

The Other as Deconstructive Phenomenon: Understanding Levinas' Hyperbolic Descriptions in
Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence

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Abstract

This monograph addresses the problem of Emmanuel Levinas' hyperbole in his work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. In this text, he claims to provide a phenomenological description of the encounter the Other, yet his descriptions are deliberately hyperbolic and therefore do not seem to actually be descriptive at all. To address this problem, I propose that we can understand his hyperbole as descriptive if we understand that the subject's encounter with the Other is a deconstructive experience. Deconstruction, which consists of both the faithful reading of a situation and the determinate destabilization of that reading, aligns with Levinas' claim that the Other overthrows consciousness, but further explains why such an overthrow is only rarely felt in ordinary experience. Understanding the hyperbole as descriptively accurate while rarely felt will then offer a positive obligation for the subject in respect of being responsible for the Other.

Cette monographie aborde le problème de l'hyperbole de Emmanuel Levinas dans son œuvre, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Dans ce texte, il prétend fournir une description phénoménologique de la rencontre de l'Autrui, pourtant ses descriptions sont délibérément hyperboliques et ne semblent donc pas du tout être descriptives du tout. Pour aborder ce problème, je propose que nous puissions comprendre son hyperbole comme descriptive si nous comprenons que la rencontre du sujet avec l'Autrui est une expérience déconstructive. La déconstruction, qui comprend à la fois la lecture fidèle d'une situation et la déstabilisation déterminée de cette lecture, s'accorde avec l'affirmation de Levinas que l'Autrui renverse la conscience, mais explique en outre pourquoi un tel renversement n'est que rarement ressenti dans l'expérience ordinaire. Comprendre l'hyperbole comme descriptive précise alors que rarement ressenti offrira alors une obligation positive pour le sujet en ce qui concerne la responsabilité pour-l'Autrui.

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Introduction

“Inenglobable dans le présent, réfractaire à la thématization et à la représentation, l’altérité du prochain en appelle à la singularité irremplaçable qui gît en moi, en accusant ce moi, en le ramenant – dans l’accusatif – à soi. Mais, le *soi* n’est pas *en état*, n’est pas *en position*, n’est pas en repos en soi, assuré en soi comme d’une condition. Sous l’obsession de l’autre – accusatrice, persécutrice – l’unicité de soi est aussi la défection de l’identité s’identifiant dans le Même. Dans la coïncidence avec soi, celle-ci se protégerait encore, ne s’exposerait pas assez, ne serait pas « assez passive ». La défection de l’identité, c’est un « pour l’autre », au sein même de l’identité, c’est l’inversion de l’être en signe, la subversion de l’essence se mettant à signifier avant d’être: désintéressement de l’essence.”

– *Autrement qu’être* 195/153 (V.3)

Emmanuel Levinas is a thinker who is often considered to have put forth a philosophical system so marked by excess and hyperbole that it is often received as rhetorical at best, and useless at worst. His is a philosophy that claims that the Other person is encountered in “proximity”, which he describes as the Other assigning me to their needs in an infinite responsibility. I am held hostage by the Other, they persecute me, and in turn I substitute the whole of my needs and my selfhood for their needs, divesting myself of all egoism and self-interest. There is no work where Levinas’ hyperbolic description of the encounter with the Other person is more extreme than in his last major work, *AE*. It is this text which works out substitution as ethical subjectivity, where the Other persecutes me. And yet, in this same work, Levinas claims to deploy the phenomenological method to arrive at this description, thus entrenching his description of proximity not as rhetoric but as experience – the actual experience of other people! The claim to phenomenology is *prima facie* seemingly irreconcilable with his actual descriptions: common sense alone tells us that our everyday encounters with others are hardly encounters of persecution and infinite responsibility for the Other. The question we are therefore interested in taking up is whether Levinas, for all the hyperbole of his text, can actually be considered to be putting forth a good faith description of the encounter with others. The question of whether Levinas is a Husserlian or Heideggerian phenomenologist is well taken up by the scholarship, and thus will not be our guiding theme here.

Rather, we are asking after the spirit of phenomenological description – what appears to consciousness – and if Levinas is in keeping with it.

Levinas claims that his work is descriptive, and yet his description (as in the above quote) is hyperbolic and therefore at odds with a good-faith description of interpersonal encounters. In his own account, Levinas makes the claim that although our encounter with any one singular Other proceeds along the terms of his hyperbole, it is because *all* Others affect us in this way that they call for consciousness to weigh their competing demands. He claims that the description he presents therefore calls for and demands consciousness and the Ego, given the ethical demands of plurality. Consequently, consciousness is ethical, and the normal world is restored with a new ethical underpinning. However, Levinas' work never truly commits to this proposed solution *as a description*. Throughout AE, Levinas' only descriptions of consciousness are presented in disparaging terms, impugning the conscious subject as for-itself, and it is on the basis of the for-itself subject that the Other overthrows our repose in consciousness. Levinas' account is therefore missing the explicit account of justified consciousness, both as constitutive of subjectivity before encountering any single Other *and* as governing our actual encounters with Others.

That said, it shall be our guiding claim that despite Levinas' indeterminacy and obfuscation, AE provides enough substance to formulate a description of justified consciousness and how consciousness truly operates in encountering the Other. From the outset, we should note why this approach has not yet been accomplished: though Levinas himself is mostly at fault for his impenetrable prose, the secondary literature has also failed to attempt to take up such a description. Unfortunately, the scholarship is predisposed to understand AE within either the context of Levinas' other works or within his Judaism; while neither are antithetical to good scholarship, the choice to explain AE *exclusively* from without has failed to attend to the nuances

of AE as an entire argument, and as such has missed the opportunity to develop the description of justified consciousness. Therefore, I propose in this monograph to undertake to develop such an account.

Of course, we must clarify what is meant when I say that we need an account of justified consciousness. In Levinas' work, the fundamental description is that of the encounter with the Other person, but that the needs of all Others are always at stake in such an encounter; we need to describe how the interaction with the Other takes place as Levinas describes it yet within the normalcy of our everyday experience (where they are an object of consciousness). In order to articulate such an account, we will need to attend to the phenomenon at hand: the encounter with the Other. In doubting that Levinas actually provides a description, we shall see that one criticism of Levinas is that his 'description' of proximity (the positive hyperbole) appears to actually be a direct inversion and amplification of a Husserlian-Heideggerian conception of the subject. This is to say that Levinas' deployment of a hyperbolic negation (his description of 'recurrence') is not descriptive, but is rather a deconstruction of a traditional conception of the subject; the result of this deconstruction is the purported 'description' of his positive hyperbole. However, I shall propose that in fact this criticism accurately highlights the central descriptive claim which Levinas makes: the encounter with an Other is a *deconstructive* phenomenon. Further, understanding the Other as deconstructive will in fact account for how Levinas' description works as an account of our everyday experiences while also justifying the use of hyperbole in description.

Deconstruction, as a method of reading a text, consists of two moments: in the first, deconstruction consists in a reading which is intended to faithfully articulate what is the dominant interpretation of the subject matter. It is only after there is such a faithful reading that it is possible for there to be a second reading, one which isolates an *aporia* or an alterity in the text which stands

outside of the first reading, putting the first reading into contradiction with itself. We shall propose that for Levinas, consciousness as an activity is set up to *read* the state of needfulness of each particular Other, and to determine our particular responsibilities thereby; thus, our very being conscious is a matter of ethical responsibility for all Others. Further, this need to measure the needs of Others requires us to construct and participate in a horizon of meanings which measure the needs of Others and instruct us in how to respond. However, because conscious weighing is based upon the comparison of incomparable Others, the encounter with a singular Other is the second moment of deconstruction: it is the encounter with the incomparable singularity of the Other amidst my effort to compare them to all Others as alike and measurable.

However, we will argue that Levinas' description will hold despite it not typically being experienced in an extreme fashion. In being conscious of Others, we typically find that the Other's needs are being met in our conscious assessment of them. Though the Other comes to me in their destabilizing singularity, we routinely encounter Others in a general state of well-being. Therefore, it is insofar as the Other is generally encountered in their well-being that their immediate destabilization is neutralized: because they are well, consciousness has achieved its ends, and thus the construction is called for once again. In their wellbeing we can account for them, reinforce the conscious horizon which had led us to that encounter, and thereby there is no impact of deconstructivity felt by the subject.

We shall then see that the justification for retaining such extreme descriptive terms is that when the Other suffers – when we encounter tragedy – the Other is then encountered in their full deconstructive effect. In having been conscious we had been participating in an ethical horizon of measured roles and responsibilities. Suffering therefore contradicts consciousness because consciousness had been intended to deny the possibility of that suffering at all. Tragedy, once

encountered, thereby destabilizes the dominant interpretation and cannot allow it to return to its machinations: after encountering the Other in suffering, we find ourselves in what Levinas terms a ‘recurrence’ to the full realization of our ethical subjectivity and infinite responsibility. In full view of our ethical subjectivity, we are then able to take up an active role in auto-deconstructing the Other, which is to say that we are called to not merely trust our conscious apparatus to meet our responsibility for Others, but rather we must take it upon ourselves to consistently test that apparatus against its sufficiency in responding to the needs of the Other.

Our claim, therefore, is that the encounter with the Other as presented in AE should be understood as a deconstructive experience; however, it is because our very consciousness itself is our ethical response to the needs of many that we so rarely feel the hyperbolic demands of the Other upon us in our everyday life. The intention of describing these demands is that this description is always operative *yet rarely felt*, and thus by describing our deeper subjectivity in advance of feeling its weight in tragedy, we are in a better position to understand and take up our responsibility. While we do not intend to acquit Levinas of his failures to be clear in his work, we do intend to show that beneath all the confusion of the text there is a powerful account of human subjectivity and experience, one which provides a robust account of moral responsibility as our human condition and therefore a calling more noble than the shepherding of Being.

The Itinerary

In our first chapter, we shall address the key issues which arise from a lack of such a description. We shall first break Levinas’ hyperbole down into its constituent elements, which consists of negative hyperbole (recurrence to the hither side of consciousness, whereby the Other is said to negate the consciousness I have of them, and my conscious standpoint is negated) and

positive hyperbole (the extreme descriptions of the Other holding me hostage, obsessing me, persecuting me in infinite responsibility, substitution for-the-Other up to death). We shall then raise the questions which devolve from these questions. First, we ask if these descriptions are at all possible- is it possible that normal experience is the denial of consciousness, and that the Other persecutes me and assigns me in infinite responsibility? Then, if these descriptions can at least be articulated in a coherent fashion, we are left asking after their plausibility: why would we want to endorse these extreme descriptions for non-extreme experiences? After defining the metrics by which these questions can be answered, we will proceed to articulate our proposal to understand the Other as a deconstructive phenomenon.

In our second chapter, we shall take up Levinas' description in full, as it is found in AE. In particular, we will attend to Levinas' detailed description of consciousness, and find that his description approaches phenomenality itself as meaningful in its linguistic structure. Thus, in attending to language speaking, Levinas will describe how consciousness identifies or 'reads' what is the case. In this reading – which Levinas terms “saying the said” – the subject approaches all objects of consciousness (including him or herself!) in the time of essence, as the duration of a thing as the same over time. We shall see, however, that such a reading takes place because of our fundamental passivity to time: we are ageing, and we are vulnerable, and both perpetually threaten the well-being and continuity of the subject. Therefore, consciousness is set up as the subject's ability to identify and bring-to-presence enjoyable sensation and self-identity which persist despite time's uncertainty. We shall see that it is this subject – vulnerable and ageing, yet comported to the world in consciously identifying the same over time – who encounters the Other in proximity, and who is for-the-Other to the point of substitution. However, as Levinas points out, what applies

to one Other necessarily applies to all Others, and consciousness will then be called in to measure the extreme impacts of all Others.

Our third chapter will then take up Levinas' description of the encounter with the Other, and seek to harmonize it with the description of consciousness provided at the start of the work. That is, we shall be attempting to articulate Levinas' hyperboles as *possible*. We shall begin by parsing Levinas' description for an account of what our actual responsibility is for any Other – to presence enjoyment in immediacy and over time – and identifying what sorts of actions we are thereby committed to doing to fulfil those responsibilities. We shall demonstrate that consciousness is in fact how we meet our responsibility. As such, we will then undertake to return to immediacy in the full light of justified consciousness, and it shall be demonstrated that the Other is encountered as deconstructive. However, the routine success of our conscious horizons and measures routinely succeed in meeting our responsibilities for Others, and we therefore rarely experience the full weight of our responsibility – rarely, that is, until we encounter them in tragedy. In seeing how tragedy imposes the full weight of the description, we shall finally be in a place to justify the use of extreme terminology as descriptive, and we shall articulate the ethical duty to auto-deconstruct.

In chapter 4, we shall address the reasons for wanting to endorse Levinas' hyperbolic descriptions, taking up the question of their *plausibility*. With respect to a description which uses extreme language for non-extreme experience (positive hyperbole), we shall demonstrate that the use of such extreme terms commits us first to the fact that such extremism *is already at work* in our subjectivity, and ought be given the prominence it deserves. Further, how we comport ourselves to one another matters for our ability to meet our responsibilities, and thus understanding ourselves as finitely capable yet infinitely bound enables us to comport ourselves to one another

as a matter of care as opposed to self-interest. We shall then see that the hyperbolic negation is not actually – as is commonly held – a denial of the reality and importance of identity and consciousness, but rather is a proactive call to not take our preconceived notions and identifications of Others for certain. Identity is in fact endorsed by Levinas as part of our ethical response, *but* it can only be ethical so long as it remains subject to challenge by the one for whom such identities exist. As such, we shall see that auto-deconstruction as our responsibility actually enables us to do right by the Other in our normal experiences with them.

1 The Problem

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, we shall present the problem of Levinas' hyperbole, which is divided into the *positive* hyperbole (his extreme jargon) and the *negative* hyperbole (the denial of consciousness and identity of the Other). Each hyperbole, when viewed together as a good-faith description of the encounter with the Other, poses two problems: whether the hyperbole is possible as a description of ordinary encounters, and whether such hyperbole, if possible, can be plausibly endorsed as such a description. We shall posit that Levinas' hyperboles are both possible and plausible by attending to the encounter with the Other as a *deconstructive* phenomenon.

1.1 Levinas and the Use of Hyperbole

In his own understanding, Levinas employs hyperbolic language and argumentations so as to use and then surpass the boundaries of the phenomenological method, reaching beyond subjectivity understood as the site of the appearing of being. Levinas equates hyperbole with “le superlatif...l'*excellence* de signification” (AE 231/183), an excellence that breaks through the confines of consciousness and awakens us to our responsibility in passivity to the Other. Naming his hyperbole the superlative – the highest degree, excessiveness – we are therefore to expect that his writing style, relying on hyperbole as it does, will be deliberately excessive. To accuse him, therefore, of unintended or unconscious hyperbole would be both a mistaken and an unfair claim. However, that does not in itself justify the use of such hyperbole.

Hyperbole shall be understood here as excess in description, in particular the description of the human being.¹ The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that hyperbole is a rhetorical figure of speech that is an exaggeration of a claim that should not be taken seriously, or it is an excess that is not understood to be literal.² However, Levinas' enthusiastic endorsement of hyperbole as a description claims to neither exaggerate nor give us reason to think that he is not to be taken literally, and therefore we must look beyond the (ironically) literal meaning of the word.³ Following Heidegger down the etymological rabbit hole,⁴ the word hyperbole comes from the Greek word *hyperballein*, formed from *hyper* [ὑπέρ] "beyond"⁵ and *balle* [βάλλω] "a throwing".⁶ taken with this in mind, Levinas' choice of excessive, exaggerated, or extravagant description can therefore be understood in its etymological sense as aiming to throw we, the reader, *beyond* (captured in the title as *au-délà*) the normal bounds of what is describable through language (Being). Hyperbole has been chosen for a specific reason, and it does no good to chastise Levinas outright for endorsing hyperbole in philosophical argumentation, as Ricoeur does. Our response should be to ask if the hyperbole of Levinas' descriptions is or can be proportionate to an excess that is being described. Claiming to describe the superlative, it follows that only a superlative

¹ This is Paul Ricoeur's formulation of Levinas' hyperbole, writing that Levinas employs "la pratique systématique de l'excès dans l'argumentation philosophique" ("Dixième étude: Vers quelle ontologie?" in *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1990), 389).

² "hyperbole, n.". OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press.

³ Interestingly, John D. Caputo finds Levinas' hyperbole appealing *because* it is excess, a tale that cannot possibly be real, "The notion of an absolutely Other lays me low... This is a fabulous story... What Levinas says is impossible, but that is why I love it" (*Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993): 82). The excess exaggerates the Other so as to vividly colour our moral responsibility to the Other where we do not belong to ourselves: the language is thus fabulous (in the Latin sense of *fabula*) so as to describe as equally fabulous a story (ibid 83).

⁴ Without reaching beyond AE for proof we can use an incidental reference to Levinas to reinforce this point. In *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (1972), Levinas notes that "C'est là qui réside la grande justification et la grande force des étymologies heideggeriennes qui, à partir du sens, appauvri et plat, du terme désignant, en apparence, un contenu de l'expérience ou psychologique, conduisent vers une situation d'ensemble où se ramasse pour s'éclairer une totalité d'expériences" (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972): 22.

⁵ Etymological dictionary of Greek, 1st edition, Volume 2, s.v. "ὑπέρ."

⁶ Etymological dictionary of Greek, 1st edition, Volume 1, s.v. "βάλλω".

vocabulary can suffice such a task. The question, therefore, is whether or not Levinas' use of hyperbole is indeed faithful to an excessive experience: such a query is all the more complicated, given the fact that he considers his descriptions to be describing our everyday life with others.

In discussing Levinas and his use of hyperbole there are two distinct uses of hyperbole that we are referencing. The first is a methodological hyperbole, a sort of meta-hyperbole that guides and limits how he formulates descriptions negatively, whereas the second is a substantial hyperbole, a hyperbolic excess in the positive descriptions Levinas puts forward. While the distinction as conceived here is my own, facets of this distinction arise from the scholarship. The two are sometimes understood in the scholarship as mutually exclusive, or as intrinsically linked. We shall here outline the substance of each hyperbole, the ensuing problems from that use of hyperbole, and the criteria that will need to be met in order to satisfy the use of such hyperbole.

It is important to clarify that both counts of hyperbole are focused upon how to describe the encounter with another human being. Of the Other, Levinas posits a method of hyperbolic negation in description that is a *de facto* prohibition against describing the Other and the subject. Levinas negates the possibility to predicate traits of the Other, to perceive or know any identity of them. This extreme antagonism towards description of the Other is hyperbolic inasmuch as it appears to provide an extreme choice: *either* description *or* the Other, never both, to the apparent confusion of our normal encounters with others every day in our life. From negating any description of the Other, Levinas moves similarly to a negation of a certain view of the subject: denouncing a conception of the subject in terms of autonomy and agency, Levinas once again argues against the possibility of a subject who has an identity, who self-identifies, and thereby he denies description of the subject. However, given the need – or even, the responsibility – of saying something within the confines of a description in a text, Levinas finds his concession to description

in instead describing the impact of the Other upon the subject in proximity. Here, the positive descriptions Levinas puts forwards – the subject obsessed by the Other, persecuted by the Other, infinitely responsible – are hyperbolic insofar as they are extreme claims about what the experience of an Other entails (namely infinite responsibility). Making such extreme claims about our subjective experiences may justify his conclusion that subjectivity is primordially responsibility for the Other, but the description of responsibility amidst the call of the Other which he does describe severely hampers both the possibility and plausibility of his descriptions and their accuracy. In both cases of hyperbole, the contention rests on how Levinas describes the human being, and it is upon both these descriptions that we shall examine the problem of Levinas and the use of hyperbole.

While the problem of the possibility of Levinas' hyperbole being valid rests mostly on the positive claims put forwards (e.g. *does the Other hold me hostage in infinite responsibility?*), and the plausibility of Levinas' hyperbole arises mostly in answer to the hyperbole of negation (e.g. *how do we reconcile this lack of phenomenality with the phenomena of the others we interact with every day?*), the two questions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are intimately intertwined (though, again, they must be chronologically presented). We shall first articulate the hyperboles themselves, and then subsequently address the concerns provoked by each hyperbole.

1.2 Levinas' Description/Argument

Before providing a preliminary outline of Levinas' description, it is important to highlight this monograph's place in the scholarship. There is an overwhelmingly strong tendency in the scholarship to look at Levinas' works within the grand view of his canon. Consequently when it comes to looking at AE, the scholarship tends to engage the development of his more notable

description of the face-to-face encounter, which in AE is revised in an extreme fashion as proximity (AE III.6) and substitution (AE IV), though that extremity is supposedly leavened in its extreme character by the third party, or the need to weigh Others (AE V). The scholarship does not, unfortunately, look at the text as an argument in its own right. Rather, scholars try to explain his key description (the Other/face) either within a retrospective look at how the concept developed canonically,⁷ or how it belongs to his own personal frame of Judaism. The implicit premise of scholarship thereby forecloses the possibility of a complete argument in the text and misses the crucial context needed to understand his description as a description. To be fair, Levinas himself is guilty of making a nearly-unintelligible text with a description claimed to be at one and the same time the extraordinary and everyday (AE 12/10). His text seems to invite canonical reading, given the difficulty of penetrating a clear meaning from his project; it is not unfair to ask whether AE would even be picked up were Levinas not to have prepared some interesting and more accessible arguments prior to its publication. However, as we shall note below, a central feature of our argument will be that AE itself, when read in an isolated fashion as a complete argument, is in fact able to lead us to justify its status as a description and give us reason to want to endorse it as a description. With this prefatory note in mind, we shall now present a description which is largely well understood in the scholarship as Levinas' own description, one which we shall see is not false but which, we shall claim, is woefully incomplete.

Levinas claims that when I, a conscious subject, encounter an Other, I attempt to say the said, by which he means I try to identify and presence the Other as an identity. While the Other

⁷ For example, in his essay on Levinas' concept of substitution (exposed in AE IV, which Levinas claims to be the centrepiece of AE), Robert Bernasconi chooses to look at an earlier version of the AE IV chapter: "in the conviction that Levinas' train of thought is more readily identified in his initial formulation of it" ("What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?" in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 234.

does offer up conscious content to my gaze via their corporeality, our approach to them as that content is halted and in fact reversed by their alterity. The body of the Other signifies a frailty and vulnerability, and in my consciousness of the one before me there is a certain defection and defeat of consciousness' efforts to identify. This failure of my conscious efforts to define the Other on my own terms causes what Levinas terms "recurrence", which is the defection of consciousness to the hither side of being. On this hither side of being I am infinitely responsible for the needs of the Other, obsessed by them whilst being persecuted and held hostage by their need.

The foregoing description is claimed to faithfully articulate the encounter with another person in immediacy, which is proximity. This encounter allows him to then analyze some salient details of proximity. First, our responsibility is anarchic: that the Other affects me due to their need means they must have affected me as responsible before we met in immediacy. Second, this encounter with their need takes place due to, and therefore causes me to recur to, my own vulnerable condition. Recurrence takes me from my place as a conscious ego, self-positing as an Ego, and throws me to the hither side of being, to my susceptibility to their needs. Third, we then find that recurrence throws me to my bare vulnerability, *but* that at the very heart of my passivity and need, I find that I am concerned with the needs of the Other as more important than my own. Levinas describes the subject therefore as "le fait même de porter la faute d'autrui" (AE 143/112), because I am for-the-Other. Finally, we can now see that subjectivity is substitution, wherein I substitute the Other's needs and place as more important than my own activities, up to and including my own life.

This being the description of our ethical subjectivity which underpins our encounter in proximity, Levinas notes an outstanding question. Given that the encounter overthrows consciousness, why was there consciousness at all? Insofar as Levinas claims that our

responsibility is anarchic, our assignation must have taken place prior to our contact. The reason for consciousness is that we are not obsessed only by the needs of one Other: because all are in need, we are obsessed by all. We are obsessed by all in fact because in our responsibility for any one Other, we are infinitely responsible, which means we are responsible for their responsibilities and thus we must consider their needs in respect of their responsibility for the needs of their Other. To be so responsible requires that I determine who comes before whom, and thus who I must help. Thereby, I take on their responsibility for me, and so I am responsible for meeting my own needs.

All told, I encounter the Other in consciousness, they overthrow that consciousness, and yet through my consciousness I can identify and therefore weigh competing needs and calculate what I am obligated to do. My responsibility is infinite, but the needs of the many require that I limit my response, and thus I am freed from the obsession by any one Other by being obsessed with all. Normal life exists and proliferates because of my responsibility to all, yet proximity in immediacy with any singular Other is intended to be as Levinas describes it.

The hyperbole of negation is Levinas' descriptive claim that the possibility of perceiving other humans, of their being an object of consciousness, only occurs in the negation of whatever perception or conscious concept we may have of them. This negation therefore comes to us as the Other, where the Other is the negating and surpassing (or going-to-the-hither-side) beyond essence. In negating identity of the Other, claiming them to be non-presence, Levinas appears to be reacting against any essentialism; were I to have a percept of them then "the Other" would simply be an egoistic appropriation of subjective conscious content. Instead, Levinas claims that my relation to the Other is one of responsibility where to be responsible is to specifically *not* attend to what shows itself. Arguing that the Good cannot enter into a representation, Levinas claims that my relationship to the Other cannot be thought but can only be experienced as immediacy which

is never present. The immediacy of the appeal happens at the site of the presence of the body, wherein the non-presence commands me. What follows is that we do not have community in either thought or consciousness, and hence my relation to the Other becomes one of infinite responsibility for the invisible, the beyond essence.⁸ Levinas hence negates essence/phenomenality of the human, both Other and subject, in a negation of Being claiming that this negation is in service to ethics, claiming that this negation is in fact justified by the phenomenon of the experience of the Other.

The positive hyperbole is Levinas' choice to use extreme terms. He talks of the Other assigning me as responsible for their needs in an infinite responsibility. The Other is said to hold me hostage, persecuting me, and that this rests upon the fact of my subjectivity being anarchically the-one-for-the-Other, such that in proximity I substitute their needs in the place of my own up to the point of my own death for their needs. The ensuing problem of Levinas' positive hyperbole is therefore twofold. He claims first that the encounter with an Other can only be described as proximity, wherein the Other obsesses and thereby persecutes me. He then claims that in proximity I discover subjectivity as the-one-for-the-Other, as being emptied of self concern for the sake of the Other, even if it means my death. All this is put upon the simple encounter with an Other, and yet it is a description which is completely foreign to our everyday reality.

1.3 The Problem of the Possibility of Hyperbolic Description

1.3.1 Criticism of Positive Hyperbole – Possibility

Levinas has claimed that proximity as described is a faithful description of the encounter with the Other person, and that proximity reveals subjectivity as *l'un-pour-l'autre*, being held

⁸ Levinas writes, “je suis obligé sans que cette obligation ait commencé en moi...Ce qui pour une conscience est impossible et atteste clairement que nous ne sommes plus pas dans l'élément de la conscience” (AE 15-16/13). The claim is explicit: it is impossible for responsibility to devolve from consciousness.

hostage in infinite responsibility. Attempting to respond to the possibility of what Levinas has put forth in his positive positions, we are immediately confronted by how extreme these descriptions are. The extremism itself, wanting of sober rationalizations, gives strong evidence that Levinas may be employing hyperbole rhetorically, and thereby his use of hyperbole could not be considered a faithful phenomenological description.

Primarily, our disbelief at Levinas' claims centers on whether or not his descriptions are even possible: can they be real descriptions of experience, and if not, what are they? A majority of the scholarship argues that Levinas must be presenting rhetorical claims, where the hyperbole employed is therefore understood to be exaggeration for literary effect or metaphysical ends. For Ricoeur Levinas is serving his argument's ends through his hyperbole, deliberately picking phrases to avoid any levity in responsibility. Remarking on subjectivity as being hostage, Ricoeur remarks, "cette expression, excessive entre toutes, est jetée là pour prévenir le retour insidieux de l'auto-affirmation de quelque «liberté clandestine et dissimulée» jusque sous la passivité du soi assigné à la responsabilité".⁹ Hence, instead of being a description of the experience of encountering another, Levinas is deploying his terminology in order to commit more fully to the metaphysical argument he is attempting to make. While not as hard on him for fulfilling argumentative instead of descriptive ends, Michael Morgan thinks Levinas is attempting to use heightened metaphors to better inflate the importance of the intersubjective relation which we often take for granted, "Levinas uses terms such as 'obsession,' 'hostage,' and 'trauma' that are clearly metaphors intended to call attention to features of the face-to-face, not literally true but rhetorically, figuratively surprising and disturbing".¹⁰ As metaphors they are not therefore descriptors, and for

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "Dixième étude: Vers quelle ontologie?" in *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1990), 390.

¹⁰ Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 304.

Morgan that is acceptable, because the importance of his rhetoric is to make states of affairs more important than they seem as an ethical gesture. Regardless, others like Diane Perpich are committed to the impossibility that Levinas could possibly be describing anything phenomenologically. She argues that Levinas employs “the method of emphasis...nothing Levinas says about responsibility is empirically verifiable or justified in any of the usual ways relied on by philosophers, nor is it meant to be”.¹¹ What’s more, the pretention that Levinas could be descriptive is actually a source of concern for Perpich, as she argues that “Levinas’ text is literary in a deep sense...we should be suspicious of anyone who is at home with or who recognizes his or her own life in Levinas’ words”.¹² Being at such odds with common reality that a scholar feels compelled to warn against those who find Levinas’ descriptions accurate, we are left unsure of how to respond to Levinas’ positive hyperbole. Can the Other truly impact me in such an extreme way? Does the encounter with the Other really dispossess me of myself, does it create me anew?

