inspired, commanded, by the need of the other to be recognized as truly other, as transcendent to all the thematizing attempts to comprehend, to grasp him or her. In this sense there is a cumulative effect of Levinas’s writings, perhaps not unlike the cumulative effect of all the years that Socrates spent talking in the social settings of Athens. If goodness is truly transcendent, then we can only focus on it, if we can focus on it at all, indirectly, through its effects, its appearance, and possibly through gestures towards it. If the self-conscious aspect of Levinas’s writings (the precision, the care, the scholarship etc.) is understood as growing automatically or organically out of what I am wanting to call a ‘grand or fine gesture towards transcendence’, where the fineness of this gesture is gauged by looking at his entire corpus of writings (as well as aspects of his life\(^484\)), and where the gesture itself is understood as being ignited by, and responding to transcendence, then there is a sense in which the ‘let thy left hand not know what thy right hand is doing’ saying is applicable to his works. Levinas’s grand or fine gesture, his elucidation of the ethical relation, has the effect of a dazzling rather than a clarifying or defining light. His writings are sometimes referred to as performative (as opposed to constative).\(^485\) Much like his own analysis of the caress, Levinas writes as if caressing towards that which he knows not what, in a non-grasping gesture that reaches towards… something which guides that very reaching towards. As readers, we of course sense the gesturing, but the transcendent light shines in our sensing of the source of the guidance of that gesturing, something that shines as it were through Levinas, or perhaps from beyond Levinas, only not the beyond of another world, but rather beyond Levinas as a comprehended being?\(^486\) In ‘comprehending’ Levinas we comprehend that that there is something active in and through him that defies, that transcends comprehension, and in comprehending that this is the ethical we realize too that we cannot approach its essence through the path of knowledge. In this regard Levinas’s engagement with the ontological tradition can be

\(^{484}\) Something which I have not touched upon in this work.


\(^{486}\) Levinas’s concept of the ‘trace’ becomes relevant here.
compared with my earlier account of ‘Socratic’ dialectic as a deck-clearing exercise. More imaginatively, what I have termed Levinas’s grand or fine gesture can be compared to a Socrates (or an early Plato?) who firmly ‘bites the bullet’ in relation to ignorance - that is, whose words, whose ‘teaching’, is progressively disinfected of the traces of definitional attempts at attaining the transcendent.

This characterization of Levinas’s writings and their potential effects on readers is not one that can plausibly be made of many philosophical works. I think that the works of Plato also share something of this character, albeit in a less transparent manner, and my hope is that this philosophical work contributes to the plausibility of this characterization in relation to both sets of writings.
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