The question of whether his “description” is truly a literal description or simply rhetoric is not the only question pertaining to the possibility of his claims, but it is certainly the most pressing. It shall therefore be the focus of this thesis to answer the question of how his “descriptions” can possibly make sense as a description. Faithful exegesis shall require us to articulate and thereby attempt to justify his descriptions, and we shall focus on the question of whether or not his account presents a description of ordinary life. At present, Levinas’ extremism seems to give us no anchor in real experience, and hence forgoes the possibility that what Levinas might say could be a true or valid phenomenological description.

¹¹ Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 121.

¹² Ibid, 122.

1.3.2 Criticism of Negative Hyperbole – Possibility

There is one question of possibility, though, which will be further addressed because it speaks directly to the problem of whether or not his description is possible: namely, the question of whether or not subjectivity can be *l'un-pour-l'autre* (as the negation of the for-itself), whether or not proximity can cause negation of self and the Other. For Ricoeur and others, Levinas' claim that subjectivity is the one-for-the-Other leads to the problem of accounting for how there can actually be a subject there to be responsive, if they are never for-themselves (or only for-themselves derivatively). My ability to respond to your broken knee is helped by my own passion for medicine which comes in handy when you come to my hospital – it is not merely the vacating of self-interest to gape at your problems that will be able to help you.

In claiming that the encounter with the Other in proximity is where we (re)discover subjectivity as *l'un-pour-l'autre*, Levinas makes the claim that the subject recurs from its substantial identifiable ego to the uniqueness of the self. This recurrence is therefore the negating of the subject's identity and consciousness, having claimed that identity is a product of consciousness which must be negated in order to be ethical. However, this recurrence to the self via negation of the I – described as emptying out the subject – is problematic because the ability to be receptive to the Other presupposes and requires some capacity of responsiveness by the subject. Ricoeur argues that “le thème de l'extériorité n'atteint le terme de sa trajectoire, à savoir l'éveil d'une réponse responsable à l'appel de l'autre, qu'en présupposant une capacité d'accueil, de discrimination et reconnaissance”.¹³ In order that the Other might come to me the self must have a structure of response, a substantiality which is able to respond to the call made by the

¹³ Ricoeur, 391.

approach of the Other.¹⁴ However, in denying and banishing consciousness (our mechanism for receptivity of exteriority) from the relation with the Other, Levinas leaves the subject stripped of the capacity for any receptive relation with the Other. Jean-Luc Marion points out this difficulty for Levinas' phenomenology, "Comment me parvient la parole qui me convoque comme son otage, témoin et enjeu de l'autre et de son sort...Phénoménologiquement, cette exigence signifie qu'il doit d'abord et fondamentalement se définir comme un (quasi-)étant susceptible d'entente ou, si l'on préfère, exposé à l'entente".¹⁵ In order to hear a sound, I must have the capacity for hearing: in order to hear the appeal of the Other, I must be receptive to that hearing. In staking out the Other as infinitely Other, approached beyond consciousness, we thereby lose our ability to be receptive to the Other and thereby we lose the ability to relate to them. A capacity which, if negated, would negate the possibility of hearing the Other's appeal. Levinas will go on to argue that language – as incarnated in the Saying – will allow us to communicate (AE IV.5) with the Other, and yet "ne faut-il pas que le langage apporte ses ressources de communication, donc de réciprocité...lequel reflète un échange plus radical, celui de la question et de la réponse où les rôles ne cessent de s'inverser?"¹⁶ Language – an operation which can only be conscious – again presupposes a subject capable of possessing and using language. This capacity must be a part of the subject, a part which cannot be jettisoned along with the rest of consciousness.

In the relation with the Other in proximity that reveals *l'un-pour-l'autre*, Levinas claims that the subject is emptied out of any and all self-concern. Recurrence – the hyperbolic negation of any identity of the subject – is described as the ethical effect of the Other's approach, and

¹⁴ "Il faut bien accorder au soi une capacité d'accueil qui résulte d'une structure reflexive, mieux définie par son pouvoir de reprise sur des objectivations préalables que par une separation initiale" (Ibid, 391).

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, "Note sur l'indifférence ontologique," in *Emmanuel Levinas. L'éthique comme philosophie première*. Eds. Jean Greisch and Jacques Rolland (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 61-62.

¹⁶ Riceour, 391.

therefore to not be divested of identity is the result of the subject choosing to act irresponsibly in responding to their responsibility for the Other. Levinas argues that “L’assigné – le Moi – ou moi, je repousse et éloigne le prochain par mon identité même” (AE 175/137); hence, all identity is the continuation of persistence in essence, and this persistence is unethical to the Other. Recurrence is the negation of personal identity, personal history, culture, politics, “c’est toujours à nouveau se vider de soi, s’absourdre de soi comme dans une hémorragie d’hémophilique, en deçà de son unité nucléaire – encore identifiable et protégée – jusqu’à l’identité quasi-formelle d’un *quelqu’un*, mais toujours *coram*, dérangé en soi au point de ne plus avoir d’intention” (AE 117/92).¹⁷ However, for scholars like Rudi Visker, the claim that the failure to divest ourselves of identity is irresponsibility fails to provide an accurate account of subjectivity: as Heidegger notes in *Being and Time*, we are historically situated outside of our own choosing – thrown in our facticity – and this historical horizon is involved in constituting our capacity for meaning.¹⁸ Visker, looking towards developments in historical meaning undertaken by Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor, argues that subjectivity is more situated than Levinas is capable of imagining because part of subjectivity involves being caught up in a discourse which one neither knows one is in, nor which one can just give up on a whim. Being situated historically, we are enrooted within a discourse which guides and yet limits the meaning available to us from that discourse: in being a 21st century white male, I cannot meaningfully pick up the status of feudal knight, because such a choice does

¹⁷ Preceding this phrase, Levinas’ hyperbole is even more intense: “Revenir à soi, ce n’est pas s’installer chez soi, fût-on dépouillé de tout acquis: c’est, comme un étranger, être pourchassé jusqu’à chez soi contesté dans son identité et dans sa pauvreté même qui, comme une peau enfermerait encore le soi, l’installerait ainsi dans une intériorité, déjà ramassée sur soi, déjà substance” (AE 117/92). The return to the self in recurrence can only be the traversal of individuality as understood in identity: no community, no sense of belonging, and no historical facticity can stand between myself and the Other in proximity.

¹⁸ Rudi Visker, “In Praise of Visibility,” *Levinas Studies* 3 (2008), 172.

not make sense within the historical paradigm in which I find myself.¹⁹ Rather, I am limited in my subjectivity by a discourse or horizon of meaning.

However, for Visker what is key is that I myself am not aware of that structure of meaning operating on me *until* I am confronted by a cultural Other who has a different structure. Encountering an Other with a different skin colour, different cultural or ethnic background, I am not thrown into the immediacy of infinite responsibility for them: instead, I encounter a part of myself which is closed off from my accessing it.²⁰ Because our discourse of meaning provides meaning for Others both inside and outside my discourse, their encounter reveals this part of me which I cannot leave behind, the part of me which refuses to leave me because it is this part of my innermost ownness which “points to what is my own without me owning it in the sense of possessing it...it seems to exert a hold on me, for example by holding some cultural practices, some value-related attitudes outside of what I could consider to be a possible alternative for me”.²¹ I am enrooted – my subjectivity consists of a participation in a discourse of meaning which I cannot give up – and thereby subjectivity cannot be the total negation of the subject and their roots as Levinas claims it to be. Were I able to somehow lose this enrootedness (which, on Visker’s contention, is impossible), we would return to Ricoeur’s problem: what is left once we have evacuated all self-identity from the subject? If language is our mechanism for meaning and meaningful communication – the Saying – then how can we give up our linguistic enrootedness and still relate to the Other?

¹⁹ Ibid, 176-177.

²⁰ This part of myself is “characterized by an essential opacity which is brought to light but not dissolved in an encounter with a truly other Other, that is, an other who is a stranger to me because he is the bearer of a strangeness beyond the scope of my sensitivity”. (Ibid, 184).

²¹ Ibid, 185.

Hence, the hyperbolic negation of the essentiality of the subject – seen within the frame of the subject’s enrootedness – throws into question the possibility that the Other could negate essence in their encounter. In arguing on behalf of the power of the Other to negate the subject via recurrence, we find either the inability to give up one’s enrootedness or the impossibility of relating to the Other if those roots are given up. And yet, for Levinas, “Le soi-même de la conscience...[est] auparavant non-quiddité – personne – revêtue d’un être de pur emprunt, qui masque sa singularité sans nom en lui conférant un rôle” (AE 135/106). Describing identity as simply the clothing of Being – “revêtus d’attributs culturels” (AE 96/76 n. 10) – implies that the subject can simply disrobe himself to offer that clothing to the Other. However, the enrootedness of the subject challenges Levinas’ interpretation of subjectivity, and as such Levinas’ hyperbolic negation must be reconciled with the enrootedness of subjectivity and the subsequent ability to relate meaningfully to the Other with or without such enrootedness. To answer whether or not Levinas’ account of hyperbolic negation is possible, it is therefore incumbent to account for the role of enrootedness in subjectivity as Levinas conceives of it. If he cannot account for this structure, then we must condemn his system as impossible.

1.4 The Problem of the Plausibility of Hyperbolic Description

1.4.1 Criticism of Positive Hyperbole – Plausibility

Devolving from the concern about whether or not it is even possible for the Other to hold the subject hostage, and for subjectivity to be the-one-for-the-Other, we are left asking – were such accurate to describe the Other’s impact upon the subject – how this makes sense with our normal and ordinary experience with others. Given that we are amidst others in a panoply of cultural roles and identities, how does the claim that the Other holds me hostage make sense with ordering a

coffee and giving the barista a smile? Or to use Levinas' example, is it really substitution for-the-Other, a substitution until death, which permits me to be able to hold the door and say "après vous"? Even if Levinas can be shown to be trying to present a description, what he describes is extreme: for Richard Rorty, Levinas' claims serve only as "pointless hype to dramatize our difficulties in knowing what to do".²² Thus, we must ask: even if we wish to accept Levinas as a description, why would we want to acknowledge it as the best description?

What of our normal lives, our normal relations with others? While the scholarship critiques Levinas for playing in metaphors (thus making his claims impossible), we here in this thesis are particularly concerned with how these claims to be descriptions could be reconciled with and properly account for what our lives with others are actually like. Levinas clearly has some sense that such relations exist, nodding towards them within his methodology of positing so as to negate a position. For example, when describing encountering the Other in proximity, he notes that "S'absolvant de toute essence, de tout genre, de toute ressemblance, le prochain, *premier venu*, me concerne pour la première fois (fût-il vieille connaissance, vieil ami, vieil amour, impliqué depuis longtemps dans le tissu de mes relations sociales)" (AE 109/86). Amidst his very argument of hyperbolic negation Levinas claims that the Other as encountered in proximity comes always new to the subject. And yet, by denying the primacy of such relations, Levinas thereby acknowledges the existence of friendship, love, and therefore knowing the Other. Levinas describes a social fabric and relations therein: but then how can this sociality exist if the Other is always encountered for the first time in proximity?

The question of Levinas' plausibility entails that we are forced to confront the question of proximity and ubiquity: are all relations with the Other as described in proximity, or is proximity

²² Richard Rorty, "Response to Simon Critchley," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 44.

a certain type of relation with others amongst other types? Indeed, if the Other comes for the first time despite social relations, does this mean that social relations are different from encountering the Other, thereby admitting of different types of relations with others? Asking first after different types of relations with others, we are immediately led to the problem of a hierarchy of relations, a hierarchy which might do injustice to some others were we to make of proximity vs. consciousness two modes of encountering others (perhaps an authentic vs. inauthentic mode, following Heidegger's lead in *Being and Time*). If there is more than just proximate encountering, then it immediately follows that anything else would be a lesser relation to the Other – perhaps that is permissible to make sense of the fact that we don't always feel the overwhelming force of the Other upon us, but if this is the case then we risk disenfranchising others from being the Other. As a pragmatic compromise, multiple types of relation with the Other would account for the fact that we do not feel such extremeness in our real life, but the key reason why this solution will not work for Levinas is the fact that our relation to the Other would then be determined by the subject instead of the Other. If it is up to the subject to navigate which type of relation the Other bears upon me – proximity or otherwise – then we undermine Levinas' key claim to be passive to the Other. Hence, Levinas' claim entails the univocity of proximity as the relation to the Other, yet then we are confronted with the fact that this proximity as described is not our normative mode of relations with others as felt. Levinas therefore begs the question of how his description can be at all plausible by being univocal. How proximity can account for all sociality is the question demanded of Levinas' descriptions in their plausibility.

1.4.2 Criticism of Negative Hyperbole – Plausibility

In describing the human being as beyond essence, the encounter with the Other taking place in proximity with their face, Levinas holds that to experience the Other is to witness the expelling of consciousness and essence from human subjectivity. However, this expulsion is not merely a proscription: in fact, Levinas claims that phenomenologically speaking, the Other *does* repel consciousness' attempt to grasp them, and that subsequent to the inability for the Other to appear whatever we have consciousness of is not the Other, but is rather our own conscious content. As such, it is because the Other is not conscious that we must disavow and undo our perpetuation of conscious content, lest we commit injustice against the Other. His argument consists of exclusive opposition between the Other and consciousness, based on the possibility of a hither side of Being (wherein the human is found). This opposition begs many questions, not only of possibility but also of plausibility. As noted above, such an argument ignores the possibility of an enrooted subject: however, even if it were possible to account for an uprooting of the subject, the question of the plausibility of Levinas' ethical hyperbolic negation rests on whether or not ethics must be irreconcilable with identity and Being.

For Levinas, the difference and relatedness between Other and self are not based upon our identity, because identity is persistence in essence, and this difference can only lead to war (or its temporary quieting in interested peace). Rather, Levinas has argued that it is only in the immediacy of contact before essence that we can enter into a relation, a relation where the subject is “the-one” in “the-one-for-the-Other”. However, the Other does not thereby enter into a reciprocal relation to me: instead, our difference is unidirectional towards the Other because I cannot abdicate or decline

my responsibility.²³ As such, the relation between the Other and the subject is described as asymmetrical, “l’autre m’obsède selon l’asymétrie absolue de la signification” (AE 201/158). Consciousness as the site of essences in synchrony would permit symmetry between the Other and the subject – would let him be like me – which would run counter to my responsibility for the Other, and as such consciousness is excluded from the site of the ethical. Hence, what Levinas is concerned with is not the ontological difference, wherein all beings are equal to one another when compared to Being, but rather ethical difference (I and the Other).²⁴

However, in having located ethics within the immediacy of the body in proximity, Levinas has opened up a challenge to his interpretation of ethical difference as beyond Being. In particular, he ignores the differences in Being and consciousness which are a part of bodily existence, such as racial and sexual difference which mark all bodies equally. Such differences – as differences which grant identity to individuals, giving community to those of similar identity, and marking as different those with different identities – cannot be understood within Levinas’ asymmetrical difference, but instead as symmetrical differences. For example, as a man (a feature of a sexed body) I am similar to other men (in community of men), and I am thereby marked as different than women (difference of community). This sexual (and further, racial) difference – neither the ontological nor ethical difference, but rather an ontic difference – does not appear to be acknowledged by Levinas in his account of ethical responsibility for the Other, having lumped identity in with consciousness and thereby claiming that the Other and the subject negate such identity. Yet, negating such identity – both negating the possibility of its having ethical import and negating its role in constituting community – carries the risk, noted by Sonia Sikka, that the subject

²³ “Dans cette non-réciprocité, dans ce «ne pas y penser» s’annonce...*l’un-pour-l’autre*, relation à sens unique, ne revenant, sous aucune forme, à son point de départ, l’*immédiateté* de l’autre, plus immédiate que l’immédiate identité dans sa quiétude de nature, l’immédiateté de la proximité” (AE 106/84).

²⁴ Marion, “Note sur l’indifférence ontologique,” 55-58.

“might contribute to a failure to recognize and respect that Other, and precisely in his or her difference from oneself”.²⁵ Though attempting to not treat a female Other as some essence of femininity may be admirable in attempting to avoid diminishing the Other’s uniqueness, this aspiration assumes either that the difference does not matter (and thus is negated phenomenologically in proximity) or that the difference does not bear upon our ethical responsibility for the Other. On the contrary, such differences make up not only how we interact with Others in our daily life, but also restrict and mediate the life experiences open to those with different identities than we; as noted above, we *do* have roots, we *do* have historical experiences contingent upon our bodily identities, and we may *not* possess the means to be entirely uprooted in our subjectivity. Ignoring identity, however, “leads to a naïve position where...Levinas exemplifies unthinking rootedness rather than opposing it”.²⁶ Failing to address the possibility of the enrooted subject, Levinas in fact leaves unquestioned his own specificity and identity and thereby forecloses on other possibilities for ethical community with the Other.²⁷

Notwithstanding the phenomenological possibility of negating bodily differences, Levinas’ claim that the Other negates and empties out the self of all identity gives us further pause to doubt the plausibility of his hyperbolic negation being the *only* mode of ethical responsibility. As Sikka notes, not acknowledging the differences between us can fail to open dialogue with the Other when

²⁵ Sonia Sikka, “The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Levinas,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 109-110.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁷ It is fair to say that within Levinas’ canon he seems to have a particular problem with thinking femininity and women. However, for the purposes of our investigation, we are restricted to AE, and therefore we will not address the unique question of sexual difference as different from an overall conception of difference (racial, cultural, political, etc.), because such difference is not the focus of AE. There is an abundant scholarship on the question of Levinas and gender because he does discuss femininity elsewhere; however, this has meant that almost every work on Levinas and gender works within the confines of these two works. The topic shall therefore not be addressed presently. While Levinas does discuss maternity in AE as a metaphor for the responsibility for the Other, we shall see that it is not applied to women alone, but is meant to enfranchise men as well within the role of the maternal.

such dialogue is needed most to do right by the Other. However, it is not just that the immediacy of differences written on the body which is ignored by Levinas: John Drabinski, following Merleau-Ponty, argues that while the encounter with the body involves the various differences written on the body, those differences possess an incarnate historiography, such that “if history is written on the body (my central claim), then the entangled history of transnational contact is written into the very method of the ethical”.²⁸ In having denied enrootedness as a component of subjectivity, Levinas thereby denies the possibility of historical meaning and responsibility which can be incarnate in the body, where sexual and racial difference are not just immediate ontic differences but can be sources of responsibility outside the immediacy of the bodily interaction. Drabinski frames this fidelity to the asymmetrical difference of responsibility as putting the Other over their history, asking instead whether “the color of the Other...[could] signify the specificity – and thus not singularity – of obligation, designating terms of responsibility that bear historical violence, memory, and pain”.²⁹ For Levinas, the Other’s singularity and the singularity of my responsibility provide the only acceptable community beyond Being which can be ethical to the Other: however, Drabinski argues that we are not just singular, we are also specific and made specific by our bodily meaning and history. Such bodily history carries with it other ethical responses and responsibilities than just the immediacy of an injured body: following postcolonial theory, Drabinski thus proposes that the skin of the Other can expose us to the *historical* wrongs done unto them. Such wrongs cannot receive redress from an immediacy of bodily interaction, but rather the immediacy of the Other’s skin may perhaps confront us, finding us “vulnerable and exposed *on the basis of* this history and its incarnation [in the body of the Other]”.³⁰ The question

²⁸ John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 11.

²⁹ Ibid, 41.

³⁰ Ibid, 41.

of how to redress wrongs committed in the past, but which do impact us today (even if not seen in immediacy) entails more than just attention to what presently takes place. What's more, Drabinski argues that Levinas' account of bodily encounter with the Other must entail the phenomenology of history written on the body, such that we can receive historical responsibility through bodily encounters with *specific* Others, not merely singular Others.

The question of the plausibility of Levinas' hyperbolic negation thus requires us to ask not whether we can deny the specificity of the Other, but rather whether we should want to. Ethically speaking, Sikka notes that Levinas' ethics makes sense as a post-Holocaust ethic, because the Holocaust was undertaken as an exercise in treating the Other in their specificity and identity alone.³¹ However, Levinas' decision to take this argument to its extreme by negating any role of identity in ethics threatens our capacity to respond ethically to situations outside the immediacy of bodily need. Levinas' insistence on bodily immediacy recalls Alain Finkielkraut's challenge to the role of Doctors without Borders in their ethical role, where he notes "Sauver des vies: telle est la mondiale du médecin du monde; il est trop occupé à remplir de riz la bouche qui a faim pour écouter la bouche qui parle".³² Attending to bodily immediacy, while a good for meeting the immediate needs of the Other, in the same instance refuses to attend to the needs beyond such immediacy. So long as you are fed, clothed, sheltered, Levinas seems to think that history and culture are not matters of ethical concern; in fact, he argues that "la bonté...brûle les bosquets sacrés où se répercutent les échos du passé" (AE 22/18). Hence, Levinas excludes history and the subject's roots from ethics, at the risk of ignoring that he himself may be enrooted and thereby blinded to some ethical needs. The plausibility of Levinas' argument rests on the question of

³¹ Sikka, "Delightful Other," 115.

³² In Alain Finkielkraut, *L'humanité perdue: Essai sur le XX^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), 128, quoted in English by Rudi Visker, *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference after Levinas and Heidegger* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, [2004] 2008), 160.

whether or not we can meet non-immediate needs through ethics as he describes it. If he is committed to the human as losing identity in order to undertake ethics, we must somehow account for the enrootedness of the Other and the possibility that their ethical needs are specific instead of singular; otherwise, his hyperbolic negation lacks the plausibility to be relevant to the needs of identity politics which constitute a vast part of our lives.

1.5 The Solution: Hyperbole as Deconstructive

1.5.1 Understanding Hyperbole not as Description but as Deconstruction

The degree to which the two hyperboles are linked is the first topic to explore in understanding what is at stake in the systemic use of hyperbole found in AE. For Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, the positive hyperbole is presented in good faith as a description, but as a description it actually relies heavily upon positing a certain view of the subject, then taking that view and inverting/negating it in extreme terms to arrive at the [positively described] hyperbolic subject. She claims that, in Levinas, “that which is presented as description of a phenomenon is in fact the deconstruction of the text of tradition”.³³ Thomas-Fogiel charges that the extreme points are direct inversions of tropes of subjectivity in the philosophical canon. Thomas-Fogiel argues that each point Levinas makes as a description of the Other actually results from an inversion of the traditional conceptions of subjectivity within the philosophical canon.³⁴ His hyperbole as a method

³³ Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, “The call in the thought of Lévinas, Marion, and Chrétien: description of a phenomenon or deconstruction of a tradition,” *Aisthesis* 3.2 (2011): 112.

³⁴ Although focused on *Totalité et Infini*, whereas Thomas-Fogiel looks at AE, Simon Critchley argues as well that “Levinas is not only engaging in a reversal of Heidegger, which leads him to repeat the language of metaphysics, but also *enacting* a displacement of metaphysical language” (“Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity?” in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, & Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1999 [2009]), 75). Like Thomas-Fogiel, Critchley sees Levinas’ theoretical move to be one that relies upon a certain sense of metaphysics, one which thereby enables certain displacements to take place. Though Critchley thereby argues that inversion is complemented by the displacement, both inversion and displacement rest upon what is inverted and or distorted, thereby re-affirming Thomas-Fogiel’s point.

thus relies not upon a phenomenon described so much as it relies upon a description posited so that it may be negated through being inverted or overthrown, where “hyperbole has an initial descriptive function and a subsequent critical and reflexive function”.³⁵ As such, the generation of Levinas’ ‘descriptions’ are actually deconstructions of a traditional conception, thereby posing two problems. First, in describing the subject in terms of what it negates, Levinas is committed to a certain historical view of the tradition of the subject, such that were we to have a different conception of the history of metaphysics, his own description via deconstruction would collapse.³⁶ Second, even if the reading of the tradition was correct, there is nothing inherent in Levinas’ descriptions that should preclude other conceptions of subjectivity, e.g. the validity of positive and affirming experiences with the Other in friendship.³⁷ Therefore, Thomas-Fogiel argues, we find that Levinas’ use of hyperbole is problematic both by providing a restricted narrative of the history of philosophy, and by presuming that his subsequent descriptions are exclusively *the* description of subjectivity. Though not enough to merit an outright dismissal of Levinas’ work, these conclusions certainly give pause to question whether Levinas can be called a phenomenologist.

1.5.2 Response: Hyperbole as the Distance between Construction and Deconstruction

Thomas-Fogiel’s central claim is that Levinas is not a descriptive phenomenologist. He cannot be one because what he presents as a description is in fact a deconstructive inversion of a traditional conception of subjectivity. It is out of this deconstruction that he is able to formulate his descriptions, and therefore they are not descriptions at all. The particular problem with this methodology is that deconstruction via Levinas’ hyperbolic negation is fundamentally reliant upon

³⁵ Thomas-Fogiel, “The call”, 125

³⁶ Ibid, 126-127.

³⁷ Ibid, 127.

what it negates, requiring that what is negated is an exclusive/exhaustive description of the way things are. By presenting other views of subjectivity and the encounter with the Other – Thomas-Fogiel prefers Fichte for this – we can challenge Levinas’ deconstructions by providing a different initial description. We are friends with the Other, they validate us in our lives, we lead our own lives independent of them: any other initial description of the Other and subjectivity therefore challenges the primacy of what Levinas negates, thereby undermining the validity of his claims. Hence, Levinas’ methodology of providing deconstructions as descriptions disproves his claim to be a phenomenologist, and thus his mechanism for making claims is fundamentally flawed.

However, this argument against Levinas restricts the parameters of how to read AE as employing a deconstructive methodology. Instead of claiming that Levinas’ hyperbolic negation is merely a rhetorical deconstructive inversion for metaphysical ends, we ask instead whether or not the method of inversion and deconstruction is problematic if the phenomenon being described is itself deconstructive. What if the approach of the Other in proximity is not described from an inversion of metaphysics, but rather is described as such because it *itself* is the phenomenon of deconstruction of the subject? What if they deconstruct my conscious subjectivity, which is to say what if the Other in their approach enacts an inversion of my normal experience of subjectivity? If the Other can be adequately described and accounted for as such a deconstructive force, then Levinas’ method of description of deconstruction would indeed be faithful to the phenomenon being described, thereby making him a phenomenologist. If his claim is therefore to describe the deconstruction of the subject by the Other, then this makes his descriptions possible: of course, the burden of proof will then fall on how to make sense of such a description within everyday life.

To investigate the degree to which Levinas may be a deconstructionist, it is imperative to define deconstruction. Though Derrida has written deconstructions (having inaugurated the school

himself), an exploration of Derrida would take us too far afield from the subject at hand (AE). Furthermore, the difficulty in referring back to Derrida about deconstruction is compounded by the fact that deconstruction has largely been a practice undertaken by Derrida in his works, without being expressly codified at any one time.³⁸ Instead, it serves our purpose of introducing deconstruction to refer to a classic work in the field which addresses Derridean deconstruction and Levinasian ethics: Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Here, Critchley claims that deconstruction can be understood as ethically motivated if one understands the "ethically" in a Levinasian way. Reversing this thesis, we here argue that Levinas' descriptions of the Other (his ethics) can be understood if his description is understood to be of the Other as a deconstructive force. Using this work, we shall define Levinas in AE as describing the Other as deconstructive.

For Critchley as for Thomas-Fogiel, deconstruction is based upon the reading of a preliminary text and a reaction derived thereby. However, Critchley argues that it is not enough to just read a text and poke holes in certain arguments; rather, deconstruction is about two moments of reading, something he terms the "double reading". He defines a deconstruction as "in a first moment, deconstructive reading engages in the patient, microscopic fidelity of commentary... whilst in a second moment, it enacts an interpretative traversal of the text that brings the latter into contradiction with itself or with the dominant interpretation of the text".³⁹ To begin a deconstructive reading is to take the subject matter (the text) and provide a faithful exegesis of its claims – in this stable reading, what is aimed at is a sense of the truth of the text as adequation with its method.⁴⁰ This attempt at adequatio is usually in line with the dominant interpretation of a text's meaning, an understanding of the logical coherency of what a text is attempting to convey.

³⁸ Thomas-Fogiel similarly does not define deconstruction in her text; she simply presents it as a school of thought which is to be understood by the audience.

³⁹ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* 3rd Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 257.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 25.

However, after providing this faithful commentary, the next deconstructive move is to then enact “a determinate destabilization of the stability of the dominant interpretation”⁴¹ by showing its own internal shortcomings. Focusing on blind spots of the author, or contradictions overlooked by the author, deconstruction then destabilizes the dominant interpretation, opening up a new approach to the text. But this destabilizing process can only occur after a faithful account has been presented, meaning that the dominant interpretation must stand and be accessible, such that it is on its own criteria that its stability collapses. Thus, we define deconstruction as the double reading of a text, first presenting a faithful account of what is in the text, followed by a search for blind spots or aporia within the text which opens up a new reading by destabilizing the old.

Turning to Levinas, we are of course confronted by a problem: if Levinas is to be describing the phenomenon of the Other as deconstructive force upon the subject, how do we reconcile this description with the fact that deconstruction is restricted as a textual practice?⁴² What text is Levinas’ subject reading, such that it could be destabilized by the Other? It is my claim that the “text” which Levinas’ subject “reads” can be understood as conscious experience. In particular, Levinas conceives of conscious experience as synchrony of the Said: this means that consciousness is the experience of what can be said (thought of essentially, ideally) about the contents of experience. Consciousness is thus the linguistic experience of Being. For consciousness, the disparate flowing of time (diachrony) is gathered together into the coherency of narrative in synchrony (the light of Being): consciousness is therefore the textualization of reality, the writing of experience. Levinas makes this point explicitly, “Le Dire se fixe en Dit – s’écrit précisément, se fait livre, droit et science” (AE 202/159). Consciousness gives permanence and intelligibility to

⁴¹ Ibid, 257.

⁴² “The first essential point to make, however trivial it may seem, is that deconstruction is always deconstruction of a *text*” (Ibid, 22).

reality – the most recent iteration of it in ontological thought presents reality as essence – and it is for this reason that the Other comes on the hither side of consciousness, because they impact us in the flowing of time (not its permanence). Their impact comes not because of their essence (their permanence which entails persistence in essence, in being what they are as present to us in conscious experience) but because they challenge us from out of the otherwise than Being.

Moving to the method of the text itself, it is in AE II and III.1-5 where Levinas does provide a description of consciousness and sensibility.⁴³ Consistent with the first moment of the double reading, AE II presents a description of consciousness as the implementation of permanence (essence) onto the flowing of time. However, as with the second moment of reading, Levinas goes on to describe how the flowing of time comes to challenge consciousness' reign (as the dominant interpretation of subjectivity): diachrony is the blind spot covered over by consciousness, and therefore in articulating it Levinas points to what is able to destabilize consciousness. In his description, Levinas says that the Other is encountered in their loss to the flowing of time, and thus the Other destabilizes the permanence (the contra-flowing) that is consciousness. Deconstructing consciousness through diachrony (wherein the Other approaches), we thereby have a description of an experience – the encounter with the Other – which confronts us as deconstructive.

What is important about the Other as a non-conscious deconstructing of consciousness is that deconstruction's first moment, the faithful reading, stands such that it is from that reading that we can deconstruct it. This in turn entails that if the Other deconstructs the subject's consciousness, it can only do so by maintaining the validity of consciousness (in its role of adequation) before asking *more* of it by showing its shortcomings. Hence, and this is crucial, we shall be able to demonstrate that Levinas' hyperbolic negation is not a phenomenological paradox in denying

⁴³ It is therefore strange that Thomas-Fogiel only focuses on the positive claims put forth in AE III.6 and IV.

consciousness of the Other: it does not deny that there is a phenomenon to be conscious of, rather it affirms that consciousness is how we encounter the Other, *but* that we can and should be troubled by our very deployment of consciousness.

Thus, it is possible from the outset to conceive of the encounter with the Other as a deconstructive phenomenon. Of course, the question then becomes whether or not the extremes of the inversion which Levinas presents are plausible. We shall have to demonstrate that the extremeness of the experience described by Levinas is proportional to the distance which the Other throws us beyond consciousness. In deconstructing us, the Other takes us from our standpoint in consciousness: the distance which we go (from consciousness into proximity) is itself extreme *from the standpoint of consciousness*, and therefore only an extreme vocabulary can properly account for this extremeness. However, we will also need to account for why this extremeness is not often felt in the ubiquity of our daily relationships.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have outlined the central problem of Levinas' hyperboles. Given that Levinas is claiming to provide a description of ordinary encounters with Others, we must ask: how is it possible that extreme jargon can be meaningfully put forward as descriptive of such encounters? Even if extreme language can be worked into a possible description, we are left with the problem of why we *should want to* endorse such hyperbole for patently non-hyperbolic experiences. The solution we propose is that by understanding the encounter with the Other as deconstructive, we will see that describing the Other in hyperbolic jargon both validates those extreme terms *while* accounting for why such experiences are not usually felt as hyperbolic.

2 Levinas' Descriptions

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter we will examine AE's arguments in full, looking specifically at providing an exegesis which is faithful by reading within the confines of what this text gives us. As noted in our first chapter, one of the greatest barriers to understanding and truly appreciating Levinas' descriptions and arguments is the fact that the scholarship predominately reads AE within the confines of the Levinasian canon, exploring the text in its relation to what lies beyond it; while interpreting an author's meaning within his canon is a valid scholarly approach, as we mentioned this reading has prevented a truly deep reading of AE as a singular argument. There is yet to be sustained attention to the argument in its structure in AE, and therefore our approach is novel insofar as it pays attention to *all* of Levinas' descriptions. It is my contention that by properly reading what Levinas has to say we will be able to synthesize from within the text a complete and coherent description of the encounter with the Other person and ethical subjectivity.

2.1 Non-Hyperbolic Descriptions: the Subject without the Other

In the first part of this chapter, we examine the subject considered without regard for the Other in order to appreciate the patient phenomenological descriptions which underpin Levinas' eventual ethical conclusions. We begin in 2.1.1 with the subject as the conscious subject, and explore how consciousness is linguistic, and how language thus occasions our experiences. In 2.1.2, however, we find that beneath the active conscious subject is the subject who is confronted with his mortality – unlike in Heidegger, however, we see that mortality impacts us not as the possibility of our own impossibility, but rather as the slow march and degradation which is ageing.

In 2.1.3, we then explore the importance of time on a micro-scale, as the quality of sensation, because we are vulnerable.

2.1.1 *Language, Time, Consciousness*

In AE II, Levinas is concerned primarily with examining language in an attempt to demonstrate what language itself tells us about the subject who speaks and their subjectivity. In this respect, his method is similar to that deployed by Heidegger in his later works.¹ Through a listening to language, Heidegger arrives at the conclusion that Dasein is appropriated by Being to think being as saying [*Sage*]. Thus, language is to be understood as the saying of beings, and so it can be used to question or think the saying itself. Saying here is the bringing to presence of what *is*, because it is in language that we presence things through saying and thus showing them. The task is to think showing itself and move past showing things. By contrast, Levinas argues, in a section titled “Le questionnement et l’allégeance à Autrui”, that the way of questioning intelligibility and being does not signify the Heideggerian notion of the appropriation of man by Being, but rather allegiance to the Other person. We can and must be aware of “la responsabilité, c’est à dire de la socialité – ordre auquel la vérité finie – être et conscience – se subordonne” (AE 33/26). However, Levinas acknowledges that this claim is not self-evident, and indeed that we cannot begin a phenomenological description from this responsibility. The immediate next section is titled “Le questionnement et l’être: temps et réminiscence” (II.2), and Levinas notes that if we are not to begin with the recognition of responsibility at the heart of subjectivity, then “tout dans la question sera tourné vers la vérité et viendrait de l’essence de l’être” (AE 33/26). Thus, the text

¹ Krzysztof Ziarek agrees, noting that “ ‘Otherwise than Being’ indicates, then, another fold in the direction of language, an approach that adds itself to, critiques, modifies, and radicalizes Heidegger’s ‘way to language’ ” (*Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 84.

openly admits that we must begin with the way of questioning Being; however, Levinas will claim that even staying with questioning and Being will yet lead us to our fundamental responsibility.

Listening to language first alerts us to the salient fact that we are the being who questions, a being who uses language to ask questions, where “La question énonce un *quoi?* un *qu’est-ce?* un *qu’est-ce qu’est?*” (AE 30/23). Such a questioning, in turn, asks after truth, such that it is fair to describe the subject as the one who questions in seeking truth, and the result of such questioning is the exhibition of being.² We manifest being in truthful saying, and hence truth is the exhibition of being: we thus formulate questions in terms of “what is?” and we answer them through the exhibition of being. As Levinas notes, being is both the term of the question and the term of the answer, what is both the most problematic while also the most intelligible. But, the question then is: why, if being is both the starting point and the conclusion of questioning, is there a questioning at all?³ The answer is that being is disseminated through time, dispersed into the flowing of time, such that it is not immanent to itself; rather, because any answer or manifestation of being can only ever be partial, truth “est progression et s’expose en plusieurs temps restant problématique en chacun” (AE 30/24).

Levinas agrees with the Heideggerian premise that “language is the house of Being”,⁴ holding that language permits us to *show* being through the act of saying [*Sage*]. In the activity of exposing being and beings, Levinas writes that through ontological saying “appartiennent temps et langage, en tant que le langage, rassemblant en noms et en propositions la dispersion de la durée, laisse entendre être et étant” (AE 33-34/26-27). In ontological saying, we are exhibiting the

² In accordance with Levinas’ reluctance to capitalize the word “être”, we here too shall follow Lingis’ example in OB by keeping “être” and thus “being” in the lower case.

³ Jeffrey Dudiak formulates the question thusly: “What are we to make, within the purview of ontology, of this reflexive loop that is exhibition?” *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 183.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Perennial, [1947] 2008), 217.

perdurance of entities through time *as the same* identity. However, that we need to say or show identity entails that such identity is not always present, or rather is hidden: entities are not often present to us because they are disseminated by the flowing of time, disengaging from presence such that they can be re-engaged in ontological saying and be made manifest in human speech. Levinas describes this process thusly, “Découverte de l’être – dégagé de son identité, dégagé de lui-même (ce qu’on appelle ici déphasage)” (AE 36/28). It is because a thing goes from non-presence to presence and back to non-presence that it can be made manifest at all: a thing’s dephasing should therefore be understood as a “diastase de l’identité et ses retrouvailles” (AE 37/29). Levinas terms this lapsing “diachrony”, and it is thanks to the play of presence/non-presence that manifestation is possible for the ontological subject.

In the process of ontological saying, we are trying to answer the question “what is?” by saying, or bringing-to-presence (presencing) that which is the case: “this is this” or “A is A”. In this activity of showing, however, we are not adding to or modifying the content known: rather, in knowing there is “éloignement où le présent de la vérité *est déjà* ou *est encore*” (AE 36/29). The truth-saying of ontology does not change what is, but rather lets what *already* is come to presence despite its dephasing through the flowing of time. Therefore, to presence a thing as the same over time is to assemble disparate moments of sense- or meaning-impressions in their initial presentation to consciousness, and to assemble those parts into the unified theme of the same across time. These ‘parts’ are sensible “images”, and operate as the base unit of language: “L’image est, à la fois, terme de l’ostension – figure qui se montre, l’immédiat, le sensible et terme où la vérité n’est pas à terme, puisque le tout de l’être ne s’y montre pas en lui-même, mais seulement s’y reflète. Dans l’image, le sensible, l’immédiat est intentionnellement tourné vers la recherche d’une présence plus complète.” (AE 37/29). Our sensory images are therefore encountered within the

context of the promise of a fuller essence – one instant of a thing is a fact which belongs to its total showing, and thus at each instant I am encountering the promise of a fuller presence. For example, each page of a book is only a moment of the book and thus not its full presence, *but* each page serves as the promise of the fuller presence of the meaning of all pages conceived simultaneously.

Ontological saying therefore operates from our encounter with things in sensibility. The image, which we have seen is the promise of essence, is initially an object of sensation: “Les choses se découvrent dans leur qualités, mais les qualités dans le vécu qui est temporel” (AE 39/31). The flowing of time thus consists of the panoply of images or adumbrations of essence in its dephasing, and consequently the sensate subject is constantly amidst these numerous images which are not-yet the fullness of presence. At the crux of identity in its play of presence and non-presence, Levinas writes that “la sensation est l’ambiguïté de la fluence temporelle du vécu et de l’identité des êtres et des événements que les mots désignent” (AE 39/31). Time is both the time of things disengaging from presence and also the time of identity remaining the same yet requiring us to show or presence that identity as the same through time. Therefore, despite the experience of a thing lapsing and losing its presence, its identity as the same over time is never threatened: we always recuperate time’s loss. Thus, conscious sensing of a thing is “se modifier sans changer...pour s’attendre *encore* ou pour *déjà* se récupérer. Encore, déjà – temps; et temps où rien n’est perdu” (AE 41/32). Levinas therefore argues that consciousness approaches/conceives of entities in time as recoverable without loss, as perfect continuation disseminated through time.

In order to properly account for this comportment of consciousness towards time as duration, it is first incumbent to look at what endures. That there are entities in the world, that there is the flowing of something as what it is, is reflected in the images which all point to a unifying ideality, their identity, which is found in language *qua* designation, a language consisting of nouns.

Levinas writes, “A travers le jour que la temporalisation ouvre dans le sensible, le découvrant par sa passée même, et qu’elle rassemble par la rétention et la mémoire...le mot identifie «ceci *en tant que* cela», énoncé l’idéalité du même dans le divers” (AE 45/35). As Heidegger noted as far back as *Being and Time*, we are comported to things by being-in-the-world, wherein we take things as something, in the as-structure. We do not approach things in the fullness of their intellectual content, but rather we approach a thing as something whereby “Identification qui est prestation de sens...les «unités identiques» ne sont pas données ou thématiques d’abord pour recevoir un sens ensuite: elles sont données par ce sens” (AE 45/35). Things are given-as, and are not just jumbles of sense data operating as discrete sensations.⁵ However, in a turn which draws Levinas’ invocation of Early Heidegger with the Late, Levinas further states that “«Ceci *en tant que* cela» – cela n’est pas vécu, cela est dit” (AE 45/35). Inasmuch as it is our comportment to the world to encounter things as things, such that we identify things and disclose things meaningfully, our disclosing is a saying [*Dire*] of this as that, a saying which assembles the sensible images under their ideal unity.⁶ Approaching the sensible as a promise of essence, our sensing is thus a saying which Levinas terms *kerygma*, a sensing which “proclame et consacre ceci *en tant que* cela” (AE 45/35). This *kerygma* is therefore the first saying, saying of a thing that this thing is that, disclosing a thing in its meaning.

Returning to the question of how this process works, however, Levinas notes that in order to approach “this” as “that”, we must already know what “that” is. It is not only the case that, in

⁵ It is from the as-structure that Heidegger likely shies away from attempting to explore raw sensibility, because for him we are always encountering things as things and not encountering “red” or “soft”. Things are ready to hand before we conceive of its constituent sense images, and hence “sensibility” as approached by idealists and empiricists alike is a path that leads us away from our being-in-the-world. Indeed, Levinas notes that Heidegger’s contribution “marque certes un progrès sur l’atomisme sensualiste” (AE 84/67), but does not go far enough.

⁶ It is this attention to the mechanics of sense-perception, informed by Husserl, deployed to explore a Heideggerian problem, which marks Levinas’ distinct concern with his intellectual tradition.

order to term a this as a that, we need a vocabulary in place (though this is part of it),⁷ but further we must be linguistically capable of saying this as that.⁸ The “that” must have already been said, in order for me to come and say it now. Therefore, Levinas argues, it is necessary for our sensibility in kerygmatic declaration to enter into a “déjà dit, dans un doxa sans lesquels le langage identifiant, nommant n’aurait pu atteindre le sensible” (AE 45-46/35-36). As a disclosing of something as something, we are revealing identity (that which is said *qua* already said) in our sensible meaning of things. Our disclosure, therefore, is a “dire qui est aussi *entendement* et *écoute* absorbés dans le *dit*... Avant toute réceptivité, un *déjà dit* d’avant les langues expose” (AE 46/36). Thus, sensing is saying of a “this” that it is a “that”, where the “that” devolves from our collective scheme of idealities and thus gives us the vocabulary and the disposition to exhibit sensory images (this) as something said (that). Thus, “Dans le sensible comme vécu, l’identité se montre” (AE 46/36) because we have said it to be such. Levinas terms this feature of sensibility as the “fonction gnoséologique” (AE 46/36) and argues that this sort of sensibility is saying the (already) said which entails sensing as obedience to ideality, as already listening for what has already been said such that we recuperate a thing as it is in its endurance through time. From nouns and our capacity for sensibility to designate identity through the kerygmatic *en tant que*, we find that in the sensible “langage a opéré” (AE 46/36).⁹ Through the language of kerygma we thus find things revealed as images of a fuller presence awaiting our thematization, made possible through the already said.

However, focusing solely on language as denomination keeps us at the level of identity as the sole function of saying, at the risk of forgetting the role of time in language and consciousness

⁷ “un vocabulaire historiquement constitué” (AE 47/37).

⁸ Dudiak notes as much, arguing that the already said is best understood as the precondition for having any language with words, contents, and meanings (*Intrigue of Ethics*, 189).

⁹ Language is therefore both the means of consciousness and the proper site of ontology because “l’essence comme essence l’étant comme l’étant, se parlent” (AE 48/37).

altogether. While identities are deployed and disclosed through time, focusing only on identities misses the crucial role of time in consciousness and saying, such that “L’identité des étants renvoie à un dire, téléologiquement tourné vers le kerygme du dit, s’y absorbant au point de s’y faire oublier” (AE 47/37). If saying (sensing) is only the showing of identity, then saying is only ever a saying of the said which is already said, and thereby things “coagulant en un «quelque chose» la fluence du temps...(comme si l’identique était indépendant du temps pour s’y faire «ensuite» fluence)” (AE 47-48/37). Levinas argues that we must attend to time as the *resonance* of being,¹⁰ as seen in the cognitive work of the “laps du temps et mémoire qui le récupère” (AE 46/36).

For Levinas as for Heidegger,¹¹ moreover, the resonance of being is best heard in the tautological predicative proposition “A is A”. While naming is our means of access to identity – the “A” – there is yet the verb being, the predication in apophansis, which in addition to its usual signification of designation is what allows us to understand that “A is A” as “A As” (AE 50/38).¹² For Levinas, what is significant about this reformulation of the predicative proposition into identity as a verb entails the saying “où brusquement se diachronise l’immédiate coïncidence avec lui-même” (AE 50/39), thus exposing to us “la verbalité du verbe” (AE 50/39). This verbalness is not being doubling up the real (as designating does); rather, in our saying of the predicative proposition we say that a thing *is* its persistence through time, persisting as what it is, such that “Dans la predication seulement peut s’entendre l’essence” (AE 50/39). It is through language and the verb to be that we come to disclose things in their identity (the verb *qua* designating), but by that same

¹⁰ Levinas writes that things are exposed in “la lumière ou la résonance du temps” (AE 47/37), which directly corresponds to Heidegger’s insistence on resonance (Bettina Bergo, “Ontology, Transcendence, and Immanence,” *Research in Phenomenology* 35 no. 1 (2005): 166).

¹¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, “Principle of Identity,” in *Identity and Difference* trans. Joan Stambaugh, (New York: Harper & Row, [1957] 1969), 23-41.

¹² The collapse of the predicative statement “A is A” into “A As” directly corresponds to Heidegger’s decision to approach the event of appropriation as a verb, where its essence is its presencing, such that for Heidegger we can only say that “Ereignis ereignet” (*On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row [1969], 1972: 24).

predication we are able to hear saying itself, hear that the essence of being is a presencing of a thing in time through the resonance of a thing with itself in the predicative proposition. Through saying it, we thus expose essence and being in the resonance of “A is A” or “A As”. The time of consciousness is then the temporalization of images as the persistence of what is, as the same rejoining with the same thanks to the lapse which occasions exhibition, recuperated without loss.

On the basis of the argument/description articulated hitherto, we have seen that Levinas gives us a robust description of the conscious subject (the subject of ontology) and has conceded that this account is faithful to our normal comportment to the world as conscious. We are such that our comportment to the world is a seeking out of the answer to the question “what is?” which orients both our broader human experience as being part of a questioning horizon which discloses being, while also implying that our everyday life is based upon this questioning, a challenging forth of things that discloses them *as* something. Our day is consistently making our way through the world in the silence of the prepredicative kerygmatic “this as that”, a never ceasing gnoseological sensibility which operates by synchronizing the diachrony of the flow of time indifferently, pairing things with their identities in the already said.¹³ Temporalizing a thing by hearing the resonance of the same the same – recuperation without loss of the lapsing of time necessary for exposition – thus gives to us a language with which to speak truth, exhibiting being.

¹³ In the same way that for Heidegger, readiness-to-hand already sets up the world for our meaningful engagement with it, “the *already said*...is the fact that this spontaneous activity takes place, so to speak, at the fundamental level of the sensible lived” (Lis Thomas, *Ethics, Ontology, Justice: Ethics, Justice, and the Human Beyond Being* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 136). The kerygma is spontaneous, is always already happening, such that we do not necessarily experience it as an active naming though this is what conscious sense is; “the sensible is always ‘already said’ ” (ibid).

2.1.2 The Temporalization of the Subject: Ageing

Consciousness is, as we have now seen, the activity of temporalization: we take up sense images, identifying this image *as* that (essence), and thereby presence a thing as the same over time. While phenomenality – the presence of an entity to consciousness – is only possible due to the fact that a thing lapses from presence, consciousness approaches things in their lapsing as an essence which must be recovered, and thus as what can endure as the same throughout time without losing its essence. Hence, consciousness approaches things in their lapsing as a lapse *without loss*.

However, Levinas contends that the human subject him or herself falsifies consciousness' very claim to recuperate the lapse without loss. The disconnect is evident when we consider self-consciousness: when we treat ourselves and our identity as an object of consciousness, the subject "se recouvre et se retrouve sans vieillir et repose dans la certitude de soi" (AE 62/48). In saying that "I am I" or that the "I Is" we say that the subject is persistence without loss. Of course, in presencing myself in consciousness I admit of the possibility of my own death, the moment where I am "frappée par la mort toujours violente et prématurée" (AE 135/106), as if I were here in self-presence one second and gone the next. It is when we turn our attention to the fact of ageing, however, that we then see that the subject is not only the one who temporalizes but further is one who is temporalized. For the subject who ages, "Le temps se passe. Cette synthèse qui *patiemment* se fait – appelée avec profondeur, passive – est vieillissement...il n'y a plus *présence* de soi à soi, mais senescence. C'est comme senescence par delà la récupération de la mémoire, que le temps – temps perdu sans retour – est diachronie et me concerne" (AE 67/52). Ageing, unlike the time of essence which consciousness presumes, is a loss without the possibility of recovery; our attempts to say or think ourselves will never completely match the same with the same because we will instead find ourselves ever that much older. Hence, though consciousness tries to presence itself,

in actual fact our experience of time must be recognized as senescence, as a lapse with irrecoverable loss.

Levinas writes that this loss without recovery concerns me because it is *me* who is at a loss, me who ages, me who lapses and thus forever loses time. Contrary to the time of essence enshrined by conscious activity, consciousness turned honestly towards itself finds, instead of continuity, “une durée malgré soi, modalité de l’obéissance: la temporalité comme obéissance” (AE 68/52). We are obedient to time’s temporalization of us insofar as we are unable to do anything but age. What we find is therefore is that we are fundamentally passive to the flow of time, and at the heart of subjectivity is “adversité même, le contre soi en soi” (AE 66/51). Aging pits the subject against itself, as both the lapsing of time and the effort to recover that lapse. From identifying a fundamental “despite oneself” [*malgré soi*] in subjectivity, we must turn our attention from the subject who masters the time of presence to the site of its victimization by time: we must pay attention to the constitutive role of corporeality for subjectivity. It is thanks to our corporeality that we age and are hurt by time; “La corporéité du sujet, c’est la peine de l’effort, l’adversité originaire de la fatigue” (AE 70/54). My body is the site of my exposure and subsequent loss to time, it is the canvas which wrinkles and withers throughout time. Subjectivity thus encompasses “la corporéité susceptible de douleur dite physique, exposée à la blessure, à la maladie et à la vieillesse” (AE 71/55). In what can only be labelled a depressing account, to be human is described as the perpetual suffering caused by ageing, where we exhaust ourselves trying to fight to hold onto time all the while lapsing and hemorrhaging life. We are both that which loses time, and the effort to recover that loss despite its inevitable futility.

This recovery – self-consciousness of an identity persisting through time – is an important part of subjectivity, one which Levinas does not seek to dispute. However, Levinas is concerned

to ensure that the subject's identity is realized as a response to our initial passivity to time. Consciousness is the mechanism by which the ageing subject can approach a recovery of the lapse: in conscious recovery, the subject "se confirme, se double, se consolide, s'épaissit en substance" (AE 62/48). Regardless, because the lapse is fundamentally lost, what consciousness actually accomplishes in temporalizing itself in the predicative proposition – e.g. "Socrate socratise, ou Socrate est Socrate, est *la façon* dont Socrate est" (AE 53/41) – is substituting the senescence of the subject with the presence an ideal identity. Though conscious comportment seeks to let the resonance of the same be heard, because we do not resonate but rather attenuate by ageing, "Aucun acte ne vient en cette passivité doubler – ni engager, ni multiplier l'un" (AE 70/54). The act of saying the said – the temporalization of essence – holds the promise of essence for the subject, but it is a false promise, more of a salve than a solution, falsified with each breath that returns always a little older. And yet, due to how long our lives are in living them, and how little we feel ageing from moment to moment, the temporalization of the subject can occur, we can identify the body with the unchanging immortality of essence, and thus give us a reprieve from ageing in being encountered as still the same despite time's flow.

Levinas began his description looking at time as the time of manifestation, as the recovery of the lapse of presence. We saw that the conscious subject views objects of perception and consciousness as the same over time without loss. However, Levinas has found that the time of essence is falsified by the subject's endurance through time as ageing, as perpetual loss. With the understanding of corporeality as the site of continual loss, Levinas concludes that "Le sujet dit aussi proprement que possible...n'est pas *dans* le temps, mais est la diachronie même: dans l'identification du moi, vieillissement de celui que l'on «m'y reprendra» jamais" (AE 73/57). We are lapsed despite our conscious activity to try and synchronize our moments through time with an

unchanging ideal identity. What is important about this examination of the subject as the one withered by time is the fact that while the subject tells itself one thing (presencing the same over time without loss), this time of continuity has always already been upended and falsified by time's flow and our passivity to it. This is what Levinas terms *diachronie*: we persist at the crux of two times, subsisting both in the time of recuperation and the fact of time's irrecoverable loss. The subject must therefore be described and realized as the meeting of time as the time of manifestation and the very impossibility to manifest oneself without loss.

2.1.3 The Vulnerable Subject

Time is not only the time of things coming to presence through the subject's machinations: time is, more importantly, the site of our ageing, our total passivity which we cannot take up in our efforts to presence otherwise. What this entails in terms of a description of the subject is that the "sujet ne se décrit donc pas à partir de l'intentionnalité, de l'activité représentative, de l'objectivation...Il se décrit à partir de la passivité du temps" (AE 68/53). We must therefore not consider the subject only from the vantage point of consciousness, we must instead turn our analysis to our passivity to time. Correspondingly, the gnoseological sensibility which Levinas explored in the conscious subject must be reconsidered in light of this passivity to time.

In gnoseological sensation we treat of sense images as the lapsed promise of essence which requires the subject to bring that essence to presence through saying the said, and so the conscious sensibility treats of sensation as a knowing. However, restricting sensibility to knowing is problematic because it always distances the subject from the immediacy of sensation: "Le symbole est aperçu ou instauré et reçoit sa *détermination* dans la passivité et l'immédiateté ou la concrétion sensible. Mais dans une immédiateté qui, dans le savoir de la vérité, toujours se refoule" (AE 68/53). Conscious sensibility is a receptivity to things within the as-structure of meaning, where I

presence things meaningfully; however, this presencing involves my efforts to abstract sense data from immediacy and synchronize that data it with an ideal essence, the same over time. Hence, gnoseological sensation is removed from the immediacy by being a knowing, and thus we are always already listening for being, actively determining what shall be presented. Thus, sensibility conceived as receptivity fails to account for our passivity to time, “l’identification qui entend ou prétend ceci en tant que cela, l’*entendement*, ne tient donc pas dans la pure passivité du sensible” (AE 78/61). Disclosure via kerygma loses immediate sensation to ideality and duration – the noun and verb – in our saying, and so while the sensing that is a knowing captures a crucial component of sensibility,¹⁴ it cannot be the *exhaustive* description of sensibility.

In order to properly investigate sensibility within corporeal passivity, we must examine sensibility in immediacy before it is lost to the machinations of consciousness. It is in immediacy that we in our corporeality are affected by what we sense: “Cette immédiateté est d’abord l’aisance de jouir, plus immédiate que le boire, plongeant dans les profondeurs de l’élément, dans sa fraîcheur incomparable de plénitude et de comblement – plaisir; c’est-à-dire complaisance en soi de la vie aimant la vie” (AE 81/64). Before manifesting the identity of sensory images in their essential reference, sensation affects me in pleasure and/or pain. We can illustrate the difference between hedonic and gnoseological sense, consider taking a sip of coffee: in it one may taste certain notes and be able to identify a certain flavour profile. However, before the knowing-tasting can commence, you are already immersed in whether or not you enjoy the taste. If you enjoy it, your first reaction is *this tastes good*, and is then followed by *what is that taste?* Similarly, you are already choking on or spitting out the poorly brewed cup before you care about just what it was

¹⁴ In a comment which is only borne out through reaching Levinas’ conclusions in AE V, Levinas will consider the passive sensibility in immediacy to be the dominant meaning so that it can account for gnoseological sense, “Une signification dominante de la sensibilité doit certes permettre de rendre compte de sa signification secondaire comme sensation, élément d’un savoir” (AE 80/63).

that was so thoroughly awful. It is in such small, seemingly insignificant moments that we can see that “Une sensation thermique, gustative ou olfactive, n’est pas primordialement connaissance d’une douleur, d’une saveur, d’un parfum. Elle peut incontestablement prendre cette signification” (AE 81/65). Sensation in passivity is to enjoy (or not) a taste or a smell before we come to knowing about that sense; it is to bite into bread (AE 92/73), not to identify that bread is taste X.¹⁵

Sensibility viewed from enjoyment, rather than from knowing, points away from the subject conceived as a self-presented identity over time. In gnoseological sense, what we sense (our knowing of what *is*) is by definition replicable: we can all identify this product on the grocery shelf *as* bread. However, because enjoying the taste of the bread is to bite into it rather than know that it tastes good, “la jouissance est singularisation d’un moi dans son enroulement sur soi” (AE 93/73). Enjoyable sense – wherein we are passively sensate – is singular to the one who enjoys, given that it finds us in our singular tastes and in our own bodies. The sensation of enjoyment is *my* enjoyment, and as such it is sensed by the singular one who is enjoying it; here, to be singular is not a synonym for being an individual, which would be just one member of a group of shared and replicated traits, but rather the fact that I am unique due to my corporeality. It is being found at the level my body, my ageing, and my tastes, where I am singularly temporalized in passivity.

This singular passivity, moreover, must be understood beyond of the notion of consciousness receptive to what it senses. In enjoyment, we are not just open to what we sense, we are *exposed* to what we are enjoying: “Le contact n’est pas ouverture sur l’être, mais exposition à l’être” (AE 101/80). What *is* matters to *me* in my singular passivity to what I sense, for I can enjoy some and not enjoy other sensations; I am therefore exposed to what I sense, affected by it on a

¹⁵ At this point, one may object that it is only because we know that it *is* bread that we are able to approach it as something good to eat. However, as we shall demonstrate below, knowing that bread tastes good still relies upon our passivity to tasting it, and that knowing must first come from a taste.

level which is deeper and more original than that which predestines and therefore welcomes sensation. The immediacy of sensation is therefore found in our exposure to what we sense. However, as Levinas is keen to constantly remind us, this passivity does not preclude conscious apperception in respect of what we sense. In the sensing of what is enjoyable, we find “la subjectivité du sujet se complaisant en soi et se posant pour soi ” (AE 81/64). Pleasure affords us the possibility to be complacent, but this complacency entails that we aim at the continuation of what we sense so that we can *continue to be* complacent. Pleasurable sense thus endears the subject to desire its endurance or continuity, thereby constituting a positive feedback loop, enjoying the more that one enjoys.

Understanding the subject to be exposed to what he or she senses, we find consciousness to be the power to recuperate what we find pleasurable. However, beneath this hedonic preference for pleasure we find that in passive sensation there is the “soi découvert, s’offrant, souffrant, dans sa peau – en tant que dans sa peau, mal dans sa peau, n’ayant pas sa peau à soi – en tant que vulnérabilité” (AE 66/51). The same skin which ages and wrinkles is also the skin which, exposed and bare, can succumb to enjoyment of a cool breeze on a hot day. However, this same skin which can enjoy is also the same skin which, when nude and bare, is exposed “jusqu’à la blessure à en mourir...être comme vulnérabilité” (AE 63/49). We therefore find subjectivity consequent upon the self in its corporeality being vulnerable from the first. Enjoyment is thus only possible for one who is vulnerable to sensation; however, vulnerability admits not only of the possibility for a better continuity through time, but its opposite as well, in painful sensation.

The same flesh that can be softly caressed in enjoyment is thus also the vulnerability to pain and suffering of the skin exposed to wounding. Passive to painful sense, “la douleur est pur déficit, un accroissement de dette dans un sujet qui ne se ressaisit pas...La subjectivité du sujet est

précisément ce non-ressaisissement” (AE 71/55). Pain is felt in the perpetual and overall loss that is entailed in the ageing body, yet it is further because of the lapse that we can in our vulnerability suffer from wounding, from harm. As part of our corporeal-vulnerable condition we find that in moments of pain we encounter sense which overthrows our welcoming of sensation, and which reveals our fundamental exposure to sensations. In undergoing painful sensations, we thus find an impetus to counter the time of consciousness and the recapture of what *is*: in our passive sensing of pain we find an imperative to cease sensing, to stop the lapsing, to stop the pain of loss. A hand on a hot stove will as quickly and immediately be yanked away as when it was first accidentally placed there. Painful sensation also involves consciousness of what *is*, but we are conscious of it not so that it may be presenced, but on the contrary so that we might undo the presence of what pains us. We want painful sense to re-lapse, to not recur, and so in seeking relief from pain the vulnerable subject runs counter to the concept of the conscious subject who presences what *is* the case, who discloses for the sake of disclosure. Furthermore, were we only ageing creatures in the adversity and fatigue of life, then pain would just be more of the same, loss following loss, and thus not truly pain. However, this is not the case. Rather, pain is “Atteinte portée immédiatement à la plénitude de la complaisance en soi” (AE 93/74). Pain – loss, the lapse of time – is painful because we have something to lose, “Imminence en tant que la douleur pointe dans la sensibilité vécue comme bien-être et jouissance” (AE 71/55). Because I enjoy, I can lose that enjoyment: this is pain, the suffering wherein my pleasure is interrupted by a loss which does not return. Ageing, I am always in the pain of dying, yet life can be pleasurable as an effort against my fate *qua* temporalized: however, I can nevertheless be pained because I enjoy the moments of my life.

Having examined the subject in passivity to sensation reveals that consciousness’ activity of presencing what *is* in the time of essence is the product of our vulnerability to sensation,

occasioned by our corporeality and senescence. We presence that which is enjoyable to us, and we seek the absence of what is painful (where absence can either be the avoidance of painful sense, or the cessation of the presence of pain). Thus, the activity of consciousness must be recognized within yet also beyond the ontological conception of one who presences the truth by manifesting being: this activity arises because we are vulnerable and ageing, passive to time and therefore responding to this passivity. We presence or absence what *is* because what *is* matters to us, it can hurt us or it can help us, and it is within this hedonic matrix of valuating sensation that Levinas finds the subject as one who is conscious. Despite the fate of ageing until death, we find the subject for whom “l’assouvissement s’assouvit d’assouvissement. La vie jouit de sa vie même, comme si elle se nourrissait de vie autant que de ce qui fait vivre” (AE 92/73). The enjoying subject, the one who pleasurably interacts with the world in sensibility, thus finds life in its moments to be the possibility of pleasure and joy. It is the subject who enjoys, who can have a life worth living because it can be enjoyable, who is the subject that shall encounter the Other in proximity.

As we noted, deconstruction involves two moments in reading: the first reading is the faithful articulation and repetition of the dominant interpretation of the text at hand, whereas the second focuses on the text’s blind spot or aporia, that which is outside and therefore what destabilizes the dominant interpretation in the first reading. Taking up Levinas’ analysis of consciousness, we have first seen that Levinas describes consciousness as linguistic (saying the said), and consequently conscious subjectivity is best understood as reading and thereby identifying reality meaningfully over time. The reason why consciousness identifies essence (sameness over time) is that time’s flow temporalizes us, ageing us and rendering us vulnerable to the presence of sensations as either enjoyable or painful. We are, however, able to suture time’s loss by presencing enjoyable sensations and by presencing our self-identities through time, and

through the act of consciousness we reduce the world to our meaningful comportment towards it, and cover over time's disruptive force. The flowing of time – the light through which things can be presented in their essence – is therefore the very mechanism which destabilizes our understanding of things as the same over time. Thus, the subject – even when considered irrespective of the Other – is already caught up in the interplay of reading permanence into the world whilst the flow of time disassembles such a reading. However, it is crucial to note that insofar as we can and do present enjoyment and self-identity through time, our conscious comportment covers over and thereby hides time's disruptive power.

2.2 Hyperbolic Descriptions: the Other and Subjectivity

There are two key movements in Levinas' hyperbolic description: being impacted *by-the-Other*, and the discovery of subjectivity as *for-the-Other*. The impact *by-the-Other* is described as the assignation of the subject as responsible for and persecuted by the Other, where the subject is obsessed by non-indifference to the Other's need and is thus held hostage by the Other. This non-indifference then reveals that the subject is primordially and anarchically *for-the-Other*, a revelation which follows having recurred to the self who substitutes their concerns for the sake of the Other's. These two steps in the description combine Levinas' positive hyperbole with his negative hyperbole. The positive hyperbole comprises the extreme descriptions of the impact *by-the-Other* upon the subject, and involves the extreme claim that I am *for-the-Other* before I am for myself. That the Other causes me to recur from my conscious standpoint to my bodily vulnerability underneath, the body which is *for-the-Other*, entails that Levinas' hyperbole of negation is the mechanism by which we come to find ourselves responsible for the Other before us.

2.2.1 *By-the-Other: Proximity*

Section 2.1 focused on the subject, going from the conscious (time of essence; temporalizing subject) to the ageing and vulnerable subject (time of lapse without recovery, temporalized subject). The key point is that in consciousness time is the coming to presence of what is (where we are saying the said), but only because of the lapsing caused by the flow of time; however, consciousness operates with a predisposition to time as completely recoverable, and that the lapse is not a loss. However, Levinas has argued that ageing is the fact that time's lapse cannot be properly recovered, that even when we say ourselves as the same over time we are nevertheless always lapsing and thus never truly present. In fact, presencing ourselves is our way of combatting the lapsing, grafting the time of consciousness onto the time of ageing, which ends up covering over the very fact that we are unable to truly recover the loss of time. Within this horizon of continual lapsing, we are further subject to the flowing of time because we are exposed to what we sense, insofar as sensation is both enjoyment and suffering. Because sensation affects us in our passivity as either a pleasing or a wounding sense, we thus temporalize that which is pleasurable and want to cease the presence of what is painful.

The conscious yet ageing and vulnerable subject is the subject who then encounters the other person (the Other). Now that we have a picture of the subject as the activity of temporalizing through saying what *is*, we can now describe what it means to have such a subject encounter the Other in immediacy, which is to say encountering the Other in proximity.¹⁶ While most of the details which shall be articulated concerning proximity and substitution will be familiar to the scholarly tradition of interpreting Levinas, we will convey Levinas' descriptions in a novel way,

¹⁶ Provisionally, we should note that although proximity is not limited to immediacy, Levinas deliberately describes proximity as immediacy before considering proximity beyond immediacy. We shall thus follow Levinas' descriptive structure, though in our next chapter we shall propose a reason for his choice to describe proximity in this way.

with a particular attentiveness to the importance of the time of essence in consciousness, and how proximity and substitution impact that time.¹⁷

In encountering the Other in immediacy, Levinas writes that the encounter ‘begins’ through the subject approaching the Other. The relation invoked by my approach is what Levinas terms proximity: “La proximité c’est le sujet qui approche et qui, par conséquent constitue une relation” (AE 103-104/82). As conscious, I take up sense images and in saying this *as* that I identify that which I perceive, thereby presencing a thing with itself as the same across time. To encounter the Other is therefore to approach within this temporalizing activity, encountering *this* sense image which I am already identifying as a *that*. As we noted in our previous section, the subject is not truly passive in sensory receptivity: we are already actively identifying what is the case, and therefore welcoming sensation on our own terms.

Though I temporalize what I sense, approaching the Other results in a fundamental disruption of my efforts to identify and temporalize them in consciousness. When I take myself as an object of consciousness, the time of essence wins out despite the fact that we are ageing and vulnerable because consciousness mitigates the sting and pain of time’s flow. However, Levinas claims that the Other is encountered as a refusal of the time of consciousness which cannot be hidden. He writes that my proximity to the Other is “en deux temps...se temporalise, mais de temporalité diachronique, en dehors – au-delà ou au-dessus – du temps récupérable par la réminiscence” (AE 107/85). As with many of Levinas’ key points, his point is not well articulated

¹⁷ To make clear that this is novel, it should be noted that even in the Eric Severson’s chapter on AE in his book *Levinas’ Philosophy of Time: Gift, Responsibility, Diachrony, Hope* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), the approach to time taken is to either explain the development of AE in terms of the other works in Levinas’ canon or to stumble around the broader historical (ontological) importance of time. Severson does not engage with time as phenomenological.

and he does not signal its importance in the text – however, the notion of two times in proximity requires significant analysis, as it is the key to understanding the disruption caused by the Other.

First, Levinas describes proximity as that which “se temporalise”, that the relation temporalizes itself. What Levinas means by this is not explicit, but it is fair (especially upon the analyses in our next chapter) to interpret that what it means is that proximity *does* entail the time of essence; however, this is the time of essence determined by the Other, not by the subject. In a subject’s self-directed intentionality, sense images are aligned with *my* objects of thought, and so I identify a thing with its identity and thus identify the same over time. The subject manifests and thus delimits the beginning and end of the meaning of sensation; Levinas terms this “l’impérialisme de la conscience ouverte sur le monde” (AE 117/92). Though we must be careful to not pretend that Levinas makes the Other out to be an analogue of the I, we nevertheless note that in the same way that the subject temporalizes himself as the same over time, so too does the Other self-temporalize his or her own identity over time. Thus, in encountering the Other, we encounter a direct refutation of *my* determination of meaning, because we can only presence the meanings which the Other has already determined for themselves. However, what the Other shows us will nevertheless be caught up in the web of our presencing and therefore our interpretations, and thus our conscious activity shall continue despite our initial passivity to their self-presencing.

Second, and more important, the Other is also one who is temporalized passively, which means that they too are susceptible, ageing, and thus wounded by the flowing of time. Temporalized, the Other cannot self-presence themselves without loss, and as such to encounter them is to encounter a “refus de la coïncidence et de la médiation qui synchronisent” (AE 106/84). Due to their temporalization in senescence, rather than presence, the Other in immediacy directly refutes our conscious temporalization of them and consequently negates consciousness’

pretensions to be the sole arbiter of meaning. This affectivity is anchored in encountering them as singular, which – to recall the distinction we made above – is to encounter their uniqueness, unlike their individuality (which admits of universality). Encountering their singularity means first that “Le prochain comme autre ne se laisse précéder d’aucun précurseur...Il n’apparaît pas” (AE 109/86). Though we may tend towards welcoming the idea of another human as another like-me, in their singularity the Other surprises my consciousness which intends an Other like-me, and hence we cannot say that the singular Other is preceded by conscious welcome. Consequently, the Other’s singularity also refuses the ideas which consciousness seeks to impose on the Other; the Other, in their senescence, “S’absolvant de toute essence...dans un contingence excluant l’a priori” (AE 109/86). The Other in immediacy is the sight of lapsing in time with loss, and the essence we identify them with will never truly recover that loss. The Other in immediacy therefore confronts the subject with the inadequacies of consciousness, of presencing, and of language; the time of the Other is therefore the destabilization of my reading of the world in the time of essence, and thus we can say that the Other affects me as the second moment of reading in deconstruction.

Levinas then says that the Other encountered within their passivity to time affects me by assigning me to them. What results from the refusal of essence is that I am implicated in the Other’s loss: “Sa singularité extrême, c’est précisément son assignation: il m’assigne avant que je ne le désigne” (AE 109/86). Their singularity challenges my consciousness, and yet Levinas claims that this singularity assigns me to them; we shall discuss what we are assigned *by* below, but it is perhaps important to signal that Levinas never makes it explicit what we are assigned to do, and that we shall propose an answer to this question in our next chapter. Levinas notes that proximity to the Other cannot properly be described as a knowing; rather, he terms our affectivity by the Other as obsession, “modalité non pas d’un savoir mais d’une obsession, et par rapport au

connaître, un frémissement de l’humain tout autre” (AE 110/87). Here obsession refers to the way in which I am ordered by the Other from without: the source of affect is one-way, coming in a unidirectional affectivity from the Other. I am held captive by him or her, or as Levinas puts it, I am their hostage: “être soi – condition d’otage” (AE 150/117). In terms of this affectivity, Levinas writes that in encountering the Other, one who is different from me and who evades my time, I find that I am left non-indifferent to the Other: “la différence est non-indifférence et la rupture – obsession” (AE 105/83). To be non-indifferent here refers to the fact that the Other affects me by assigning me, and that in the difference between terms (the same and the Other) there is my being affected by him without regard for whether I affect him.

When we encounter the Other in their singularity we are encountering them insofar as they are corporeal, and they offer a sense image we can approach consciously. However, it is their very skin which is the site/sight of the refusal of presence, because their skin is the surface which ages and wrinkles and which is susceptible to the elements. In the intimacy of immediate contact with the Other, “Il n’a pas d’autre lieu, non autochtone, déraciné, apatride, non-habitant, exposé au froid et aux chaleurs des saisons” (AE 116/91). To see the Other in this bodily encounter is therefore to see an image (what *is*: the body of the Other, skin) but for that image to point beyond itself, pointing to the failure of consciousness to recuperate the lapsing of time *but further* confronting the subject with the one who is need due to what *is* the case. This confrontation to consciousness is what Levinas has termed the ‘Face’ [*visage*];¹⁸ he writes, “Cette *façon* du prochain est visage. Le visage du prochain me signifie une responsabilité irrécusable” (AE 112/88). The Face is what assigns me as responsible for the Other in their need, in the failure of presencing; however, Levinas notes that

¹⁸ We can acknowledge, of course, that this term was developed by Levinas far earlier than in AE, and that this plays a central role in *Totalité et Infini*. However, given our methodology, we will only follow the face as Levinas introduces and develops it in AE.

the Other's face refuses presence not because it is too overwhelming to appear, but rather because it is "trop faible...Le dévoilement du visage est nudité – non-forme – abandon de soi, vieillissement, mourir; plus nu que la nudité: pauvreté, peau à rides; peau à rides: trace de soi-même" (AE 112/88). The Other is made weak by their flesh, and to encounter them is to encounter this weakness and this needfulness due to time's flow, because despite whatever temporalizing activities the Other may undertake for themselves (the first of the two times in proximity) they will always be subjected to ageing and perpetual loss. Encountering them in immediacy is to be confronted with this fact, and we find my "obsession de cette nudité et de cette pauvreté" (AE 113/89) which assigns me as responsible for their ageing and their vulnerability. Confronted with their corporeality and therefore need, I am assigned thereby; the Other is "déjà pauvreté qui cache sa misère et qui m'appelle et m'ordonne. Signification singulière d'une existence se désertant elle-même" (AE 115/90). This poverty is what Levinas terms the trace of itself: "Cette existence abandonnée de tous et d'elle-même, *trace d'elle-même*, imposée à moi, m'assigne" (AE 115/90). The sense images of the Other's body are not adumbrations of an ideal self-presence, but rather they are a trace of the inability for presence to recuperate the loss of time. The body is therefore the trace of the Other's need caused by the impossibility of presence, and this trace assigns me.

All alone because he is his elemental susceptibility, the Other is "réduit à recourir à moi...m'incombe" (AE 116/91). My assignation, however, is not the assignation to an ethical calculus where I would be called to measure the Other's needfulness within a matrix of my agency and my culpability.¹⁹ Were this to be the case, then the subject of assignation would be my self-presented Ego which could measure responsibilities and therefore say that I am not responsible

¹⁹ For the sake of fidelity to the later argument concerning the assignation to be conscious for-the-Third, we should note what is said is correct but could be misleading: it is true that the *singular* Other does not assign us to a measured response, but the *multiplicity* of singular Others do assign me to such ethical calculations.

for the Other; “Autrui m’apparaissant comme étant dans sa plasticité d’image, je suis en relation avec le multipliable qui, malgré l’infinie de reproductions que j’en prends, reste *intact*” (AE 112/92). Instead, the breakup of time is the breakup of *my* time and my claim to manifest what is adequately and without loss; thus, the breakup caused by the Other is a critique or an indictment of the one who witnesses and presences. Levinas claims that such a critique “ramène le Moi à soi en deçà de mon identité, *plus tôt* que toute conscience de soi, et me dénude absolument” (AE 117/92), reducing me to my own corporeality which is to say my nudity and my vulnerability to time. However, this is not a move of recognition where the Other would cause me to recognize something about myself – actually, Levinas says that “tout en lui me regarde rien ne m’est indifférent. Rien n’est plus impératif que cet abandon dans le vide de l’espace” (AE 118/93). I do not recognize that I am like-him; I am exposed as concerned with him, assigned to his needs, and that assignation comes at the level of my passivity to him.

We have seen that the description of the encounter with the Other is proximity, wherein I am non-indifferent to the Other. In their corporeality they are victims to time’s temporalization, and they destabilize my interpretation of them in the time of essence, as the same over time. Due to time’s flowing, they are therefore in need, and this need assigns *me* as the one responsible for them. The assignation has then been likened to a hostage-taking where I am wholly captive to their affect on me. In lieu of the presence of any essence, the Other is senescence and vulnerable, repelling all consciousness of them. Such is Levinas’ description of encountering the Other, the description which we will need to question and interrogate as a description of everyday life.

2.2.2 *For-the-Other: the Ethical Self*

The description of proximity presented so far is meant to describe what is experienced when we encounter the Other person in immediacy. However, the description of the Other in the

immediacy of proximity is incomplete so long as it remains within the encounter. Levinas argues that in my assignation proximity makes us experience a deeper notion of subjectivity beneath that of a conscious ego initially shocked by the singularity of the Other. Levinas claims that “L’approche...en fin de compte se montrera substitution” (AE 119/94), because our affectivity to the Other in proximity signifies that we are not originally for-the-self but for-the-Other. Thus, it will not be correct to say that the for-itself is simply surprised by the Other in their failure to be presenced (*though* it may be experienced as such); instead it is because we were already for-the-Other that they affected us, overwhelming consciousness and assigning us to their need.

Proximity has been initially described as if it were a self-contained event, where I was first without the Other, then I encounter the Other, and then I am assigned to their need. Such a chronological rendering of proximity as an experience – one which consciousness can then recollect and narrate – is not, however, faithful to proximity because it does not properly appreciate the fact that I am *passive* to the Other in their encounter. Levinas claims that because we are affected by the Other in total passivity to them, to be truly passive would entail that we were affected by the Other before that affectivity was evident to consciousness. Such affectivity, if truly passive, would precede the very experience of encountering them in immediacy. Were I to have become sequentially responsible (such that I was previously not responsible) then responsibility would be up to me and therefore active; I could then avoid responsibility by leading a life of solitude, doing my best to avoid immediacy with anyone else. However, “l’obsession traverse la conscience a contre-courant...défaisant la thématization, échappant au *principe*, à l’origine, à la volonté, à l’*arché*...Mouvement, dans le sens originel du terme, an-archique” (AE 128/101). The refutation of the time of consciousness happens from outside of consciousness and therefore we

were unable to commence it; consequently, Levinas terms our affectivity to have taken place beyond any response in us, and hence our responsibility is without a beginning, is *an-arche*.

Understanding proximity as anarchic entails that my assignation to the Other is something which happens to me, beyond my control and therefore beyond my time of synchrony. It is like ageing, part of my passivity to time's flowing and prior to my conscious self-possession of myself, as if I was always already responsible for them. Levinas describes the experience of this anarchy, "Dans l'approche, je suis d'emblée serviteur du prochain, déjà en retard et coupable de retard" (AE 110/87). Not only have they already assigned me as responsible, but further Levinas claims that in our encounter I am late to their need and responsible for being late! An extreme claim to be sure, one which Levinas then heightens by saying that "Nous reconnaissons sous ces traits la persécution, mise en question antérieure au questionnement et responsabilité par delà le logos de la réponse" (AE 130/102). In the anarchy of my being affected the Other persecutes me for having already been responsible *before* our immediacy despite yet because of the fact that I could not take up the Other in consciousness, in a welcome where I am my own first principle.

We saw that in proximity the Other assigns me as the one responsible for their needs because they negate my conscious efforts to temporalize them, and this negation exposes the Other as frail and in need of the one who witnesses them. In this witnessing my conscious activity is countered insofar as I attempt to presence their lapsing in time without loss while their body falsifies that effort. This traversal of conscious time has an impact upon the subject which Levinas terms 'recurrence', that the refusal of my time recurs me from my conscious comportment to my passivity at the level of my own skin, to my own "exposition aux blessures et aux outrages" (AE 134/105). In proximity I am being temporalized by the Other's assignation, and as oneself I am "auparavant non-quiddité – personne...une retraite *en soi* qui est un exil *en soi*...toujours déjà

faite” (AE 135/106-107). Conceptually, we can note that Levinas here describes the recurrence to the oneself or ipseity along similar lines as the Other in proximity: both are reduced to their corporeality, withdrawing from consciousness yet stuck in their skin, exposed and vulnerable to wounding. However, this is not to say that it is because I recognize the Other as vulnerable *like me* that I then come to allow assignation from them: rather, because their vulnerability obsesses me, the relationship remains passive and the inequality of the terms remains. As non-quiddity, as the responsible one, I recur from consciousness to my ageing frailty, my mortal body, “Le soi-même, inégalité à soi, déficit en être” (AE 136/107). As the corporeal *one* assigned, we can thus see that the subject is “en un certain sens atomique – c’est-à-dire in-dividuelle – du soi qui l’empêche de se scinder...Cet empêchement est la positivité de l’Un” (AE 136/107). To be singular entails that I am stuck being me in my skin, and the body assigned by the Other is the base atom or monad that is the self. I am my singular materiality, “une matérialité plus matérielle que toute matière – c’est-à-dire telle que l’irritabilité ou la susceptibilité ou l’exposition à la blessure et à l’outrage, en marque la passivité” (AE 137/108). Undoing consciousness undoes my protection, my time, hurting me by reducing me to the pain of ageing, my time, my vulnerability. All multiplication is burned away, but I remain beneath, the responsible one.

To be this vulnerable body is to be one, to be myself. Yet, to be a vulnerable body is also what signifies the alterity of the Other. While not admitting to any equality between the terms self and Other, that I in my body approach the Other in theirs means that “L’approche est précisément une implication de l’approchant dans la fraternité” (AE 104/82).²⁰ Our humanity is our shared

²⁰ We must admit here that the word “fraternité” here, as with the use of male pronouns above, does seem to reinforce the critique that Levinas’ system might work only amongst males, and thus might not work within the paradigm of sexual difference. However, we will address the female pronoun in chapter 4; with regards then to fraternity, we would here posit that fraternity only be taken insofar as it is one part of the French motto, and that it should speak more to a comradery than to a gendered unity. To capture the shared corporeality, we could also imagine “consanguinity”.

subjection to mortality and death, but it is also the shared possibility to enjoy, to give hope and effort and pleasure to counter the diachronic loss we live every day. Thus, as one body approaching the next, “Récurrence [est] où le corps par lequel le donner est possible rend *autre* sans aliéner” (AE 139/109). I can be other in our human fraternity as ageing beings with a hope of joy despite everything. Recurrence entails that “loin d’épaissir et de tuméfier l’âme, [recurrence] l’opprime et la contracte et l’expose nue à l’autre jusqu’à faire exposer par le sujet son exposition même...la découverte de Soi dans le Dire” (AE 139/109). Responsibility for the Other who causes my recurrence means that I signify that I am so exposed. Such an exposition is thus a saying to the Other, saying that I am exposed by them, and as we shall see, a saying that I am *for*-them. That which wounds you hurts me too, and also that which I enjoy can also be for your enjoyment. We shall see that this saying is the signifying of the one-for-the-Other, as *me voici*.

We must now consider how we can say that the self is afflicted beyond being. Returning briefly to language, Levinas considers a helpful comparison between kerygmatic saying and ethical saying. In the kerygma of saying the said, a thing is given over to the claim of being, totally passive, being surrendered or abandoned to logos “est l’essence de l’accusatif. Le logos qui informe la matière première en la rappelant à l’ordre – est accusation ou catégorie” (AE 140/110). The effect of our temporalization is to broach things in their meaning, hence accusing this as that. However, “Dans l’obsession, l’accusation de la catégorie se mue en un accusative absolu sous lequel est pris le moi de la conscience libre” (AE 140/110). Assigned in my skin is actually being accused in my skin as oneself, accused in my enjoyment and complacency while the Other goes without, is in pain. To be so accused in my passivity – completely beyond my control – is thus an accusation under the “Passivité du traumatisme, mais du traumatisme qui empêche sa proper representation,

du traumatisme assourdissant” (AE 141/111). I am accused as myself, thus I am stripped of my defences, so I find myself pained and exposed, truly passive to them in their need.

However, the true extent of my passivity can only be the case if all that I suffer in persecution by the Other precedes the Other’s assignation in their moment of need. All the description hitherto has been stuck within the frame of the “event” of the Other’s immediate proximity, as if I once was not assigned. We saw that to be truly passive entails that we could not have first been free and unassigned, and thus what is missing from the description is that “Subir par autrui, n’est patience absolue que si ce «par autrui» est déjà «pour autrui».” (AE 141/111). Entering into proximity with the Other would be an activity were it dependent upon my assumption (hence, a prior state of not being assigned) of proximity. To be truly passive would therefore require that I already be responsible, already for-the-Other before I came to feel the weight of my assignation. For Levinas, the logical condition of my assignation is that I must have always been for-the-Other, at the core of myself – despite myself, as in ageing, but despite oneself as for-the-Other. Thus, Levinas makes his, as Bernasconi put it, quasi-transcendental claim that “autre qu’intéressé, «autrement qu’essence» – est la subjectivité même” (AE 141/111). I am not, at my core, for myself, for then the Other would be secondary and thus reliant upon an active receptivity. The proof of this claim comes in the fact that at the very pinnacle of our suffering by the Other, under accusation and obsessed, persecuted, we may yet offer ourselves to stop the Other’s pain. To have been so affected by the Other’s pain is one thing, but that our non-indifference could lead us “dans la souffrance subie demander cette souffrance...dans le traumatisme de la persécution passer de l’outrage subi à la responsabilité pour le persécuteur et, dans ce sens, de la souffrance à l’expiation pour autrui” (AE 141/111). That I should wish to atone for the Other, even if this means suffering myself, is what Levinas defines as substitution. I am already more concerned about you

than me, and it is your needs which come before. Hence, I am responsible even for your persecution of me, up to the point where I sacrifice myself.

Substitution is a destabilization of the normative conscious comportment which marks our quotidian lives, found at the hither side of being in the nudity of the self. The Other persecutes me, uncovering the self who can be persecuted because I am responsible beneath the conscious pretention to indifference. Recurrence is therefore “rongeant cette identité même – identité se rongeant – dans un remords” (AE 145/114). Because the Other continues to cut away from my own temporalization, my identity will therefore be continuously attempting to cover over the self whilst yet being uncovered by the self’s pain. To the conscious ego who stumbled across the Other, “Je n’ai rien fait et j’ai toujours été en cause: persécuté” (AE 145/114). That I came across you was contingent and so this responsibility in total passivity can only be properly accounted for by describing the subject as a “otage. Le mot Je signifie me voici, répondant de tout et de tous” (AE 145/114). Hyperbolic though it may appear when written, describing the self as a hostage answering for everything done to the Other does describe the force with which my responsibility for the Other deconstructs my consciousness, as “une responsabilité du moi pour ce que le moi n’avait pas voulu c’est-à-dire pour les autres” (AE 146/114). Without wishing to be so I am responsible, and my responsibility highlights “cette passivité subie dans la proximité de par une altérité en moi, cette passivité de la recurrence à soi...Non alienation cependant parce que l’Autre dans le Même est ma substitution à l’autre selon la responsabilité, pour laquelle, irremplaçable, je suis assigné” (AE 146/114). In having been deconstructed, I come back to myself in the recurrence as myself, as one-for-the-Other.

In my substitution for the Other, taking place within my passivity, I am exposed by being stripped of my temporalization. And yet, I approach responsible for the Other though signifying

beyond manifestation. Here I signify my responsibility by approaching, I pronounce *me voici*, that it is me here for-the-Other, offering myself despite persecution. Here, I say it to the Other, but in so doing I do not seek to presence the Other; while the trace of the Other allows them to come to be known and presenced, “*la trace d’une retraite...ne se fait présent que dans ma propre voix, déjà obéissante*” (AE 179/140). I signify that that which is (hence, a certain degree of knowing) is not right, and so should be changed by me, the one here who witnessed it. *Me voici* thus does not manifest the one I answer to, but signifies my responsibility for what has come to manifest. Further, I do not seek to temporalize or identify myself in saying *me voici*; rather, it is “*énoncé du «me voici» ne s’identifiant à rien sinon à la voix même qui s’énonce et se livre*” (AE 182/143). This is saying, a saying by the self in passivity to the Other broached in their pain. The *me voici* thus underpins all communication, proceeding out of my non-indifference for-the-Other, “*Se communiquer c’est s’ouvrir certes...mais en faisant responsabilité pour lui*” (AE 152/119). Quia responsible, I thus communicate to the Other beyond seeking to manifest, instead I am concerned by their pain. To say without saying the said – the true or originary signifyingness of saying – is therefore not to show, but to say that I am responsible, that it is me here.

2.3 Levinas’ Answer to Hyperbole: the Third

We have now seen that the body is the site of the Other’s destitution, understood as both the pain that is ageing and the vulnerability by which we can suffer. We saw that the body is the conjunction of the Other’s visibility and invisibility: though not an object of perception, the Other is perceivable and thus an object of consciousness through their destitution, and so the Other can be said to appear. This appearance, however, is an appearing through resistance against appearing, as a withdrawing from presence. The apparition through withdrawal from presence is what Levinas has termed the trace, which “*se montre à une connaissance*” (AE 197/154). Remembering our

analysis in chapter 2.1.1 of gnoseological sensation, we can say that the trace is thus a sense image of the Other, a “this” which will permit the kerygmatic determination of “ceci en tant que cela”. While we shall explain the mechanics of ethical kerygma in the next chapter, what is first of all important for Levinas is that the trace permits showing, though only as a showing of what ought to be re-lapsed. The trace is not an essence – it is not meant to persist over time – but is rather what Levinas terms an enigma: “dans la description de la Proximité, nous avons nommé énigme, l’hésitation entre le savoir et la responsabilité” (AE 197/155). That something can appear calls for its presencing, for saying the said; however, insofar as the Other refuses this appearing the trace’s visibility is both a matter of responsibility as well as being. The time of essence therefore devolves from my responsibility, and so Levinas claims “l’apophansis – le Dit – plus formel que le formel n[’est] plus en rien énoncé de l’être... il n[’est] irréductible à l’essence, mais [semble] à elle par l’ostension” (AE 197/155). The cognition we have of an Other is not a matter of saying what is, it is instead a witness to the Other’s need and my responsibility for that need.

In his description of proximity, Levinas had noted that proximity to the Other is immediacy which undoes whatever appears. However, the Other *does* appear through their destitution, entailing that proximity intrinsically involves cognition. There is therefore a problem for Levinas: if the Other in proximity does not appear, yet affects us through what trace they do leave, we must ask “Pourquoi la proximité... retournerait-elle à l’être ou tomberait en être... en essence se montrant dans le Dit... Pourquoi savoir?” (AE 199/156). The answer to this question comes in the shape of what we discussed above: given that the Other’s very mortality, their ageing, is a pain which affects us, this then implies that because every Other is ageing, we are responsible for all Others. Responsible not just for one but for all, “La responsabilité pour l’autre... est troublée et se faire problème dès l’entrée du tiers” (AE 200/157). Levinas had written that in proximity we are

non-indifferent in a unidirectional obsession by the Other: that there is a plurality of Others all in need, however, entails that our obsession cannot be singularly directed to just one Other, but to all Others. The fact of our responsibility for a plurality of Others entails two distinct facets of response. We are called to weighing, which is a call to knowing, to saying the said; and, we see that I myself as a subject am of concern as well in the equal status of Others being weighed.

All are mortal, ageing, and vulnerable, and therefore all assign me in their destitution; because their needs are different, however, I am called to know and weigh their differences so as to properly respond to their needs. For any singular Other we encounter in proximity there is also another Other, a third party who is “*autre que le prochain, mais aussi un autre prochain, mais aussi le prochain de l’Autre*” (AE 200/157). There is a key set of distinctions which Levinas makes here: the third party (a different Other in need) is different from this Other and is therefore also an Other unto themselves, yet is also this Other’s neighbour. Thus, in responsibility I am assigned to this Other before me while I am also assigned to that singular Other over there. Yet, in assignation to any one Other, the infinity of my responsibility entails this Other’s responsibility for that Other, and thus my responsibility for one is a responsibility for their Others. Plurality therefore challenges my responsibility for any one Other with the competing demands of any and all Others, asking of me “*Qu’ont-ils fait l’un à l’autre? Lequel passe avant l’autre?*” (AE 200/157). In passivity to Others, my non-indifference is now split by multiple assignations, but instead of being paralyzed by an infinite number of demands I am now called to determine who to help through weighing their needs. This action is the activity of consciousness whereby I can sense and thereby know the pains and needs of Others, such that I can determine the correct course of action in respect of them themselves and in their relation to one another. We shall see elaborate in our next section that needs are different, determined by the quality of pain experienced: saving the mechanics of

responsible consciousness for our next chapter, we can imagine a scenario to make this point clear. Imagine that I come across two Others, both injured, one with a paper cut, one with a gaping wound. In such an instance, both are singular Others, and I am the subject non-indifferent to their suffering. The Other with a paper cut is one who is suffering from a painful sensation, and thus appeals to me to cease what pains them. Similarly, the Other with a gaping wound is also suffering from a painful sensation which ought to be ceased. In knowing that one suffering is more painful than the other, and in being assigned to both singular Others, I determine that I should first help the one with the gaping wound, thus enacting a “comparaison des incomprables” (AE 201/158). However, this determination is rooted in comparing the responsibilities they have for each Other: were I to help the one with a paper cut, I would be doing wrong by him by not seeing to his responsibility for the grievously injured one, and so I help the one more in need at the moment. Thus, responsibilities to multiple others is twofold: I care for each Other as singular ones in need, but I am also responsible for singular Others in respect of one another.

We have now established that my responsibility for any one Other is a responsibility for all Others. It follows, therefore, that I too am an Other for those Others for whom I am responsible. As we discussed, I age and am vulnerable, and if I too am corporeal and my body bears witness to my own suffering inflicted by time’s lapsing, then I am also visibly in need before the Others I encounter. We should repeat our caution that in AE Levinas has strenuously denied the possibility of any analogous relation between the Other and myself. To maintain that the Other is like me, or that I am like them, is to establish a shared essence which – to Levinas’ mind – would establish a community through my recognition of Others as similar to me, thereby ignoring or actively working against the fact that community is established in my passivity to the needs of the Other. In order to therefore be relatable in a shared space, yet retain the responsibility for the infinity of

a singular Other, we require a way of encapsulating both the infinity of the Other and its necessary finitude. While we will examine the full importance of his solution in our next chapter, it is important here to introduce Levinas' solution: the pronoun 'God' encapsulates the infinity of the Other for the sake of all Others. Using this term directly from its Cartesian sense (AE 158/123), Levinas claims that in the word "God" we understand that the noun points away from itself, points out its own deficiency in containing its ideatum. By this linguistic possibility, so too am I encapsulated as an Other in need, "La synchronisation ...institue, avec «l'aide de Dieu» le lieu originel de la justice, terrain commun à moi et aux autres où je suis compté parmi eux" (AE 204/160). Insofar as my passivity to the plurality of Others requires the synchronization of Others in a shared space for their weighing, my responsibility and passivity thereby instantiate a neutral shared space of justice where I am counted as well. From my need to weigh all, I find myself – the one who weighs – also one to be weighed, counted as one of the Others for whom Others are responsible, and thus for whom I am responsible. I am the Other to an Other, and thus my responsibility for them and all Others means I am responsible for myself, "Mon sort importe. Mais c'est encore à partir de ma responsabilité" (AE 205/161). On a practical level, this invective makes sense: if I do not care for myself and give myself wholly over to the needs of Others, I will quickly lose my capacity for attending to the needs of Others. Indeed, we saw earlier that I am exposed to the needs and pains of the Other because of fraternity in our corporeality, that my skin's vulnerability and my own ability to enjoy is the means by which I am assigned to the Other's needs. On a very practical level, my responsibility for Others requires self-care: I too must eat, sleep, presence myself over time, so that I may continue to be for Others as long as I can. Thus, responsibility for the Other's responsibility entails a responsibility for myself as their Other, while also requiring that I be fit to best serve that Other as well. We shall further see in the next chapter

that the development of my own capacities and my self-projecting into the future are means of ethical responsiveness to Others.

We have now sketched the key components of Levinas' proposed solution to the excesses of encountering any one Other, given plurality's impact on my infinite responsibility. We are called to weigh the needs of Others we encounter and in that weighing we are conscious of Others. Amidst the weighing, I find that I too am one amongst Others to be counted, and consequently, I must attend to my own needs to better serve Others. These elements of plurality are incumbent upon the self, mandating that we are conscious of Others as a matter of responsibility for them.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have undertaken to provide the complete exegesis of Levinas' argument. We began with the subject who is conscious and who lives linguistically, manifesting being through saying the said. Because the flowing of time disseminates and thus lapses the thing with its essential endurance of things, this subject brings the essences of things to presence in its saying. In saying the said, we are undertaking a reading of reality in line with its dominant interpretation, attempting to faithfully identify what *is*. However, we say what *is* as if the lapse caused by time were completely recoverable. In contrast to the subject who temporalizes in language we then found that in ageing the subject is in fact temporalized in passivity to time's flow; moreover, in ageing we see that time's lapse cannot truly be recuperated, and that we are in fact made needful by the flow of time. Using this passivity to time as a new basis for examining subjectivity, Levinas then uncovers a sensible passivity beneath the receptivity of the subject: he uncovers the subject who is vulnerable, who enjoys some sensations and is pained by other sensations, and who therefore becomes conscious so as to presence what is good and absence what is bad.

It is *this subject*, the one who is vulnerable and who ages and yet who covers over this passivity through the time of consciousness, who encounters the Other in proximity. In the immediacy of encountering them we are in contact with their corporeality which is to say we are suddenly witness to their ageing and vulnerability, a witness to the refusal of our attempts to presence them. This refusal of presencing confronts the subject with consciousness' inadequacies and thereby destabilizes the dominant interpretation of things as persisting in the time of essence without loss. Their corporeality therefore deconstructs the approach I had made to them in consciousness. What's more, in their need they assign me as responsible for them. This assignation originated anarchically, before we ever encountered each Other, and it causes me to recur from my conscious comportment to my elemental susceptibility. At the heart of my susceptibility we find the unique and singular self who is originally responsible, who is *for-the-Other*. This subject is the one who is affected by the Other and therefore is willing to sacrifice themselves and their interests for the Other, even up to the point of death. However, because we are always already amidst a world of innumerable Others, all of whom affect me in this way, we must be able to measure Others in their needfulness, approaching them in consciousness. From a responsibility to all we find a responsibility to myself, and we find that consciousness is actually the site of our responsibility to all Others, which is to say that we find consciousness to be proximity.

The exegesis now complete, we are of course in the unenviable position of wondering what the point of this description is. It is banal and probably unnecessary to note that we all age and to transcribe the basic utilitarian metric of pleasure/pain into a phenomenological register. But then in contrast to this banality of describing the subject we then find Levinas proffering a completely bewildering account of encountering an Other, claiming that we find ourselves overthrown in our consciousness and infinitely responsible for-the-Other by the mere fact of encountering them in

immediacy. The problem, I believe, stems from the fact that Levinas' proposed solution – to claim that consciousness is proximity to all and is therefore suddenly justified – does not explicitly provide us with an actual description we can use to understand our everyday encounters. However, this should not give us reason to entirely dismiss his work. Instead, in our next chapter, we will attempt to undertake what Levinas failed to accomplish in AE through weaving his descriptions together, in particular by looking at how consciousness operates as our means of ensuring proximity to all. By harmonizing consciousness with proximity we will see that Levinas does offer us one possible description for everyday life; of course, the burden of our final chapter will then be to assess why we should want such a description at all.

3 The Possibility of Levinas' Descriptions

3.0 Introduction

In our last chapter, we undertook to articulate Levinas' description *in full*, with a particular focus on his least-studied account of consciousness. As a result of this description, we found a theoretical consistency in how the encounter with the subject is fundamentally constructive, to the effect that the Other deconstructs the conscious subject. However, despite this theoretical consistency we are still missing how to reconcile the extremism of the description with the non-extremism of our experiences. In this chapter, we shall undertake to harmonize Levinas' description of consciousness with the description of proximity in order to complete the description of justified consciousness, an account which Levinas does not provide in AE. In this exploration, we shall see that the encounter with the Other, when taken as deconstructive, can and does result in a justification of extreme terms for experiences which are not felt as extreme. We shall, at the end of our analysis, provide answers for how Levinas' hyperboles are possible as descriptions.

3.1 Theoretical Concerns

What we have to understand now is: if our everyday experiences are supposedly supported by the responsibility to all, how is it that in everyday life I do not encounter singular Others as the overthrow of consciousness via persecution, and recurring me to ethical subjectivity? To answer for the gulf between our normal experience and Levinas' description, we shall take the final claim of AE – that consciousness is my responsibility for all – and examine whether the initial description of consciousness can be reconciled with and in fact be supported by infinite responsibility. To guide this work of fully clarifying what Levinas' description entails, it is fruitful to borrow some clarifying questions out of analytic methodology. This is not to say that Levinas can be inducted

into the analytic tradition so much as to say that there can be fruitful use of analytic questions to thoughtfully probe Levinas' description.¹ The analytic claim that if something is worth saying it is worth saying clearly or not at all will therefore guide us.

We begin with an initial clarification. When Levinas is talking about our (infinite) responsibility for-the-Other, he is obviously talking about a moral responsibility. Therefore, we should define "moral responsibility". Taking from a recent anthology on the subject, we can say that "moral responsibility is something attributed to agents, and attributed for certain things (actions, failures to act, attitudes – and perhaps lacks of attitudes – traits, and consequences of at least some of these things)".² We can further clarify this definition by noting that when we talk of moral responsibility we tend to hold that an agent possesses the capacities to render him/her responsible. Thus, in looking at the claim that we are responsible for the Other and therefore for all Others, we also seek in Levinas' description a clarification on what sort of action(s) I am responsible for doing. We have Levinas' established claim that I responsible because I am for-the-Other, but what does this responsibility actually commit us to do?

Having clarified what we mean by moral responsibility, we should next clarify what we want from a theory (or description) of moral responsibility. Gideon Rosen argues that any theory of moral responsibility has three questions it must answer. We start with the analytic question, which asks: "What is it for [me/the subject] to be morally responsible for an act, event, state?",³

¹ Probing analytic questions does not, however, commit us to exploring analytic answers in particular debates: the questions we will draw from will be used to draw distinctions and elicit clarity, and will not be used to induct Levinas into analytic thought. Engagement between Levinas and analytic thinkers has been undertaken several times, most thoroughly in Morgan (*Discovering Levinas*) but also in Perpich, who concludes Levinas to be normative though not descriptive (*The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*).

² Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, & Angela M. Smith, "Introduction," in *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, eds. Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, & Angela M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2-3.

³ Gideon Rosen, "The Alethic Conception of Moral Responsibility," in *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, eds. Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, & Angela M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65.

which can be refined further to ask “What is it for X [me] to be morally praise-/blameworthy for A”, where A is my activity in response to the Other’s need.⁴ In the text Levinas only ever tells us of our specific responsibility to act when it comes to the responsibility to measure the needs of all Others; when it comes to my responsibility for a singular Other, however, he can only ever tell us that my responsibility is infinite. The grounding question asks what are the conditions under which a person is morally responsible for an act?⁵ In Levinas’ description the answer is unclear, given that responsibility for one Other is unclear; in the case of multiple Others, however, we know that I am responsible for measuring their needs and being conscious because of the omnipresent condition of the plurality of Others all in need. The explanatory question asks “why are the conditions of moral responsibility as they are?”,⁶ and Levinas’ whole description is built on addressing this question, and the answer is found in his description: we are for-the-Other, which is why we are always and infinitely morally responsible for Others. However, while this explains *why* we are responsible for measuring the needs of all – and thus the needs of each one who appeals to us singularly in immediacy – we still lack an account of what we must do.

The content of our responsibility is at no time systematically developed in the text; at most, Levinas has casual asides where he throws off a few qualifiers of our relationship. These qualifiers are all we have to go on to understand our specific responsibilities to act. This question is also not settled in the scholarship. John Llewelyn notes that “we must now ask how in the face-to-face the other man can say *anything at all*”.⁷ Diane Perpich agrees, arguing that “absent criteria that specify just what makes the other an obligatory object of my moral concern, it is difficult to discern what

⁴ Ibid, 65.

⁵ Ibid, 65.

⁶ Ibid, 65.

⁷ John Llewelyn, “Am I Obsessed by Bobby?” in *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 244.

the substantive content of my obligation could be”.⁸ In his own chapter on the issue, Michael Morgan further concedes that Levinas’ “ethical commitments surprisingly do not, or perhaps cannot, result in ethical directions of any concrete and precise kind”.⁹ Morgan notes therefore that we should take Levinas to be trying to say that the ethical is what inspires all that we do and is therefore a transcendental phenomenologist.¹⁰ However, Levinas maddeningly makes the following claim in the preface to the text, “Reconnaître dans la subjectivité une exception déréglant la conjonction de l’essence...la substitution à autrui... faire dériver de cette susceptibilité inassumable la *praxis* et le savoir intérieurs au monde – voilà les propositions de ce livre qui nomme *l’au delà de l’essence*” (AE x/xlvii-xlviii). Levinas therefore claims that in seeing subjectivity his way we can derive praxis and knowledge, and therefore we must see to it that he actually is describing what we are responsible for doing, due to our assignation by the Other.

3.2 Prospective Responsibility

We must isolate what the Other’s needs are in order to understand what we are responsible for doing. This is to say that we are examining our prospective responsibility – our obligation or our duty – which will allow us to understand what we can be praised or blamed for retrospectively in immediacy to the Other.¹¹ We turn therefore to the description of our responsibility as infinite and anarchic. If infinity is meant to indicate that the content of our responsibility is a positive obligation to do anything and everything unceasingly, then our responsibility would be unknowable and therefore meaningless. However, if we approach “infinity” in its privative conception – as the lack of an end or lack of calculation – we may be able to allow for specific

⁸ Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 155.

⁹ Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 294.

¹¹ Michael J. Zimmerman, “Varieties of Moral Responsibility,” in *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, eds. Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, & Angela M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 46

actions which must be undertaken, *but* actions which would be without end because they cannot be fully met. While this may seem like a worse track to follow – if a need can never be met, why bother trying to meet some degree of it? – needfulness without end actually meaningfully identifies the Other’s needs. In passivity to the flow of time, we are victimized in our corporeality insofar as we age and are vulnerable. Both ageing and vulnerability are inextricable from our corporeality, and thus are always already the case (without beginning, those needs are thus an-archic). The Other therefore assigns me to the fact that they are in need due to their ageing, and due to the fact that they are vulnerable. These needs constitute the human condition, which finds us, as Levinas writes, in corporeal fraternity with the Other. Further, as we saw, these needs cannot be truly met (e.g. they could not cease) without changing the human condition – an interesting point for transhumanists, but not one Levinas concerns himself with. However, though we cannot end their needfulness, we can in fact ameliorate the sting of death and pain: we saw *infra* 2.1.3 that while enjoyment does not end our need, it covers over our needfulness, such that ageing can mean living a life worth living.

If moral responsibility stretches to what the Other needs, we can say unequivocally that we are responsible for the state of the Other’s very condition – the fact that they are mortal and that they are vulnerable constitute their determinate need and our assignation. To say that I am morally responsible for the human condition is at least a start, and it decidedly leaves Levinas far afield of any analytic thinkers. Whereas most thinkers in moral philosophy tend to consider responsibility in events where I am called upon to make a decision and take a particular course of action,¹² Levinas is saying that my responsibility is for the human condition itself, “la responsabilité pour

¹² Neal A. Tognazzini, “The Strains of Involvement,” in *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, eds. Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, & Angela M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 21

autrui à la vie et à la mort” (AE 159/124). Extreme as this may be, we at least now have a working understanding of what we are responsible for: the total needfulness of the human being.

We can now return to our moral responsibility questions, beginning with the analytic question: what actions are required of me, given that I am responsible for the Other’s need? Given that Levinas’ key phenomenon is the Other in immediacy, we shall turn to immediacy to know what we are obligated to do. In the first, the Other is vulnerable, and therefore we must presence pleasurable sense for their enjoyment. To enjoy entails that I further ensure the absence of pain, or the cessation and mitigation of painful sensation. Thus, what I am responsible for in respect of any singular Other is to presence pleasure and the absence of pain, and to cease pain wherever found; I can be praised or blamed in respect of these actions. Because the Other is *always* in need, the grounds under which I am responsible for presencing pleasure are unceasing, tied to corporeality and therefore stretching to a time “Immémorial, irréprésentable, invisible, le passé qui se passe de présent, plus que parfait” (AE 13/11). Without beginning and without end, I am responsible for the needfulness of human mortality.

3.2.1 First Precondition of Prospective Responsibility: Grounds of Responsibility

The claim – that my prospective responsibility entails being always already responsible and assigned to always presence pleasure – entails two concerns. In terms of the analytic question: if the Other is *always* in need, then this would commit me to responsibility at all times, whether they are immediate to me or not. Thus, we would be responsible outside immediacy – and how this would be the case needs further articulation. Second, in respect of the grounding question: if my very corporeality is the condition for my being responsible, then we are committing to the *prima facie* ludicrous proposal that I am as responsible at birth as I am when a fully developed adult. How could I, in infancy or infirmity, be responsible for any immediate Other, let alone all?

To tackle these two concerns, we shall sketch our response by considering the question of moral development in Levinas. While not wishing to be facetious, we must first concede that “Levinas does not give sufficient articulation to the way that his phenomenology works as a process of moral growth”.¹³ If Levinas’ account is to be treated seriously, we must know what exactly I am committed to doing if I am always responsible, even in my infancy. Taking the answer to the grounding question at face value – I am responsible since birth! – David Michael Kleinberg-Levin claims that we *must* hold persecution as concomitant with corporeality. He claims that “the accusation of persecution is to be located...already inscribed in the sensibilities of the flesh, even before the subject, the infant, can speak”.¹⁴ The accusation here is the assignation to the needs of a singular Other in immediacy: however, this Other is *me*, in *my* total passivity and therefore total and overwhelming needfulness. As we saw in 2.3, plurality means that I too must be counted as one with needs, and I must take on the Other’s responsibility for me. Thus, at birth, I am under assignation, but I am assigned as responsible for my own needs for pleasure and the absence of pain which arise from my total passivity. The fact that we are passive and initially unable to take up this responsibility to what we sense means that responsibility for our need is initially the Other’s responsibility (e.g. my parents). I am thrown into a world in which Others are already concerned for my needs, who nurture me and tend to my needs. However, we do not remain totally passive: as our needs are met, as we encounter enjoyable sense, we mature and begin to develop knowledge about what we do and do not enjoy. From my initial state of passivity I come to experience pleasure and pain, and thus I come to learn which sensations are to be presented over time, and which are to be avoided (and thus ceased if they occur). We can describe even my infancy as an accusation

¹³ David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, “Persecution: The Self at the Heart of Metaphysics,” in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Nelson, Kapust, and Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 204.

because I am a responsible one due to my flesh, which provides me with a “compass of ‘predispositions’”,¹⁵ predispositions which entail our vulnerability. Therefore, our corporeal fraternity – from our very birth – is proximity to the Other because we are exposed to the elements which pain and pleasure all Others.

To return to the question of what we are therefore responsible for doing in respect of the Other in our infancy, the activity I am assigned to is to guard my vulnerability by developing my own capacity to identify sensation as good or bad. I must develop an understanding of which senses are good or bad so as to comport myself to examine sensation along these axes. To say, therefore, that I am responsible for approaching sensation knowingly, with a valuation of whether or not to presence what I sense, fits the description of the already said, the so-called mysterious schematism identified as underpinning consciousness both as our comportment and as the catalogue of meaningful “that”s. The condition or ground of my vulnerability means that I am responsible for taking up a position with respect to that vulnerability, to not remain passive to pain or pleasure but to actively condition what I sense. This activity is undertaken in gnoseological sensation, where I am on the lookout to identify sense with the aim of avoiding pain and achieving enjoyment. Of course, this requires that I have the capacity for knowing¹⁶ pain or pleasure, this capacity being my corporeality as a compass, and that I develop knowledge of what is painful and pleasurable. However, this ‘knowledge’ is different from an identity statement ‘A is A’ or ‘A is B’ which doubles up the real, and which presences the same over time in ‘A As’. Instead, this ‘knowledge’ is a valuation statement, a determination of whether ‘A As’ *should be the case*. While taking the same structure as the apophantic statement, Levinas states that “La bonté est – nous l’avons dit –

¹⁵ Ibid, 205.

¹⁶ We use ‘knowing’ for lack of a better term to mean the capacity to register and be aware of pain or pleasure. Obviously, I am in pain before I can identify as much, but that pain is then registered consciously.

le seul attribut qui n'introduit pas de multiplicité" (AE 151/118). Of all predications used with the verb *être*, only goodness does not multiply a thing in ideality. Rather, goodness precedes and in fact determines whether there should be presence at all. Our development is thus guided by learning whether this (sense) is good (enjoyable); this value statement is prior to and thereby inextricable from our identity statements because a sensation's value determines whether it will be presented. Anything we experience occurs within this matrix of good/bad (or indifference), and thus in our own sensate life we develop a catalogue or repository of valuations of sensation. The value statement of a thing will have been known and therefore already said by the time I next encounter it, which allows me to orient myself in and control my surroundings. In saying this as that, the 'that' will already encapsulate its valuation, which in turn determines whether it should continue. For example, it is because I have experienced the taste of coffee that I know coffee is good, and this value means that I seek out coffee, and determine to drink it. Thus, in response to my initial passivity, I am responsible for taking up a position in respect of judging sense within the matrix of whether it is good or bad for my vulnerability.

In knowing what is painful and pleasurable, I can be on the lookout for what is enjoyable and thus what should be presented or not by identifying sensation. In identifying sense, I am able to identify the Other's needs and the response they require. Levinas therefore makes clear that "*La proximité c'est le sujet qui approche*" (AE 103/82), and because consciousness is an approach, in consciousness we are in proximity to Others by being equipped to approach the needs of Others. We therefore see that the responsibility for identifying sensation is enabled by our capacity to value sense and determine whether what is should be. In terms of the deconstructive reading, our catalogue of valuations and the comportment to identify this as that make up the very capacity to read: in order to elucidate meaning, and for that meaning to then be destabilized, I must have the

capacity to read at all. In our initial, total passivity, we develop and take on an active role to consciously presence sense: what Levinas means when he writes that the Other is at the core of the self is that I can never be indifferent to the plight of the Other's destitution because I myself am one such Other. In my learning, in building my catalogue of valuations, I am thus reading immediacy for-the-Other. This is what accounts for the already said which both enables the time of essence and valuating of essences as a matter of justice.

3.2.2 Second Precondition of Prospective Responsibility: How to be Responsible

Having now seen that our need for development grounds the responsibility to be aware of the Other's needs and how to meet them, we can now turn to how to meet the needs of the Other (and thus all Others) who are not immediate to us. However, to do so, we must sketch a preliminary picture of what it does mean to be responsible in immediacy so that we can understand responsibility for the non-immediate. It should be stressed that the obligation to the non-immediate Other (the third) impacts immediacy: therefore, what follows is a preliminary account of immediacy, with a full picture to follow in 3.3. Hence, what follows is deliberately vague about what our responsibility entails so that we may get to the responsibility for non-immediate Others.

Assignment and approach are thus terms that refer to the already said. Insofar as I am gnoseologically sensitive I am always already reading and therefore approaching. But this approach is to the Other as an individual, as a concept. Immediacy, however, alters this abstract relationship. When any one Other enters into my sensitive immediacy, my assignment to the Other as an individual like-me becomes an assignment to the singularity of their need in the "immédiateté dans la caresse...d'une peau et d'un visage" (AE 107/85). The immediate Other is first encountered by the visibility of their trace. Through the identifying move of this *as* an Other, "that is an Other" says that as a vulnerable one, committing me to identify their current state and need.

I say this (body) as that (vulnerable to what it senses), where the “that”s are informed by my prior sense valuations in the already said. I thus say that what is should continue to be presented, or not. If I say this as a smiling Other, smiling having already been valuated as good and a sign of an enjoyable sensation, I can then identify this Other as completely fine, and so I must ensure that such a state continues. If I see this as a blank face staring as that Other walks by, such an image (be it their ability to carry on, or the absence of pain markers) tells me that the Other is at least okay; however, the absence of pleasure thus finds me responsible for presenting their enjoyment. Should the Other be in pain (e.g. seeing tears on their face), I am assigned to cease and mitigate what pains them, and to try and presence pleasure in its stead. Thus, in immediacy, I am called to identify the state of the Other’s needfulness in their vulnerability, and to thereafter respond with the aim of presenting enjoyment.

However, if responsibility were to cease at immediacy, my only constant immediacy would be to myself, and self-concern would eclipse the concern for Others and undo the human condition as proximate. As Peperzak notes, “the fact that I cannot get to know everyone and that most people remain nameless for me cannot degrade them into a secondary species of human beings”.¹⁷ An Other is an Other who assigns me, regardless of whether or not I am immediate to their needs.

The character of my response to a non-immediate Other can be determined from my response to the immediacy of a third party. When there are two Others immediately before me, I must break the unidirectional obsession with any one Other for the sake of not only my responsibility for each, but for their responsibility to each Other; I must be able to have a degree of certainty that those whose needs I have weighed as non-urgent can thereby subsist on their own, without my attentiveness. I must be certain that you with a paper cut can be okay, while I attend

¹⁷ Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 127.

to this one with his gaping wound. In the immediacy of our encounters with Others, we must be able to have certainty that when I weigh someone's need as non-urgent, I can move past them to attend to their Others. I take the essence for the Other, I thematize them in their non-urgency, and thereby turn away from them in their needs. I know and identify what is the case so as to *evaluate* what is – such a need to evaluate signifies my uncertainty about what the Other's needs are – but then in being certain that their needs weigh less than Others, I can move on to the needs of Others. Weighing an Other as “good enough”, and being certain that this can persist, is to be ethical to many; plurality means that I have consciousness of Others in the time of essence, seeking “une assurance contre tout risque” (AE 152/119). Without certainty and taking the essential sensation for the Other I could not be responsible to all. I must therefore say the said in order to be ethical, and it is my conscious comportment to Others which enables this response to their needs.

Certainty as a triage, however, does not mean that I am suddenly freed of responsibility for the one I had weighed – what it does mean is that the exigency to look away requires that my turning away does not occasion harm or suffering to befall the Other. My responsibility stretches to ensure that they continue to enjoy or be okay once I no longer weigh them, and it is logically consequent that we thereby extend this responsibility to ensuring that they are okay before I am immediate with them, and even if I am never immediate to an Other.

Responsibility for the Other, and especially those I am not immediate with, means that I have a responsibility to ensure the possibility and promote the likelihood that they can presence enjoyment or absence pain. I am therefore assigned to the possibility of the Others' happiness, whether I am there to verify that it is the case or not. Thus, I encapsulate the Other in a word, and take that the Other as that word, whereby there is “la reduction de l'être au possible et la supputation des possibles” (AE 201/158). This possibility then finds me responsible for being

certain, or promoting the continual presence of the Other's well-being, which "appelle au contrôle, à la recherche de la justice, à la société et à l'Etat, à la comparaison et à l'avoir, à la pensée et à la science, et au commerce et à la philosophie, et, hors l'anarchie, à la recherche d'un principe" (AE 205/161). Control here refers to our attempt to permit the safety and security of vulnerable Others, to control the variables to which we are susceptible.

I have the responsibility for the possibility and likelihood of all Others' well-being through time, which is to say I am responsible for being certain that they can have a good life. By a good life, we mean that their general continuity through time should result in enjoyable immediacy, or at least an immediacy free from pain, or that they can cease and mitigate pain in their lives. This responsibility for the entirety of the Other's perdurance is what we are responsible for in respect of the Other's needs as one who ages. While our own bodies do most of the work in terms of being the natural source of our vitality, we are responsible for ensuring that they have a life worth living over a long period of time. We are therefore responsible for each moment of their immediacy, in part because a painful sensation could very well mean the cessation of their duration and life. However, this requirement for enjoyment is not simply a hedonic invective to pleasure all the time and never any pain: pain and pleasure have their appropriate place and contexts, and indeed pain can often be a necessary component to a greater, more pleasing reward. Thus, when we say that I am responsible for the well-being of the Other insofar as they are capable of enjoyable immediacy, it is perhaps more correct to say that I am responsible for ensuring that pain takes place within the measure of their wellbeing. For example, running a marathon is often rather painful in training for it and in the immediacy of the run: yet, in undertaking the pains of a marathon, one is committing to an end-state of enjoyment (e.g. feeling fit, happy with the accomplishment). Returning to the immediacy of the moment: if I am watching a group of runners from the sidelines, I can tell by

their expressions that they are in a certain degree of discomfort, *but* the overall context situates that pain within the horizon of their well-being, because they presumably chose to do this, and they will benefit from it. Thus, the context lets me know that the Other's needs are being met, insofar as the pain is part of their own pursuit of well-being and enjoyment. Were I instead to turn down an alley way and see someone running towards me with a similar look of pain, the lack of context would most likely trigger the response that this Other is running from something, and that they may very well need my assistance or care.

In being responsible for the Other's lifetime, we are therefore responsible for the possibility for them to know and achieve their own happiness, and to pursue that which will attain their overall happiness, *even if* it entails some necessary pain in between. Because they are most immediate to themselves, we want them to be capable of caring for themselves. We thereby presence the Other as for-themselves, "*Le pour soi de la conscience est ainsi le pouvoir même que l'être exerce sur lui-même, sa volonté, sa principauté. Il s'y égale à soi et se possède*" (AE 129/102). By approaching the Other as an Ego, a for-itself subject, they can each take control over the ravages and vagaries of time's lapse, finding an origin, a principle, and a theme to recover. We have "*la responsabilité pour les libres initiatives de l'autre*" (AE 61/47), and thus we are responsible for guaranteeing their autonomy; we do so not to absolve myself of responsibility but in fact to increase the likelihood that they will have their needs attended to in my absence. As for-oneself, the Other can go about discovering what they enjoy, pursue what interests them, and determine projects and goals for themselves to live for.

This sort of a good life is the response to the Other's senescence, insofar as it develops a motivation to persist through time despite time's lapse. They have need of the recovery of the loss of themselves over time, even though this recovery will never capture all that is lost. This recovery

is the first time with the Other where, in proximity, our relation “se temporalise”: we presence their continuity and this continuity resonates across time, are identifiable as the same despite ageing. Levinas writes that “Le soi-même de la conscience ... [est] résistant dans sa stance à l'érosion du temps et de l'histoire” (AE 135/106). The Other is able to stand in resistance to time's flow; their ideality permits a substantive identity to be formed, one through which they can project themselves through time and which we can observe and identify in time's flow. It is because the Other carries on despite ageing that their identity and individuality inheres in their corporeal morbidity; their time and effort are thus also encountered in proximity because “L'individualité même de l'individu est une façon d'être. Socrate socratise, ou Socrate est Socrate, est la façon dont Socrate est. La predication fait entendre le temps de l'essence” (AE 53/41). This presence over time is an act of consciousness, one which the Other actively perpetuates and which we in turn are called to presence as well. What this means concretely is that our responsibility for the Other in their ageing is to be conscious of their unique identity, insofar as its presence signifies resistance to loss and the possibility of their own happiness.

However, to truly ensure that the Other can so presence themselves and their enjoyment, it is not simply incumbent for me to promote their identity and autonomy in immediacy. My assignation to those I am not immediate to requires that I ensure that *each* and every Other is counted and their needs met within such accounting. Hence, Levinas claims that responsibility entails the existence of structures to provide for such overarching measurements of the needs of Others: these overarching measurements are what constitute the realm of politics. The key element at work in the Levinasian understanding of politics is the ability to inhere in particular roles: these roles exist through our co-presence to one another, and are informed by the systemization of measured responsibility in horizons and institutions.

We have noted that responsibility is transitive, such that Others have responsibilities for Others, and thus what has been argued concerning the subject must also apply to Others. That Others are subjects as well entails that they are also responsible for weighing their immediates and non-immediates, and for caring for themselves as well; this shared obligation of responsibility constitutes sociality. All Others are bound to measuring all Others; Levinas notes,

Si dans la quiddité des êtres qui se montrent, ne s'inscrit pas en guise d'attribut leur visibilité et leur être, c'est leur groupement, leur co-présence – c'est-à-dire – chose nouvelle! – la position de l'un à l'égard de l'autre...la signifiante réciproque de l'un par rapport à l'autre – qui équivaut à la venue à la lumière des quiddités qualifiées elles-mêmes (AE 168-169/132)

Because each of us is responsible for all, we each identify one another as a matter of responsibility. Co-presence is the presence of me to the Other, of the Other to any Other, of the Other to me, in the equal standing and shared understanding had by interlocutors (AE 32/25). What is significant about co-presence is that because consciousness is our means of approaching Others in responsibility for all, reading the Other in co-presence is proximity to all Others because we are all accounting for one another. Participating in co-presencing Others is my action to ensure that other Others will be taking care to account for those immediate to them.

We must now ask what it means to “co-presence” in the facing of an Other to their Other and third parties. Beginning with the broadest possible meaning, “co-presence” means we presence the theme of the Other in their stability and sameness across and therefore regardless of the flowing of time. This is first their personal identity, but it quickly requires more than just their individuality. Levinas writes, “La conscience en situation, de tout ce qui est soustrait à son choix, forme une conjoncture dont les termes sont synchrones ou synchronisables, ramassés par la mémoire et la prevision en horizon de passé et d'avenir” (AE 174/137). To take up co-presence amongst one another is to know what to expect from one another in meeting each Other's needs. We are therefore assigned to clothe ourselves and the Other in being, “revêtue d'un être de pur emprunt,

qui masque sa singularité sans nom en lui conférant un rôle” (AE 135/106). To be equal to an identity over time is to recover the same, a recovery which involves the predications of identities and roles in nouns and adjectives.

Identifying and inhering in roles is part of our response to the ethical demands of plurality. Through identification with a role, the Other accounts for herself and the third party, and the third party can thereby account for himself and the Other. A role is a particular measurement of what I owe to the Other, and what the Other owes to me and Others, in the particularities of our interactions. By this, we mean that each of us have obligations to Others but also to ourselves on behalf of Others: hence, we are obliged to live our lives within the greater context of meanings for a good life, both for ourselves to lead and for Others to be able to lead for their own happiness and the happiness of their Others. Madeline Fagan notes that for Levinas, plurality “requires an institutionalization of some sorts of ethical guidelines or knowledge, a series of rules regulating social behaviour”.¹⁸ Such rules come about through the imposition of structures of weighing where “La structure est précisément une intelligibilité ou une rationalité ou une signification... Les termes reçoivent *dans* la relation une apesanteur – une grâce – et comme une transparence pour le regard” (AE 169/132-133). In being present to one another, our various needs receive intelligibility and thus transparency. From making our needs intelligible, we can determine which roles are required and which we would like to inhabit to meet the needs of the Other: we see that we therefore need e.g. parents, educators, farmers, governments, laws, judges, etc. Inhering in one of these roles, our relationships are thereby defined as a certain measure of obligations, one which consists in limiting our infinite responsibility for one Other for the sake of all Others.

¹⁸ Madeline Fagan, “The Inseparability of ethics and politics: Rethinking the third in Emmanuel Levinas,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 8.1 (2009), 11.

Roles are manifold, and it would take us too far afield to go into the variety of roles and how they are ethically founded. It is nevertheless evident that “the Levinasian picture suggests that social and political norms and institutions are established to enhance our opportunities for fulfilling our responsibilities to Others”.¹⁹ These structures – all, Levinas claims, born from our needs – give signification and meaning to our relations to one another. Again, Levinas does not account for these roles: however, we can note that these roles are always going to be conditioned by the historical and cultural horizon we are born within. I am born into a world where I am in need, where I am measured but those measurements are not my own; such measurements then inhere in me as they apply to me, and I learn how to apply them to Others. These roles devolve from the valuations of those before me, whose valuations and their amalgamation in roles thus constitute a *cultural* already said, “le logos dit...assur[e] la continuité de la culture” (AE 215/169). From the cultural measurements and valuations which I learn and adapt for myself, I am thereby rooted in my historical situation, a member of the culture who interacts with Others through that culture. Regardless of the historical peculiarities, however, roles are ordained by needs, giving rise to structures and systems, and thus there is “clarté en fonction d’un certain arrangement qui ordonne en système – en les rassemblant – les étants ou les moments et l’*esse ipsum* de ces etants” (AE 170/133). This arrangement we could call our horizon, be it cultural or historical or societal, etc. Roles do consist therefore of possibilities made open or available to a group for them to co-presence, and we could imagine that with Levinas’ foundation in ethical subjectivity at its bedrock, Heidegger’s description of thrownness and facticity might very well apply here.²⁰ Regardless of our time and roles, however, roles confer measurement and a place to be counted for Others by Others who inhabit and thereby actualize systems for meeting each Other’s needs.

¹⁹ Michael Morgan, *Levinas’s Ethical Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016): 64.

²⁰ Perpich, *Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 132-133.

Therefore, we have now identified that I am always responsible for the Other regardless of whether they are immediate to us; our responsibility for those not in immediacy is met through my participation in a horizon of meanings – made up of roles and institutions – which permit Others to co-presence one another in their needfulness, thereby accounting for their needs. Such horizons are cultural, political, social, and historical – however, at their root is a shared, collective responsibility for measuring one another.

3.2.3 Summary of Prospective Responsibility

The purpose of the foregoing analyses has been to distill from Levinas' description an account of what responsibility for the Other actually entails. Levinas holds that we are for-the-Other, which means that we always have a responsibility to presence enjoyment, presence the absence of pain, or cease the presence of pain, for Others. However, the actual mechanics of this responsibility – including the actual actions we are obliged to commit – are woefully unexplained in the text, and necessitates an exposition of his description as a description of moral responsibility.

It is my duty to know what any Other's needs are, to know the measured roles which allow each their place to have their needs met and accounted for. What this duty entails is an understanding of those measures, and to thereby presence those identities again over time in our daily encounters. I am called to promote the time of essence: the endurance through time of our shared meanings as the same. Therefore, Levinas writes that:

c'est comme reposant sur un Soi, *supportant* tout être, que l'être se rassemble en unité de l'univers et l'essence en événement. Le Soi est Sub-jectum: il est sous le poids de l'univers - responsable de tout. L'unité de l'univers n'est pas ce que mon regard embrasse dans son unité de l'aperception; mais ce que de toutes parts m'incombe, me regarde dans les deux sens du terme, m'accuse, est mon affaire (AE 147/116).

The unity of roles and valuations in a horizon are my affair, are my responsibility. I am, Levinas says, therefore responsible for participating in the horizon I find myself in, because the horizon

allows for the possibility of our happiness. This participation is effected through living my own life, caring for myself, fulfilling roles, and co-presencing Others in their roles. Essence – the persistence over time of what is good – only works so long as there is the active recuperation by subjects: “L’essence mène son train de presence comme ostension ... requiert un sujet en guise de conscience et l’investit comme voué à la représentation. Cette façon de requérir le sujet et de l’engager à la représentation par l’apparaître où l’Essence effectue sa présence, est l’objectivité de l’Essence” (AE 226/179). In my conscious comportment – the subject which Levinas first described – I am therefore partaking in maintaining the unity of the universe, presencing that which is good, and in my commitment to the time of essence I am able to be certain that the needs of Others are being met. Therefore, insofar as I am conscious and a member of a horizon, fulfilling roles, I am acting as a matter of responsibility for-the-Other.

Therefore, when in day-to-day life I encounter Others I do not know, I can only perceive an image of “an Other” who passes by me; “c’est précisément dans son image qu’il n’est plus proche; déjà il me permet un «quant à soi», des distances” (AE 112/89). While I may not know anything about what they like or dislike, by reading an Other into a horizon as a particular role, I presence the possibility for his/her own good to be discovered and actualized by them, guided by the historical horizons which open up possibility for us, and thereby they appear in that horizon and are counted for by those around them. What I am responsible for doing, therefore, is to share in a common good of behavior to give cheer or joy – hence, Levinas’ invective to promote “le peu qu’on en trouve, même le simple «après-vous-Monsieur»” (AE 150/117). Our cultures provide us certain ways to act and behave in public, and in following these mores we are presencing some measure of enjoyment as we can. Rather than claiming that I owe less to some Others, however, that we could be called upon to do so little is reflective of the necessary limitations of my finitude

in contrast to the infinite demands of innumerable others. I always owe, but what I can meaningfully give or do to the Other depends on *their* needs, and on how much those very needs are revealed to me and assign me. I am passive to their likes, to what they enjoy; because we can barely have access to such intimacy with Others in most of our encounters, we respond in kind to those we encounter through our customary common response.

That said, we do have some Others who are closer to us, given the finite spheres in which we operate in and the bonds we form. As we mentioned last chapter, Levinas does identify that the Other can be a “vieille connaissance, vieil ami, vieil amour” (AE 109/87).²¹ As we get closer to some Others, we become aware of the extent of what makes them happy, which in turn deepens the demands they make of me – thus, Levinas’ comment “Sujet d’autant plus responsable qu’il répond davantage, comme si la distance entre lui et l’autre s’accroissait au fur et à mesure où la proximité se resserrait” (AE 178/139-140). This comment means that in becoming close I come to learn more about their particular enjoyment and what they are pained by, and so I am more responsible for these needs. In becoming close, I am thereby given access to the possibilities of higher-orders of what constitutes a good life and well-being for those I am close to: e.g. I can know that my friend goes through an incredible amount of pain and stress in writing a thesis, *but* I can further know that his work is important to his interests and his eventual field of work, so I will support him and permit him to continue his painful path, in the recognition of its higher end. However, this sort of response is only possible through my familiarity with my friend and his situation. Such familiarity does not diminish the responsibility I have for those I do not know, but it reflects that to effectively presence enjoyment requires responding to the particularities of an

²¹ Levinas does not take any pains to explore the sorts of measured obligations we have to Others close by me, because he is only concerned with the preconditions for any such obligation at all.

Other's needs and likes; with those around me, I am much better able to diagnose need and response than with those who pass in and out of my life in a momentary blip.

Therefore, we can say that in terms of the analytic question, what I am responsible for doing is to embrace the Other in consciousness, to identify their needs, to identify the role they are fulfilling, and to thereby know my particular obligations – if any – to take further steps to presence their enjoyment. In so doing, I take part in building and maintaining the universe of meanings whereby I and all Others can meet our responsibilities to one another.

3.3 Retrospective Responsibility

We must acknowledge that all the analysis undertaken has been an attempt to take Levinas' description at the theoretical level, and to mete out coherency and a theoretical superstructure from what he gives us. Yet, all this has so far been for an extreme description, one rooted in hyperbolic terms and hyperbolic negation, which is claimed to be my encounter of the Other *but* which we still have no reason to want to support, given how alien that description is to our normal experiences. However, this proscriptive work has been done because in order for us to truly account for the potency of immediacy with the Other, we need to know what we had been responsible for doing, such that we can understand Levinas' hyperbole to be descriptive of our retrospective responsibility to a singular Other, which is to say we have a responsibility for what has already happened, for what did take place. To say that a logic or a coherence – despite Levinas' best efforts to obfuscate any such rationality – is in AE does not discredit his efforts. It is only imperative that the phenomenon not *appear* in the logical order of my active contemplation, which is to say that it is felt illogically and confusingly. It can have a structure, and an internal logic, but such logic is valid only to the degree that it is already operative, seizing me before I think it.

3.3.1 *The Other in Everyday Immediacy*

Given Levinas' claim that our responsibility for Others is accomplished through being conscious, we can therefore return to immediacy in the understanding that when we encounter the Other, they are already in need and we are already responsible for that need. Consequently, the very phenomenality of the encounter (insofar as I have an experience of an Other in daily life) is part of my responsibility. Therefore, to recall the analytic question, Levinas' description claims that I am morally responsible to have consciousness of the Other, to determine their needs and my response, and therefore as an act in fulfilment of my responsibility, my consciousness can be either morally praiseworthy or blameworthy. The commitment to support the universe by meaningfully being-in-the-world entails that in immediacy I am responsible for undertaking a full reading of what is the case in respect of their needfulness (the dominant interpretation, what appears to consciousness). Within my various horizons, I am therefore already proactively identifying the Other in respect of her role and our relation, and I interpret her in such roles because the continuity of those roles are meant to ensure her wellbeing. This reading further reveals the measure of what I am responsible for doing for her, given the state of her need and our closeness.

When we encounter an Other in immediacy, we are encountering them in the fact that I was already responsible for them, and they were already in need. Therefore, we find in immediacy that we are now in a situation of retrospective responsibility, where we have a responsibility "for something that has already happened".²² Insofar as the Other steps into my immediacy within a horizon which stretches between us, we can say that the Other had already been needful, and that I had already taken steps to broach those needs through supporting this horizon. However, this response had been undertaken to treat of their needs as predictable and comparable with Others, at

²² Zimmerman, "Varieties of Moral Responsibility," 46.

the needed cost of silencing and even ignoring their singularity. Thus, when I come face to face with the Other, their singularity assigns me *as* singular. This assignation therefore has the effect of a second reading, because the singularity of their need destabilizes my approach to them as an object of consciousness, comparable in presencing their identity. Their singularity therefore contradicts the premise of my first reading (that the Other is comparable), and thus they confront me deconstructively. In this singular need, they are exposed in the second time of their victimization to time, and this singularity falsifies the consciousness and the certainty I had employed to be responsible for their needs. In their flesh, as we saw last chapter, their senescence is laid before me and deconstructs the constructive time of consciousness which tries to presence the same over time. We are witness to their needs, to the uncertainty that immediacy causes, and the fact that these needs are infinite; their flesh therefore blames me as one in need, one susceptible to wounding, and thus one who must be cared for.

While this blame assigns me in my passivity as *me voici*, as me-here who is responsible for their singularity, their blame assigns me also to think of their responsibility for their Others as well. Thus, in immediacy we are called to identify their needfulness and the measure to which I in particular must respond. In the first, we identify this (sense image) *as* an Other thanks to their trace, which means we identify that the Other has needs in respect of ageing and vulnerability. In terms of ageing, we identify whether the Other is in fact supported in carrying on with their own life: are they able to support themselves, have they the means to cultivate an individual life for themselves without me? While such a claim may in fact seem to apply to the whole class of humanity in terms of biological vitality, this is a concern we have which speaks from the young, the old, and the sick: not knowing any better, the infant will as quickly put itself in danger as it will stay safe, hence the need to protect the infant and safeguard it in its every moment. As part of

identifying their overall need in respect of presence over time, we are also thereby identifying the role they are in, our relationship in co-presence, and therefore the degree of responsibility I have for them. Having affirmed the capacity to self-presence over time, we then identify the sense images of the Other in their immediate circumstances. We identify this (sense of the Other) *as* that (state of the Other). If the Other is smiling, and we know that a smile *is* good, then we can take it as certain that the Other is cared for, that enjoyment is being presenced, and thus I can turn away because they are clearly able to be happy without my attendant care. Should the Other merely pass me by without even a second glance, I will then identify this Other as carrying on, as alright all things considered, and thus I can turn away given the fact that our horizon enables them to follow their own direction and intentions. And yet – and all of Levinas' description is formulated on this cornerstone – should the Other be in pain, or should those I am close to lack enjoyment, I am unable to be indifferent to their need. Passive to whatever they require, I find myself concerned for their lot – I am in substitution, concerned more for them than for me. When the Other is in pain, I am concerned because in sensing what *is*, I am assigned to the fact that it should not be so. For example, should someone trip and fall, their misfortune is harmful, and thus should be ceased and mitigated. I extend a hand, I help them up, see if they are okay or if they need help getting to where they need to be. Should he have broken a leg, then our collective horizon provides for my ability to call a taxi or an ambulance for him, and to have that pain rectified; thereafter, I can go back about my day in my way, as I can be certain that his needs will be accounted for.

I am therefore witness to multiple singular needs every day, but I generally meet those needs in presencing what is, reading them into our shared horizon. Hence, singular Others being needful means I am always called in passivity to their needs, finding that in presencing I am doing so as a self, as for-the-Other. There is always the uncertainty which diachrony itself causes

unceasingly, “Trace fuyante s’effaçant et réapparaissant qui est comme un point d’interrogation placé devant le scintillement de l’ambiguïté” (AE 206/161). Yet, given relative peace and order, I find that I must, for the sake of Others, consider the needs of all Others, and thereby deny the singularity before me by weighing their needs. In having newly measured them, and finding that the horizon had cared for them before, I can trust that such a horizon is sufficient to continue to account for their needs. Thus, although the Other’s singularity destabilizes the time of consciousness and thus deconstructs me, their comparable wellbeing does not truly contradict but in fact affirms the horizon! My responsiveness qua being conscious is thereby praiseworthy and reinforced. Thus, Levinas notes that “Par l’implication de l’un dans l’un-pour-l’autre, par la substitution de l’un à l’autre, les fondements de l’être s’ébranlent ou s’assurent” (AE 173/136). Note the possibilities at the end of this quote, that being can be shaken *or ensured*; insofar as *my* participation in being (weighing in immediacy; taking part in political structures) yields good, healthy, and hopefully happy Others, being and the co-presence of the Other are praised as successful, as having met the responsibility I have for all Others.

What I therefore propose is that encountering the Other, as Levinas describes it, is best viewed as deconstructive. I had approached them in a horizon, trying to account for their needs against the needs of all Others – hence, the first moment of reading the text (faithfully attempting to identify what is the case) is my accounting for all needs of all Others. However, in immediacy, the Other imposes upon me as singular, and thus my gaze is obsessed with them. Because my total responsibility remains, however, the singular Other destabilizes while their comparable measure reaffirms and in fact further stabilizes the first reading. Thus, the first reading is deconstructed but as quickly re-constructed once I have verified the well-being of the Other.

Identifying Others through saying the said is largely successful in the well-ordered state, for the Others on the street or in the café are all persisting and in that persisting are not in pain, perhaps are in enjoyment! In such success, “L’écoulement du temps ne rompt pas cette présence et cette présentation: par la retention...la conscience est re-présentation entendue presque dans un sens actif comme l’acte de rendre à nouveau présent et de ramasser la dispersion en une présence” (AE 210/165). Time is no longer experienced as a breakup so long as its recuperation of time’s lapse is re-affirmed time and again, and thus the subject continues to recuperate time’s lapse with such familiarity with the time of essence that the time of recuperation itself can be forgotten. However, successful presence can never undo the responsibility we have, though it can be covered up, “Dans la non-indifférence à l’égard du prochain où la proximité n’est jamais assez proche, ne s’efface pas la différence entre moi et l’autre et l’indéclinabilité du sujet, comme elles s’effacent dans la situation où la relation de l’un avec l’autre est entendue dans la réciprocité” (AE 176/138). Given that our relationship with many means I must triage and thereby decline the infinite response to their singular demands, co-presence thus leads to a covering up of our responsibility’s full force.

Insofar as we were assigned by the singularity of the Other, it is necessary in Levinas’ description that the subject is recurred back to its ethical subjectivity, that its constructive reading is de-constructed, throwing us to the hither side of consciousness. However, on the basis of the above description, it does not seem that we experience such recurrence, given that we never really leave our conscious standpoint. Indeed, we are so enmeshed in this ethicality-qua-consciousness that we can look at the Other, and in the blink of an eye turn away from them unless I find them to be in some pain and therefore in need. However, as the intensity of the Other’s needs can be covered up by the needs of all, so too is recurrence to the self not felt as such in immediacy and normal experience. While he uses an early draft of AE IV, and therefore does not specifically cite

AE, we can use an insight from Michael B. Smith to examine the ramifications of remaining in consciousness. Smith notes that for Levinas, knowledge and the conscious activity of knowing are a recognition of knowledge and knowability in what is sensed.²³ Thus, encountering Others as knowable over time – and being in co-presence with them as an Ego or I – find consciousness constantly returning to consciousness. Smith therefore concludes that “both consciousness and the mysterious movement preceding it (recurrence in its original sense) are recurrence”.²⁴ Levinas himself seems to confirm this second sense of recurrence, writing “Cette récurrence est tout le contraire du retour à soi, de la conscience de soi” (AE 190/149). The ethical subject always weighing the needs of all thus co-presences always because diachrony is always a threat; yet when this threat is kept at bay, the self finds itself meeting its responsibilities in consciousness, and thus recurrence is felt only as a recurrence to the conscious ego. Recurrence is therefore always the case: immediacy suspends certainty, but that Others are normally good means that they reconstruct our horizon, and I am able to continue in consciousness. Yet, such reinforcement in being does not mean that the Other was not deconstructive; it means that my response was sufficient, my continued constructivity was what was called for, and so I continue on in construction.

3.3.2 *The Other in Exceptional Immediacy*

On a theoretical level, we can now affirm that what Levinas does offer us is at least *a* possible account of our encounters with the Other in immediacy. This account is rooted in describing my encounters with the Other in extreme language, and yet the end result is a system which uses extreme language but which restores and supposedly explains non-extreme and normal life. Levinas seems to relish in this indeterminacy, speaking of the referent of his description in

²³ Michael B. Smith, “Recurrence in Levinas,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 14.1 (2006): 1.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

the following way, “l’événement extraordinaire et quotidien de ma responsabilité pour les fautes ou le malheur des autres” (AE 12/10). And yet, he maintains, “Le langage éthique auquel nous avons eu recours, ne procède pas d’une expérience morale spéciale, indépendante de la description jusqu’alors poursuivie” (AE 154/120)! We are thus left with a hankering question with regards to the text, which also applies to the description in principle: Levinas introduces proximity and recurrence *as if* we were in touch with the absolute infinite singularity of the Other, unconcerned with the third party. There appears to be a potential disconnect or irregularity with his account as presented, given the immanence of the Third Party, and therefore the role of justified consciousness, in immediacy to any one Other. Thus, to comprehensively answer the question of whether proximity in its full extreme jargon, and subsequently recurrence to the hither side of being, are possible, we must ask how it could be possible to ever encounter such extremeness as we saw *infra* chapter 2, given that we are always with the Third.

Within the description, our success carries with it the constant praise of our actions (being conscious), such that we reinforce that behavior. While praise is merited – and I believe that this is entirely in keeping with and therefore is actually the point of the text – it never undoes our assignation *but* can cause our original assignation to be forgotten. The needs of plurality and the normalcy of peace and order find consciousness recurred and therefore reinforced in itself and the shared space of justice where we co-presence the Other. This remaining in consciousness is not, however, benign; Levinas warns, “tout comme l’Etat issu de la proximité du prochain...est toujours sur le point d’intégrer en nous figeant et moi et mon prochain” (AE 205/161). Remaining in being – the hallmark of successfully navigating multiple needs – is a double-edged sword, “La responsabilité illimitée, initiale, qui justifie ce souci de justice de soi et de philosophie, peut s’oublier. Dans cet oubli, la conscience est pur égoïsme” (AE 165/128). We can forget our ethical

subjectivity by succeeding in being responsible, and this forgetting demonstrates that we are originally good without knowing it, and thus not feeling extremity *is part of* proximity. Enjoyment begets complacency, and the fact that we are for-the-Other is, ironically in its very success and accomplishment, forgotten. Forgotten, that is, until its terrifying truth is visited upon us when we come face-to-face with suffering and tragedy, where the Other's life is on the line. What follows will be a description which operates entirely within the confines of the description articulated last chapter and the analysis above, *but* one which, in its exceptional character, not only is a possible experience, but one which effects and calls for the very description we have seen presented.

When we encounter an Other in mild pain, we are called to that mishap as a sense image which ought not be; however, it is a pain which is localized to its moment, and thus its response is just as momentary and confined to being a blip in an otherwise full-coverage consciousness. Thus, I continue to recur through self-consciousness because “accidents happen”, “they’ll be fine”, and in fact the system or horizon we are a part of knows how to account for and thereby mend that pain, and so the system is re-constructed even when pain befalls the Other.

We are, however, always vulnerable, and in that vulnerability the Other is susceptible to suffering, to being victimized by pain which threatens their very life. In such suffering, the first moment of proximity – the moment of “se temporalise” – is put into jeopardy, and thus the certainty that the Other will have a life at all to lead is suddenly incumbent upon me. This suffering too assigns me to a response of ceasing painful sensation, but the quality of suffering thereby finds that my responsibility to them is at risk of never being fulfilled. If my responsibility for their needs would extend beyond our immediacy to one another, then I cannot be certain that my responsibility for them will be met. The tragedy of serious suffering means that the horizon I identify them in cannot be certain of guaranteeing the absence of suffering going forwards, in part because that

suffering had happened. Therefore the degree to which an Other's suffering is impactful is proportionate to the degree that I must cease presencing; their suffering, a singular appeal for a singular need, strikes me in greater intensity to the magnitude of what is called for from me.

In extreme suffering where the Other's very life, hence the possibility to recuperate the lapse of time, and the possibility for pleasure or the absence of pain is threatened, the remedy required to cease the suffering requires ceasing the very horizon I had entrusted them to. I was a part of presencing immediate Others, with roles and a place in a horizon; that very horizon had been set up and active so as to prevent these serious and extreme forms of suffering from happening. That suffering yet happened thus contradicts the horizon, finds it and my reading to have been deficient in their duty, and that such a comportment itself must be ceased or at the very least interrogated given the suffering it had wrought. My consciousness, which identifies that what is ought not be further tells me that it shouldn't have happened, it should not have been able to happen. To flesh in this claim, it should help to use an example: if I go to a hockey rink and, while finding my way to my seat, see that there is ice on the steps, I might notice it, think to go around it, and proceed to my seat. However, should a fellow hockey fan then take those same steps and not see the ice, slip, and crack his head open, then his suffering shall indict all those who saw the ice and went around it without doing anything to rectify the situation; similarly, even those who may not have known about the ice may feel the same accusation that "I should have known, or it could've been prevented", for the Other suffered when by all accounts he should not have. In tragedy we are confronted by the fact that the system allowed for that tragedy to transpire, and thus we are accused for having presenced that very system. Levinas describes this, writing that the subject "*souffrant pour tous, mais chargé de tout; sans avoir eu à décider de cette prise en charge s'amplifiant glorieusement dans la mesure où elle s'impose*" (AE 189/148). Insofar as the Other's

needs are intensified, so too do those needs impose greater responsibilities for their well-being, calling for needing me here [*me voici*] to respond. Having been in proximity to all Others through my comportment and my participation, when suffering occurs that suffering accuses me of failing to have met my responsibility. Thus, our consciousness implicates us in having allowed the Other to come to suffer, finding me not innocent but guilty for their suffering.

Extreme pain or suffering therefore deconstructs me in my recurrence to and subsistence in self-consciousness; my constructive actions are therefore morally blameworthy. To say that consciousness failed entails that while I must first attend to the singularity of the Other's needs to cease or reverse what pains them, my reading within the preceding horizon must be ceased as it had failed to tend to the Other's needs, in part because my conscious comportment gave me weight and consideration. What matters in suffering is their urgent need, and thus I am obsessed and this obsession precludes my ability to be certain about what I sense. This singularity will always make its appeal alongside the appeals of all Others; however, to the degree that the appeal of the Other is suddenly extreme, I am called to take all Others – including but especially myself – as not obsessing me in comparison to this singular need. The extremism of the Other's need finds my own needs to be weighed out of the equation, weighed as if they do not count at all. Confronted by a singular assignation where the suffering Other's needs are far greater than my own, I weigh them as paramount and in turn find me as a self, persecuted and held hostage by their need. This symptomatically presents itself as a guilt or a being accused for self-concern or egoism because such neutral co-presencing of all Others with an emphasis on myself had put my needs ahead of the wounded one. Therefore I find myself in substitution for the Other's needs, called as the uniquely responsible one, to re-commit my resources to them.

3.4 The Complete Description

3.4.1 The Awoken Subject

The suffering Other puts the full deconstructive weight upon me, and I am in fact recurred to and remain at the level of my ethical subjectivity because I respond in the fullness of substituting myself for them. However, once the danger has passed, either by successfully meeting their challenge or in the demise of the possibility of helping them, the full impact of the Other's persecution of our horizon – which can now rightly be described as a persecuting hatred – accuses me for having taken the Other for certain, and for having not attended to their need. This weighs upon the subject given its implications for our constructive presencing, and thus we find ourselves changed in that comportment: having always been responsible, yet not realizing as much, the facts of my subjectivity and my responsibility show themselves to me, “Il fallait donc, pour que la subjectivité signifie sans réserve, que la passivité de son exposition à autrui ne s'inverse pas aussitôt en activité, mais que, à son tour, elle s'expose” (AE 181-182/142-143). As a subject previously unawares of my exposure, there is the “traumatisme qui m'a absolument surpris, l'ordre *n'a jamais été représenté*, car il ne s'est jamais présenté – pas même dans le passé venant en souvenir – au point que c'est moi qui dis seulement – et après coup – cette inouïe obligation” (AE 189/148). The Other had always called me to the saying of *me voici*, but that is also why I was conscious and called to the saying of the said; now, in the aftermath of realizing or recognizing my role as the-one-for-the-Other, I am called back to saying *me voici*, but as a calling which is no longer done only behind the scenes of my daily life. That the Other suffered due to my ignorance entails that I can no longer live in ignorance of my obligation to them, and so I must say and hear my obligation to them and the singularity of their needs.

The subject finding him/herself to be ethical is called to say their obligation to be for-the-Other in their comportment, to live within the rediscovery of consciousness' role as responding to the Other. It is the *newly revealed* responsibility to recognize that the Other is singular, that the self is for-the-Other, and thus that being is always an injustice done to the Other; while it is a necessary injustice for the sake of the third, what cannot be continued is the forgetfulness and complacency which we are tempted into as subjects, for-itself. Their demand is for recognition as singular – it is the Other who appeals singularly, and who appeals for me to approach them in their singularity. The claim that we must not take identity and being of the Other as certain is therefore a demand from the Other, made upon the self, but only experienced when our horizontal means of accounting for them fails. When we compound this realization with the fact that I am responsible for their singular needs, then we realize that our consciousness itself is dedicated to the Other.

The subject finds him/herself changed by the Other's deconstructive weight. I am now awake to my responsibility whereas before I had been asleep, "Délivrance en soi d'un Moi réveillé de son rêve impérialiste, de son impérialisme transcendantal, réveillé à soi, patience en tant que sujétion a tout. Spiritualité où se passe l'infini" (AE 209/164). Suffering recurs me to my original assignation to the Other. Consequently, we are called to recognize the singularity of the Other amidst the ruinous trauma they inflict through their suffering. Levinas therefore concludes this to be "la signification de ma responsabilité pour ce qui échappe à ma liberté, la défaite ou la défection de l'unité de l'*aperception transcendantale*" (AE 179/141). Insofar as the unity of transcendental apperception – or, what we described is our responsibility to read Others into a horizon of meaning – is defeated, therein we find the signification of my responsibility. However, there are two possible consequences of this claim: while on the one hand, this describes that suffering impacts the subject by deconstructing their constructive comportment, on the other hand this further

implies that insofar as we defeat self-consciousness we signify responsibility. To return to the wakeful subject: awoken from our conscious slumber, the subject is called to say his/her obligation to the singularity of the Other. We must therefore understand what this saying entails.

First, saying our obligation entails understanding that co-presencing leads to the possibility of the Other's suffering by forgetting my responsibility. The claim here is that how we comport ourselves to Others matters greatly for how we meet our responsibility for them, and as such we must actively re-orient ourselves to the witness of their singularity. In the philosophical canon, presencing the self as a free ego has in turn led to the conclusion that the Other is simply another Ego like me, for example "[pour Descartes] l'âme étant entendue comme pensée thématitante. Abordée à partir de la responsabilité pour l'autre homme, le psychisme du sujet – l'un-pour-l'autre – serait la signification ou l'intelligibilité – ou la signifiante elle-même" (AE 181/142). How we understand our subjectivity matters for our responsibility; for Descartes, as Levinas notes, the subject is simply the one who thematizes, which precludes realizing that beneath that activity of thematizing is the passivity to the Other. Worse yet, we could endorse Hobbes, and presence the Other as an allergic ego in a war of all against all (AE I.2). Hence, it is no wonder that a subject who approaches herself and Others as thematizing agents would reduce the Other to their conscious themes, and not realize her responsibility for the Other until suffering gives us no choice but to be aware. Thus, the awake subject must forgo the certainty of themes for the uncertainty of responsibility, "L'identité du sujet s'accuse ici, non pas par un repos sur soi, mais par une inquiétude qui me pourchasse hors le noyau de ma substantialité" (AE 181/142). The subject aware that she is for-the-Other is therefore assigned to comport herself so as to avoid such ignorance of the Other as needful. What Levinas therefore argues is that the subject is assigned to avoid the fixation on identity which precludes attention to the singularity of the Other.

We can see an immediate objection to this appeal for singular recognition: it was because *all* Others were each singular unto themselves that I had to weigh them in the first place, and the injustice was done out of a demand for justice. We can never be free of Others, and so the appeal to a renewed approach to the Other as singular would seem to preclude this facet of responsibility. However, that we are amidst plurality does not mean that should forgo plurality; rather, Levinas argues that the subject must recognize its weighing as an injustice, and not shy from the fact that we can and should always do more to alleviate that injustice. He presents the paradox thusly:

Mais d'autre part «le faire signe» dans le monde où se parle objectivement une langue, où l'on est déjà avec le tiers, doit percer le mur du sens *dit* pour retourner à cet *en deça de la civilisation*. D'où la nécessité de dédire tout ce qui vient altérer la nudité du signe, d'écarter tout ce qui se dit dans le dire pur de la proximité. On ne peut, sans équivoque, faire signe dans la nuit. Il faut dire «ce qu'il en est», dire quelque chose – avant de ne dire que le dire, avant de faire signe, avant de se faire signe (AE V n. 7 182-183/143)

The Other and the subject will always already be part of an objective language which operates for the benefit of the Third, such that there is meaning in the saying of the said and in reducing the Other to our consciousness of them. However, we must break through saying the said to the original saying itself to unsay that which is said, to refuse the certainty consciousness would otherwise guarantee for the Other's sufficiency in their role. It is only from the activity of unsaying the said that we are then able to signify our responsible subjectivity; however, unsaying requires that something be said, that there be meaning, which is then overthrown in the unsaying as an act for-the-Other.

3.4.2 A Newly Revealed Prospective Duty, or *Ex Post Facto Praxis*

This “unsaying” for Levinas refers to a responsibility to more actively attend to the deconstructive character of the encounter with the Other. Levinas proposes that we take on the perpetual activity of deconstructing our kerygmatic declarations and what is said about the Other, so as to get ahead of the possibility that what is said and taken for certain might lead to suffering.

Responsibility for unsaying finds the subject now assigned to undertake a skeptical approach to its consciousness, its place in co-presencing, and its certainty of Others and their roles. Skepticism is the appropriate model because “Le retour périodique du scepticisme et de sa réfutation, signifient une temporalité où les instants se refusent au souvenir qui récupère et re-présente” (AE 213/167). Skepticism is the discourse of saying the uncertainty of the said. It is not wrong to find certainty in recuperation, because it is the only way we can go about our responsibility for multiple Others; however, skepticism introduces a saying which is called upon to consistently challenge the veracity of our claims of what *is*, to be more uncertain about what our constructive approaching tells us.

To be uncertain involves two elements: it is first “un refus de synchroniser l’affirmation implicite contenue dans le dire et la *négation* que cette affirmation énonce dans le Dit” (AE 213/167). In the act of saying the said, our saying signifies or affirms our responsibility for multiple Others; however, in stating the said (even in formulating that responsibility in the said), we negate the responsible saying for the sake of the content said. In other words, anything said on the side of being – even the attempt to describe the hither side of being – remains within the time of essence, condemned to rest in the certainty of its formulation, because “L’essence n’est-elle pas l’impossibilité même de rien d’autre?” (AE 230/182). Saying the said is a matter of responding to the needs of Others, but is then covered over in its success in meeting those needs. Skepticism, therefore, is the refusal to remain within the recurrence of self-consciousness: this refusal is practiced through unsaying the said, which is to negate the conscious meaning I have of the Other, and attend to the singularity which had motivated the said (we shall arrive at the mechanics of unsaying below). However, the second element of uncertainty is, as with recurrence to self-consciousness, uncertainty’s refutation: “Contradiction [est] visible à la réflexion qui la réfute” (AE 213/167). Saying of the said will always recover its bearings and truth in the said, and thereby

subordinate the saying to the said. That skepticism is typically defeated might appear to invalidate its role, but for Levinas “le scepticisme fait précisément une différence et met un intervalle entre le Dire et le Dit. Le scepticisme est le *réfutable*, mais aussi le revenant” (AE 213/168). It is in the setting up of a gap between what is said and its saying, in acknowledging the separation between the contents of what is said and the fact that I say it for-the-Other, that skepticism can maintain the subject’s connection with their ethical subjectivity. This gap, first imposed upon me in the wake of the Other’s suffering, becomes an assignation to keep contact with that gap, to not allow for the forgetfulness or complacency to allow Others to come to harm. It is taking up the second moment of reading, where *I* determinately destabilize my first impressions of the Other.

We are called to unsay the said, which is to both remember that we are for-the-Other, and thus our conscious activity must be for-the-Other, *and* we must remember that the Other is singular and their demands are that we are responsible for their singularity. However, we are called to weigh and measure due to the demands of all singular Others upon me. Thus, we must approach Others within our exposure to their singularity yet without denying their plurality. For Levinas, this process involves finding in language the capacity to unsay itself: after all, I approach the Other through language, and so witnessing their singular needs is “le sens du langage avant que le langage ne s’éparpille en mots, en thèmes s’égalant aux mots et dissimulant, dans le Dit” (AE 192/151). Because saying the said is a matter of responsibility, “Je peux certes, énoncer le *sens témoigné* comme Dit. Mais mot extra-ordinaire, le seul qui n’éteigne ni n’absorbe son Dit, mais qui ne peut rester simple mot” (AE 192-193/151). This extraordinary word, for Levinas, was originally formulated by Descartes: it is the word God, one which – we should stress from the outset – is based in its philosophical sense, and most assuredly not in its religious sense. As a name, ‘God’ signifies as the need to be known yet the inability of the word to totalize its referent, because

“la gloire de l’Infini s’enfermant dans un mot s’y faisant être, mais déjà défaisant sa demeure et se dédisant sans s’évanouir dans le néant, investissant l’être dans la copule même par laquelle il recevait...des attributs” (AE 193/151). As a name, we can refer to the Other and the need for them to have a presence in a shared space for the sake of Others. However, in the name God, we are uniquely called to not be certain of the referent through that name, “Témoigner de Dieu, ce n’est précisément pas énoncer ce mot extra-ordinaire...le «me voici» me signifie au nom de Dieu au service des hommes qui me regardent, sans avoir rien à quoi m’identifier, sinon au son de ma voix ou à la figure de mon geste – au dire même” (AE 190/149). To say that the Other is God is to say that I am conscious because of my responsibility for them in their singularity; it is, however, to concomitantly admit that I am obliged to all Others, and thus there is a need to have a consciousness of them which permits me to weigh them and allows them to be counted.

The unique contribution of this pronoun is that it appeals not for certainty but rather for uncertainty in the predication, it calls for us to not take our consciousness for granted as a matter of self-concern, and further that we must not rest complacent in thinking that roles suffice for the Other. In saying that the Other is God, we say that the Other is beyond what is said of them, and therefore that what is said is ultimately accountable to our fundamental responsibility for them as ageing, for them as vulnerable. It is to recognize that what we say about them in the said must respect the responsibility we have for them, and this respect is undertaken in constantly deconstructing what is the case, *even if we re-construct it* once more in having found that what is continues to be good. Levinas sums up the assignation this way, “Négation du présent et de la représentation qui trouve dans la «positivité» de la proximité, de la responsabilité et de la substitution une différence par rapport aux propositions de la théologie négative. Refus de présence qui se convertit en ma présence de présent, c’est-à-dire d’otage livré en don à l’autre” (AE

193/151). Negating is therefore not about rejecting identities as an approach to the Other; rather, negating is about holding those identities accountable for our corporeal needfulness and the demands of justice. We negate to test the foundations, to do away with that which does not serve the Other, and to be forever looking ahead to how to best serve the Other. To draw an allusion to Nietzsche, we can say that Levinas fully supports philosophizing with a hammer, albeit a hammer testing the mettle of our systems in their perpetual responsibility for-the-Other.

3.5 Answering the Question of the Possibility of Positive Hyperbole

This chapter has been dedicated to presenting a full account of Levinas' description of the encounter with the Other as a description of the experience of moral responsibility. As we saw in chapter 1, the scholarship is divided as to whether Levinas is even trying to put forward a description at all – the consensus seems to be that he is *not* trying to describe our face-to-face interactions, but rather is a transcendental phenomenologist or merely a storyteller who uses rhetoric to over-emphasize a supererogatory ethic.

To counter this consensus against Levinas as a descriptive phenomenologist, we have addressed the sorts of duties which Levinas seems to presume are at work before we ever encounter a singular Other, and it is from having accounted for such proscriptive responsibility that we have been able to give a full accounting of Levinas' description. Let us therefore return to an idea proposed in Chapter 1, and ask whether it is possible to find that such an everyday event as my encounter with the barista while ordering coffee is indeed an obsession in infinite responsibility.

In being conscious, it is logically antecedent that we find ourselves in the already said. We are comported towards beings in consciousness as things to be conscious of in the time of essence. This further entails that we have a catalogue of 'said's which enable consciousness to identify, through kerygmatic speech, all of the sense images which I come across. However, we have seen

that the already said is already proximity. As corporeal, I am exposed to the destitution of the flesh, and through this I am exposed and thus bearing witness to the needfulness of all. I come to develop valuations of sensation, and these valuations determine which sensations are good and which are bad in respect of human vulnerability. I am thus always comported to identifying and presencing from within the matrix of what is good/bad for an individual Other. My corporeal vulnerability had assigned me at birth both as responsible for the needs of any singular Other, and plurality further assigns me to weigh the competing needs of Others where I too am counted as one. Always myself in need, hence in fraternity to the needs of all, I therefore approach sensation out of responsibility for our human need, and the so-called “mysterious schematism” of the already said is actually the product of ethical subjectivity, of the fact that we are always already proximate to the needs of all Others. Thus even before we set foot in the café, that we are conscious and that we are planning on ordering a coffee because it tastes good, are both possible because we are responsible for the Other. The needfulness of the Other, always ageing, always vulnerable, has assigned me from birth to approach them. Yet, both the type of need and obligation to weigh all needs has required me to be consciously comported, weighing and thus responding to their needs. I am therefore already engaged in the first moment of reading, in identifying what I perceive, such that the Other will be perceived and identified in their need. From this identification will follow clarity on what my responsibility is, in light of their need.

In entering the café we enter into immediate contact with the Other before me. I walk in, I know what I want. I see someone taking orders, give them a smile, exchange pleasantries, make my order, pay, and leave with my coffee. As far as this relation appears to my recollection or in the moment, I interacted with another person in respect of their role for my own ends: my coffee. Beyond pleasantries, if they took place at all, the Other was of no particular concern to me, I didn't

feel any responsibility for their needs and/or well-being (I didn't buy them coffee!), and the ideas of obsession, substitution and infinite responsibility are not at all recognizable in my experience.

Yet, for Levinas, such a description of what might be the case from our conscious engagement with it belies and betrays the true ethical subjectivity always operative and always at stake. Levinas has argued that “*Tout se montre et se dit dans l'être pour la justice et reçoit les structures du thématisé et du dit*” (AE 207/163). Hence, the structures we experience in consciousness are truly born as proximity though they take the form of being. But appearing in structures of being is part of my ethical response to the plurality of needs and plurality of Others, and so the divide is one sanctioned, required, and praised by our responsibility.

With that in mind, we turn back to the description, first in the matter of immediacy. In encountering the barista – as with those both before and after me in line – I am conscious of the Other. This consciousness, though, is a weighing of their need, reading to identify their need, their role, and my duty. But this reading is destabilized in singularity, and then calls for identification nonetheless. I am thus conscious of the Other first as an Other, then as an identity persisting through time despite ageing, then as an Other who is vulnerable. My initial kerygmatic move is to say this sense image as Other due to my originary assignation and approach to all Others as individuals. Consciousness of the Other therefore signifies my responsibility for the one whose destitution is visible in the trace. That I am conscious is the fact that I am measuring their needs, measuring whether they are okay in the immediate case; what makes our quotidian experiences quotidian is in fact the case that they are alright! My obligation to all Others and the singular Other's responsibility to all requires that I then take the measurement for certain in order that my consciousness of their state can meet their assignation. That I use consciousness in such a way, and that I can't help but weigh the Other in their vulnerability demonstrates that I am a hostage to

the Other and I am obsessed by their needs. Yet, due to my obsession by all needs, the objects of my obsessions “se jugent dans la neutralité de l’essence” (AE 207/162). Plurality as well as the intensity of needs when considered together therefore neutralize the extreme infinity of my assignation into the finitude of an Other as a measurement, an object of consciousness.

To take a step back from the immediate ethical proximity, we further note that proximity is not just immediacy. Proximity is further the structures and systems themselves which occasioned the possibility of the encounter, structures which themselves signify my proximity to all Others. Both of us found ourselves in particular roles and in a relationship thereby – I, the student, she, the barista. While to the conscious standpoint it may seem that these are exclusively roles played by free egos in the suspended peace covering over the war of all against all (AE I.2), Levinas instead finds that these roles are measurements made from justice, where “La substitution s’y montre coexistence et corrélation, la proximité, monde historique” (AE 207/162). That we engage as customer/barista is a measurement I make whereby I can be assured that the Other is accounted for, that she has the possibility of living a life on her own, outside and beyond our immediacy. We get on well enough to have this relationship, participating not only as coffee shop employee/patron but further fitting into a larger cultural meaning, and under the scales of justice in a state of equals. Through my participation in such cultural/political horizons – where participation means continually approaching Others by presencing their themes – we are thus proximate to all Others.

Therefore, we can say that Levinas’ positive hyperbole is in fact possible as an attempt to describe what the experience of encountering the Other entails. To encounter an Other is to encounter them in proximity, where I am responsible for them but where that responsibility in its extreme claims is dispersed across the vast numbers of needful Others and the quality of their needs. They are always in need, and so I am called to respond to those needs, both in immediacy

and beyond. My subjectivity is therefore best described as the-one-for-the-Other. I recur, but in self-consciousness. The horizon persists, and is not contradicted in the well-ordered state.

However, whether the terms of Levinas' description graft fully onto our daily experience as an interpretation is one thing; we are yet left with the clear gap separating the extremism Levinas ascribes to our encounters and how they are felt in lived experience. In our next chapter, we shall therefore address the plausibility of Levinas' account in using such extreme terms if they apply to our normally non-extreme encounters.

3.6 Answering the Question of the Possibility of Negative Hyperbole

The question of Levinas' negative hyperbole – of his hyperbolic negation of consciousness with respect to the Other and the self – rests on whether or not humanity can be accounted for on the hither side of being. Therefore, the negating of consciousness in our relation with the Other must first be able to account for how we are able to be in community with one another. Second, we must ask if recursion, as Levinas describes, is truly possible, to the extent that we could be uprooted from our condition as historically, culturally, and even engendered enrootedness.

In turning now to the question of being uprooted, we had so far only explored being uprooted from consciousness qua consciousness. In order to fully answer the question of whether we can be uprooted, however, we must return to the role of horizons. It is worth bearing in mind, however, just how scant AE is on the details of cultural enrootedness, such that what follows is what *ought to have* been better addressed in the text.

Ricoeur and Marion had asked how we could relate to the Other, if we are divested of all our resources with which we can hear and thereby respond to the Other. To answer this question we argue that our corporeal fraternity instantiates the relation of community and responsivity with the Other. It is from being born that we are installed into the community of corporeal needfulness,

and it is out of our own need that we come to realize what needs we all share, and how to answer for those needs. Therefore, that all of us might eat, drink, breathe, and feel pain is for Levinas the true site of our enrootedness. We are enrooted because, at the surface of our skin, we will not only eventually die but because the process of getting to death is dying, is time as the never returning lapse. Before we were cultural, we were biological²⁵ and this corporeal fraternity is enough to bond us together. This realization underpins the plot of any “in a glass bottle” story (where people are trapped isolated together) where identity breaks down in the face of the corporeal fraternity between the two. That we both suffer, that we both feel enjoyment, is what is able to unite even the fiercest of enemies, once deported from contextual circumstances. This is not to say that context isn’t a truly crucial facet – indeed, it supports my responsibility for all – but that context can be broken down due to our fraternity, and we see this especially in times of tragedy. Our corporeal humanity means that regardless of your skin, culture, or gender, I am non-indifferent to your hunger because I get hungry too, and know that food would help. As higher level orders allow for our overall care for these basic needs, we come to identify and realize those needs thereby. However, all the hierarchy of needs sit atop our base, corporeal exposure and need.

Rudi Visker had argued that our condition as human is being enrooted within horizons of meaning, where our roots can go so deep as to form the centre of our subjectivity. These roots then filter our meaning for whatever we encounter, including Others. This is not to suggest that our roots thereby give autonomy and control to the enrooted subject; on the contrary, roots displace the subject from himself/herself, othering the subject from self-control, and thus are we are passive to our enrootedness. What we have seen, however, is that for Levinas the encounter with the Other does uproot us because any roots are grown from our originary responsibility for-the-Other,

²⁵ It is important to note, however, that “biological” is a dirty word in Levinasian thought, because it presupposes a recognition of biology (AE 109/87).

assigned in corporeality before any culture. Consciousness writ large involves my participation in cultural and political systems whereby we co-presence, measure, and thereby account for the needs of all Others. Insofar as I myself am destitute in my corporeality and born into a horizon whereby my own needs are accounted for and responded to within the facticity of that horizon, in my own development I come to my own understanding of what is good for Others under the same horizon. Thus do I come to valuations about what is good for people, and about which people are good, rooted in infinite responsibility yet measured by my particular historical situation. For Levinas, every cultural system defines itself on measures of what is the Good, *but* based on our corporeal fraternity, and it is through this prism that we meet our responsibilities for Others.

In answering the question of whether we can be uprooted, we argue that yes, the Other in their suffering can cause us to be truly uprooted. This is because our original enrootedness is to be found in our corporeal fraternity, whereby we are first and foremost vulnerable to the flowing of time. It is human vulnerability and need which occasion horizons of meaning – shared catalogues of already saids – to be established, shared, and promoted, for the benefit of all. Thus, insofar as roots were first our means of being cared for by Others, then the means by which we cared for Others, they can be uprooted when those very roots are accused as insufficient to the assignation they were a response to, and we recur to the level of responsibility where we are assigned to ask anew whether what *is* is good.

We should note that in a sense, we can never be entirely free of our roots, given that we are always in the midst of a plurality of needs. We must therefore refine our definition of recurrence, and whether we can every truly be on the hither side of being. On the one hand, we are always in proximity to all, having been born from and into a plurality of needful Others. All Others are singular and their needs are singular unto themselves, but in normal circumstances we find that

weighing meets my responsibility, and that is why I engage Others as particular and thereby cover over their singularity and how extreme their singular needs are. However, as we noted, while we may never be free of the need to weigh all Others, we can weigh this singular Other in suffering to be of such paramount importance that the Others are weighed as if they are virtually unimportant in comparison. In the same way, we always already have our already saids of our cultural horizons, which are supposed to presence enjoyment or the absence of pain across time. Thus, in suffering, the Other causes us to recognize in us our roots in virtue of the fact that those roots lead to pain. This does not entirely disavow us of our roots, but the moral imperative of our assignation qua one-for-the-Other pulls out the validity those roots had had for us, because while they born from one-for-the-Other, they did not result in responsible outcomes. The assignation is then made to assess our roots, to either “brûle[r] les bosquets sacrés où se répercutent les échos du passé” (AE 22/18), or find what is worth salvaging and improving. Thus, we are never truly free of being; however what is meant by finding ourselves on the hither side entails that being is realized not as a showing but as showing for-the-Other, and that we are put back in touch with the rawness and exposure that is our fundamental obligation to the Other. In the extreme impact of extreme suffering, I thus find myself in ethical recurrence which is an alarmingly disarming experience. Our habit of presencing good sense and wellbeing for the Other means that it is rare and thus a shock to be put back in touch with the assignation. It is a call to better our systems, given their deficiencies, or to upend them in proportion to the needs of the Others.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have taken up the description which Levinas formulates in AE, and have tried to articulate it as a possible description. To this end, we have taken steps to present Levinas’ conception of justified consciousness given the descriptions available – yet not rendered explicit

– within his text. To that end, we have found that our overall responsibility for Others is to ensure the presence of enjoyment, the absence of pain, or the cessation of pain, over time: however, the actual nuances of what it means to *meet* this responsibility involve the construction of a conscious apparatus which provides for a horizon whereby Others can be revealed in their needs, and assume roles whereby they attend to their needs and those of their Others. This construction is put into effect through the activity of conscious subjects, co-presencing one another in identities and roles which permit for the overall accounting of our needs. Thus, it is the prospective duty for any subject to be approaching Others by identifying them and their role in our shared horizon of meanings: I am therefore required, in immediacy, to faithfully identify and read what is the case in respect of their needs, and how those needs are accounted for.

The key to understanding Levinas as actually putting-forward a good faith description of encountering the Other in immediacy relies upon this notion of justified consciousness, wherein our duty to all Others entails the construction of a horizon and the reading of the needs of Others in immediacy. It is only from this standpoint of just consciousness that we can truly describe the encounter of the Other, and see that it is a deconstructive phenomenon. In immediacy, we are already approaching the Other as one amongst many, a comparable Other who I must take for certain in presence through faithfully identifying the state of their need. Yet, in encountering the Other in immediacy, we encounter their singular need, and in that singularity they destabilize my attempts to grasp and presence them in consciousness. Although their need in the context of the needs of all Others had been the very reason for the first reading, in immediacy they accuse me for having ignored that singularity, and obsess me with their needfulness. Thus, in encountering the Other in immediacy, they deconstruct my conscious standpoint. That said, the deconstructive phenomenon is not usually experienced in its hyperbolic weight, because I was conscious at all so

as to respond to their needs. In the well-ordered state, I encounter singular Others who often have had their needs measured and met, and so while they recall me to their singular needs I find that those needs *have been met* in the measure that they have assigned me. I am therefore praiseworthy for perpetuating this horizon, and thus the Other's well-being actually permits and calls for the continuation (re-construction) of my first reading.

The corollary is that the deconstructive experience can be, and is, felt in its hyperbolic content when I encounter an Other who is suffering, where the possibility of leading a life at all is uncertain. In moments of tragedy, the Other's suffering contradicts the horizon I had approached them under, because the point of that horizon was to prevent their suffering and enable their happiness. When they suffer, the constructive reading has failed, and is therefore indicted by the Other's pain; that horizon is therefore deconstructed, and I find myself in recurrence back to my original ethical subjectivity as for-the-Other. Out of this traumatic deconstruction, however, I am able to then take up my responsibility under the ethical horizon of auto-deconstruction.

Therefore, we can see that understanding Levinas' description as deconstructive explains *both* why our experiences are described in hyperbolic terms and why we do not regularly experience them as such. That said, however, we will need to now address the actual benefit of endorsing Levinas' extreme formulations, given the stated intention that they so rarely apply to our normal experiences.

4 The Plausibility of Levinas' Descriptions

4.0 Introduction

In our last chapter, we formulated an account of how to understand Levinas' claims as a good faith attempt to describe our actual encounters with Others in immediacy. However, in formulating a possible account, we have nevertheless been left with a description which consists in hyperbolic and excessive terminology. In order to truly determine whether Levinas' description is worth endorsing, we therefore need to articulate a defence of his choice to put forward hyperbolic terminology as proper for a description of non-hyperbolic experiences.

4.1 Answering the Question of the Plausibility of Positive Hyperbole

In our first chapter, we formulated the charge of Levinas' positive hyperbole as such: even if we *can* see Levinas' description as applicable to every encounter with the Other – which entails hostage-taking, persecution, infinite responsibility, obsession, subjectivity conceived as for-the-Other – we are left asking why we should want to endorse such a hyperbolic account. For all the overtures Levinas makes (and which we have tried to account for in the previous chapter) to say that his description fits everyday life, his description is still supremely extreme, and its terms are inimical to our daily experience. We are therefore left asking Rorty's question of whether Levinas can actually provide us with anything meaningful beyond pointless hype.

We turn first to the concern with using hyperbolic language at all: if all the extreme descriptions presented are intended to apply to our everyday non-extreme experiences (and only rarely apply to extreme experiences), what benefit do we have from such extreme language for non-extreme referents? If everything is extreme, then truly nothing is extreme; if everything is given such an extremist element to it, then there is no added benefit to the choice to use extreme language. However, this very claim – if all is extreme, then nothing is – is actually what structures

Levinas' main argument. His argument is that all needs assign us in their infinity understood privatively, to mean that we are always and unceasingly in need, and so while we can respond to those needs we cannot end the state of needfulness. That said, because everyone's needs are so extreme and given my own finitude in being able to respond, "ma responsabilité pour tous peut et doit se manifester aussi en se limitant" (AE 165/128). Because everything is so extreme, we are able to take the measure of these extremes, and thereby quiet the intensity each singular Other bears. The extreme language does serve its purpose when suddenly the extreme intensity of one claim outweighs all other claims: then, not everything is extreme in the same way, and consequently we then feel the extreme weight of proximity, pushing us into recurrence. In the suffering Other, their face pleads for safety and care from me, accuses me for having presenced a horizon to protect them and yet having failed to protect them. I am recurred to my ethical subjectivity because the weight of their needs is suddenly so extreme, and this breaks out of the self-recursive loop of consciousness doing its job.

Therefore, the choice of extreme language to express a real-yet-unrealized extremism is part of Levinas' argument. To illustrate the validity of such a description, Levinas proceeds by way of analogy to look at how the experience of breathing is a comparable experience to that of our ethical responsibility,

Que le vide de l'espace soit rempli d'air invisible – caché à la perception si ce n'est dans la caresse du vent ou la menace de la tempête – non-perçu, mais me pénétrant jusqu'aux replis de mon intériorité – que cette invisibilité ou ce vide soient respirables ou horribles – que cette invisibilité, non-indifférente, m'obsède, avant toute thématization, que la simple ambiance s'impose comme atmosphère à laquelle le sujet se rend et s'expose jusqu'au poumon, sans intentions et sans visées – que le sujet puisse être poumon au fond de sa substance – signifie une subjectivité qui souffre et s'offre avant de prendre pied dans l'être – passivité, toute entière un supporter (AE 227/180).

In our corporeality we breathe, and we normally persist in breathing. Respiration is organically a part of our corporeal condition, yet as a process it is something we are rarely aware of until it brushes up against us (when we feel the wind on our face where before was simply the apparent

absence of empty space), *or* when we are confronted in the extreme moment of its loss. Every breath out is a moment where the failure to breathe in once more could spell our ultimate end; and yet, given the oft-repeated success of the breath, that time does not come, and we are not confronted with the pain of its loss. Proximity's intensity should therefore be understood in the same way as our breathing: it forms the very precondition of our daily existence, and because it is so successful in operating by determining how I operate, we are able to carry on in life without attending to it as a matter of my concern. Hence, as a description, Levinas in AE provides an understanding along these lines, that our lives operate under the ethical horizon which supports phenomenality and our cultural or political or social horizons, and that in our success our responsibility for the Other can therefore remain hidden from us until it confronts us in tragedy.

Levinas further promised us praxis and knowledge as a result of his description. In the revelation of ethical subjectivity, we are given access to a revealed knowledge of sorts: when a subject awakens to the true operation of ethics as first philosophy, in their trauma they are then able to comport themselves towards Others, their roles, and their own roles, in light of this ethical subjectivity. In the same way that – for at least a while after – the one who nearly drowns savours and treasures the awesome power of each and every single breath, so too does tragedy awaken the subject to the ethical character of normal existence and its omnipresent yet silent operations. It is due to suffering that we find our ethical subjectivity, and we then realize that the Other assigns us to their infinite singular needs. Despite how terrible it was for an Other to suffer, at least as a result of that suffering we can bear witness to the subjectivity we had forgotten. Suffering therefore plays a role in our moral development, insofar as it is clear that we too often and too easily subsist in the recurrence to self-consciousness which covers over our responsibilities for one another. The shock of the Other's suffering affirms that our responsibility is a process of moral growth in

passivity to the needs of the Other who assigns me. It is due to suffering that we can therefore see that the roles we presence for ourselves and for Others are to be understood not within the framework of the war of all against all, but rather devolve from our responsibility for one another. What we can therefore note is that suffering is in fact part of our moral development, for it awakens or reveals to us what had already been the case, and in that awakening we are able to take up a position in respect of that revelation.

It would, however, be irresponsible for us to say that our moral development requires merely that we each wait for tragedy to befall us in order to have this stage of development. Rather, it is incumbent upon those who have had to learn the tragic lesson to teach and instruct Others about how our horizons and constructions have failed the Other. This entails bearing witness to the suffering which has taken place, and seeking to account for what has happened by dedicating to its prevention and its being watched for in the future. It is this instruction which is, I believe, Levinas' motivation for writing. In part, this is because whereas tragedy reveals the failure of part of our horizon, we are missing an explicit philosophical articulation of this element of our existence, and it must be formulated so that it can be understood without suffering. This will involve understanding subjectivity in terms of responsibility for-the-Other; in practical terms, this involves the negation of skepticism (which will be explored in the next section). However, this negation is built off of the premise that "*Ici l'humain s'accuse par la transcendance – ou l'hyperbole ...hyperbole où elle éclate et tombe vers le haut, en l'humain*" (AE 231/184). In the hyperbole of the singularly extreme experience, we fall into our responsibility and our duty, having lived in ignorance of it while accomplishing the Good all along; the goal thereafter is to ensure that it cannot happen again, and I do this not only for this Other before me but for all Others yet to

come. Given that I am responsible for the Other's responsibilities for Others, it is therefore my responsibility to make Others aware of ethical subjectivity and responsibility.

Although he does not make the distinction we have made between what is always the case and the extreme moment of tragedy, throughout the text Levinas nevertheless signals that he is keenly aware that to one who has not gone through this experience – who has not lived it herself – the text and its extreme claims will read like the mumblings of Cassandra. Admittedly, his presentation reads like a prophecy that falls on deaf ears: yet, to those in the know – those who have suffered, and who, as with the *Tractatus* will have already thought the thoughts which are expressed by it – our responsibility must be articulated all the same. Indeed, as part of being a descriptive phenomenologist, Levinas freely admits the shock that his descriptions engender. For the self-sufficient Ego who then encounters the Other in suffering, it is impossible to not take up Hamlet's point, and ask "Pourquoi Autrui me concerne? Que m'est Hécube?" (AE 150/117). Levinas goes further to align this encounter with Job, because "[Job] aurait su expliquer ses malheurs s'ils pouvaient découler de ses fautes! Mais il n'avait jamais voulu le mal! Ses faux amis pensent comme lui: on ne peut dans un monde sensé, avoir à répondre alors qu'on n'a rien commis" (AE 156-157/122). To the conscious ego who self-presences herself as autonomous, as free to enter into contracts with one another for self-benefit, the shock of the Other in tragedy strikes us in an illogical way. It is without reason or calculation that I could be blamed for tragedies that befall the Other – and yet, Levinas' point is that I experience responsibility all the same, and that it is only in the traumatic moment that I come to the realization that I was for-the-Other.

Of course, we can pause to ask – if I am ethical already, why do we need to take up this responsibility? The answer lies in the forgetting which our ethical normalcy engenders: an attendant possibility for tragedy in our horizontal co-presencing of Others. In weighing and

measuring Others – comparing incomparables – we risk reducing the Other to the measurement we have of them, and *only* treating them as such. The repeated success in meeting our responsibilities by this presencing turns the risk into a reality. Cultural systems require that we know and identify Others so as to account for the needs of all Others; however, the necessity of weighing the needs of Others against each, and of engaging Others as their role in a horizon, provide the mechanisms for denying this Other for the sake of the third, or even oneself. This measure can result in effacing human need by taking the measure for the Other, and thus failing to understand that our measure is the way of accounting for them too, not just at their expense. For example, that we deny the Other for the sake of the third is the principle behind the criminal justice system, which is to say that understanding some mechanism for weighing out the good life for one Other for the sake of Society is not bad per se. It is thus a perpetual feature of the fact that we are called to determine what a good life entails – informed by horizons of meaning which guide us and our own experiences – which means that we will try to accord Others a meaningful life on the terms we understand. In part, the desire to know (why reveal being?), which Nietzsche claimed was a selfish will to power, is for Levinas a will to power, but a power of being able to respond to our responsibility for Others, to determine how to have a life which presences pleasure, and either absences or reverses pain, even if the fundamental for-the-Other of ethical subjectivity is not recognized as the motivating factor.¹ Finding our own path thus inspires us also to evangelize, to promote the Good for Others, and in this promotion we can come into conflict with one another. If I know the good life, and I find it challenged by Others or groups of Others, then I may find myself in a conflict with those who would seek to destroy my sense of the good life.

¹ “although it may be true to say that the human being is conditioned in the manner argued by psychoanalysis, sociology and political theory, *we do not need this knowledge to enter into relation with the other*” (Critchley, “Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity?”, 69).

AE therefore can (and, I believe, should) be read as Levinas' own attempt to tell of a revelation which would otherwise only be available to us as a result of an Other's suffering. The inscription at the front of the book, "A la mémoire des êtres les plus proches parmi les six millions" signals as much, bearing witness to "des millions d'humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l'autre homme" (AE v/v). As Michael Morgan notes, "it is important to know that political institutions and practices are founded on responsibility rather than rights",² because the primacy of ethics thereby entails that we are obligated to critique politics due to its foundation in ethics. Were we to start from the position of the rights of the individual subject – the one shocked by the trauma of the Other – Levinas claims that we start from a failure to see our responsibility for the Other, and we thus risk causing their suffering in our ignorance. It is to recognize that what motivates us is responsibility, that we are called to account for our systems in terms of whether they serve the Other: this recognition as an inspiration to change how we understand one another is the *praxis* Levinas claims to find in his description. It is to look at one another not as self-interested agents who are only sociable and peaceful in the prolonged peace of commerce which is really just war by Other means (AE I.2). How we presence the subject and the Other matters in terms of how we will be able to meet with the responsibility we already have, and how we can avoid the tragedies which befall us in our complacency. We therefore see that Levinas argues that we must knowingly approach Other as one with needs, and that I approach in the context of the opportunity for me to respond to those needs; Levinas thus writes that we need to see in one another a certain weakness, "Il faut cette faiblesse. Il fallait ce relâchement sans lacheté de la virilité pour le peu de cruauté que nos mains repudièrent" (AE 233/185). This is not to treat the Other in a paternalistic fashion, to pretend that they are in need and I know better; it is, rather,

² Morgan, *Levinas' Ethical Politics*, 97.

to treat them with kindness and politeness, to respect that we have a relation rooted in care rather than self-interest. To be aware of our subjectivity as for-the-Other, our responsibility as anarchic and infinite, and the Other as always assigning me to their needs, is what truly allows for solidarity which is not merely self-interested egos in competition with one another (AE 150/117).

Proximity as described in its full extremity is worth it, I argue, because in being awakened to our responsibility we are given a more noble duty than that of self-interested individuals who happen to find themselves in situations where we are called to make decisions which may be termed ‘moral’. Levinas says of proximity, “N’est-elle pas, dans son inquiétude et son dévidement et sa diachronie, *meilleure* que tout repos, que toute plénitude de l’instant arrêté?” (AE 118/92). Much as we might find ourselves sheltered from loss in the fullness of temporalizing the same in consciousness, knowing responsibility for-the-Other is my invitation to not only let-be, but to do good. Despite all the gloominess of our mortal fate, our subjection to corporeal vulnerability in an ageing in only one direction, Levinas writes that his argument is one of optimism and hope despite that fate, because “Tout est successif (même la vérité), mais la diachronie n’est pas seulement la tristesse de l’écoulement des choses [c’est aussi le] mot *meilleur* – et le Bien qu’il énonce” (AE 118/92-93). Taken with its preceding sentences, Levinas’ use of *meilleur* here affirms that his description even in its extremity is preferable to any offered by consciousness, because we can thereby do good through our responsibility for what is. Taken alone, the word *meilleur* can be seen as summative of Levinas’ entire critique of the Late Heideggerian philosophy on *Anwesen* and *Gelassenheit*: to be human is not to approach time as the time it takes to presence what is, but rather the possibility that “what is?” concerns the Other, and hence can be better than what it is, even if I must sacrifice myself for this better state. The hyperbolic description thus describes that

we do not seek presence for its own sake or our own sake, but that all our efforts and the very self-conscious subjectivity we imagine for ourselves are for the sake of the Other.

Therefore, in regards to the case of whether we should want to endorse Levinas' description, we can make the following remarks. From the outset, we note that Levinas' description operates in two moments. It is first an account of the always already ethical self, one which operates without much activity on our part; this extreme structure is always already the case *but* necessarily hidden from our view due to (a) the need to attend to the needs of all, but also (b) because in a well-ordered state we actually accomplish our measured responsibilities to Others fairly well, and thus are not confronted with an extreme need very often. However, when the needs of an Other are extreme, we are affected by this hidden sub-structure coming to the fore: here, the evidence can be logically argued, but it is not until one has lived through tragedy that Levinas' words begin to ring true. The gap between our reflective self-consciousness and the unfelt infinity of ethical demand notwithstanding, Levinas maintains that if we can take pains to live in the recognition of the Other's frailty and our responsibility for all, then we can better ensure that our horizons are centered on responsibility to prevent tragedy from transpiring. From living in recognition of our ethical subjectivity in all its grandeur and excess, Levinas claims that we can only then find ourselves truly committed to the Good and to ensuring a better world. What we are thereafter called to do, however, is to undertake the skeptical discourse.

4.2 Answering the Question of the Plausibility of Negative Hyperbole

In our first chapter, we formulated the charge of Levinas' hyperbolic negation as such: even if we were to recur to our ethical subjectivity in proximity with the Other, which is on the hither side of consciousness and therefore calls us to negate consciousness of the self and Other, *would we want to?* Sonia Sikka makes the argument that the negation of identity presumes that the only

difference that matters is the difference between subject and Other, to the effect that all other differences are ignored. However, she argues, ignoring identity misses the fact that such identities shape both how an Other understands herself in her difference from the subject, and it also tempts us to naïvely believing that we are without roots which need to be thought and criticized in order to do right by Others. John Drabinski further argues that Levinas' argument ignores the possibility that the Other's body is not just a corporeality, but further that history and therefore historical appeals for justice can be written on the body. Drabinski argues that singularity misses that some Others' needs are *specific* to them within their historical and cultural contexts, and that the Other can therefore be exposed and vulnerable by those historical meanings in addition to those shared by our corporeal fraternity. Both of these challenges, however, rest on the presumption that Levinas' claim is that we must do without identity; what we have endeavoured to show so far is that Levinas' argument is not that we must negate identity and being. Rather, Levinas' case is more nuanced, insofar as it both recognizes the ethical importance of identity, but that identity must always be responsive to the needs of the Other. Consequently, we negate only insofar as we see whether identity is still in keeping with its fundamental mandate. If the identity is responsible, then we can reconstruct that identity again, but without ever truly taking that identity for certain; if it is not, however, then we are truly called to deconstruct that identity so as to replace it with one which better meets our responsibility for the Other. However, in order to fully address the criticisms of Levinas' hyperbole, we shall further argue that Levinas actually provides the solution required of us by the problems posed by Sikka and Drabinski.

We have seen that my entire conscious comportment to the Other is always already a manifestation of my responsibility for the competing needs of innumerable singular Others. It is through consciousness that I can weigh their needs and best respond in the full responsibility I

have for them, which includes responsibility for their responsibilities, and therefore to be conscious is to be in proximity with all Others. However, we further saw that this conscious comportment to Others often meets the measured demands of Others, and therefore measuring becomes my normative comportment to all Others; while I measure out of responsibility, in measuring I can forget that I am responsible, and thus I can miss the possibility of preventing the suffering which can be caused either by a deficient conscious system *or* a system which, while intending good, causes harm. We have seen so far that in suffering's wake, the subject comes to witness their original subjectivity as for-the-Other, and witnesses the singularity of the Other once more. This subject awoken to the Other is therefore called to actively fight the tendency towards complacency in measurement through enacting the skeptical discourse, which is to constantly unsay what is said about the Other. However, this unsaying – which for any singular Other is described as a complete and relentless (and therefore hyperbolic) negating of the Other's identities – is not a final resting spot: we are not called to simply forgo identity as if it were meaningless or harmful for the Other. Rather, to unsay is to constantly question whether identity serves the needs of the corporeal Other with whom I am in fraternity; oftentimes, such a questioning will bring us back to where we started, re-affirming an identity's place, which *is* good. However, that we are always testing by deconstructing our ideas about the identities of Others means that we can thereby be pro-active against the possibility of suffering caused by our failure to imagine better ways to serve the Other, or by our attempts to help which actually cause suffering. Thus, to construe Levinas as saying that we must always negate the Other's identity and stay with the negation is false.

With regards to the question of whether the only difference which matters is my non-indifference to the Other (as opposed to symmetrical differences in identity), we should first state that although Levinas does not investigate cultural difference, he understands that all different

cultures rest upon ways of doing right by the Other and the third. Since all cultures and symmetrical role-based meaning arise from within our commitment to each Other, our commitment to one another in our corporeal needs (ageing; vulnerable) must be the metric by which we judge systems of thought and co-presencing. As Michael Morgan notes, “What Levinas does is argue that ethical standards for the critique of everyday social and political practice are already present in human existence from the beginning”;³ having been born into a world of measurements whereby I was measured in my needfulness, where I could then in turn measure Others, entails that measurements (being; identity) are derivative from our corporeal fraternity. However, being born and developing requires that I grow and learn about differences in roles and identities for one another; while Levinas does not enumerate such differences, it is not hard to identify sets of identities which we encounter, beginning with corporeal differences (sex; race; physical characteristics), succeeded by higher level differences which are or are not based on those corporeal differences (gender; culture and its manifestation in physical traits). We *are* different from one another biologically and in how our cultural horizons provide specific co-presences of identities and the sorts of roles we have. However, these differences do not change our fundamental corporeal needfulness: we all age, and we are all vulnerable.

What these differences *do* entail is that these inborn or learned differences are presented to my consciousness as assignations to help the Other because they qualify what it means for us to be vulnerable and to age, and are *not* meant to distance some Others and hold other Others close. These differences are part of our vulnerability, singular yet classifiable, which is both an injustice to a singular Other yet justice for all Others. To use gender for a moment, to say that a woman is alike another woman in her woman-ness is to reduce her to shared traits (which negates her as an

³ Ibid, 67-68.

individual), which denies that she is more than just a woman. Thus, certainty in saying this Other *as* a woman reduces the singular Other to a fact about her, and can lead to limiting my interaction with the Other on the basis of her woman-ness instead of her singularity. However, to identify this Other *as* a woman also means that the Other has some needs based in that grouping – there are experiences and needs which women have which men do not have (to remain within sex-essentialism for a moment), and which thereby appeal differently than the corporeal needs of men. (We shall tackle horizontal meanings of gender and historical obligation below.) Levinas' imperative, therefore, to approach this Other (who I may identify *as* a woman) with the name God seeks both to recognize the fact that the Other is singular, but further recognize that identifying the Other *as* a woman is a way of approaching out of my responsibility for her and all Others like her. Approached as God, therefore, my approaching is to realize first and foremost that regardless of how I presence the Other, they are an Other, and my presence will only be the consequence of my responsibility for them. By approaching in the name of God, I am called to questioning how my understanding of the Other *as* a woman meets my responsibility for her needs as vulnerable and ageing; it is to question whether such an identity is responsible at all; it is to proceed with that role in certainty if the Other's needs are met by such an identity, and it is to cease my co-presencing of that identity if it does a dis-service to the Other.

To turn to the application of this auto-deconstruction, we should note that what Levinas means by unsaying is both that we must be attentive to how the Other's singularity *always already* unsays itself in immediacy, but also to question and unsay beyond the confines of immediacy. In encountering one another in immediacy, we are confronted with a singular Other immanently filtered through the particularities of identities and roles which apply to them, and with which they self-presence. The assignation, however, is to approach the Other as singular, which is to say that

I approach the Other in their identities not in terms of how I see them, but in terms of how they present themselves within those terms, and as opportunities for their needs to be counted for, and for me to be responsible. What this means in real terms is that I am called to approach the Other in their identities with an intention to ensure that they are doing well, that they are hopefully enjoying themselves in the moment, and that those identities permit their possibility of a good life. However, this overarching skepticism too must be measured by competing needs. In immediate terms, the burden is of course significantly low – it is hardly within the scope of my responsibility to go up to Others and question if they are happy if I am just trying to get a coffee and get back to studying. Yet, I am called to approach them in their singularity beneath identities, to treat them as an Other deserving of respect – hence, Levinas’ claim that the simple *après-vous* is substitution now makes sense, because “Il n’en faut pas, en tout cas, moins pour le peu d’humanité qui orne la terre, ne serait-il que de pure politesse et de pure polissage des mœurs” (AE 233/185). Politeness, manners, deference to the Other’s needs through simply letting them pass before me – these actions, seemingly small ornaments of our daily experience, are actually for Levinas the proof positive of our infinite responsibility for one another, and signify my responsibility for the singularity. Thus, in immediacy I am called to approach the Other in their identities as ways to ever improve their lives within the resources I have, measured by my needs for all, and to respond to them howsoever I can to make the world slightly brighter with my care for them.

However, immediacy is occasioned by and infused with the transcendence of our cultural-political-historical horizons. Thus, ordering a coffee is not just about immediate contact with a singular Other – it is also a confrontation with the system of meanings whereby there are coffee shops, baristas and patrons, gender norms, cultural signifiers, etc. In immediacy itself, we are not necessarily able to measurably respond to all the possible identities and roles with a skeptical

outlook. Thus, immediacy demands a comportment to the Other as singular without necessarily questioning the entire ideological apparatus between us; but overall, as witnesses to the impacts of ideology upon the self and the Other, we can in our own ways pursue the skeptical discourse in the degrees that we are able to do so. For Levinas, immediacy will always be the site of our passivity to the needs of Others, and so in immediacy we are given occasions to contemplate and ask after how immediacy respects Others. This entails sustained thought, argument, critique – it requires philosophy, because “la philosophie tout en cernant la vie de l’approche dont elle mesure devant le tiers les obligations avec justice et savoir – avec sagesse – ne déjoue pas cette vie” (AE 214/168-169). Levinas therefore argues that philosophy needs to be recurred to its fundamental possibilities as skepticism of what *is*, wherein philosophy is thinking the Good and undertaking an approach of questioning, but a questioning founded as being responsible for-the-Other in being aware of the extremes of our responsibility but also the limits of our finitude. It is to ask the broader questions – such as, though I presence the Other *as* a woman, to what degree should that be important in its circumstances: certainly, the contemporaneous discourse surrounding #metoo is doing a lot to shed light on the fact that for a vast majority of women, being approached *as* a woman is being approached *as* an identity for sexual submission and an object of harassment. The critical discourse which is springing forth from the suffering of so many is very much in keeping with the arguments we have seen in this chapter – suffering begets witness, and from witness we are called to skepticism. However, to prevent this suffering, the subject (or society) awoken to how its normative comportment has failed the Other must go forth in skepticism to not only prevent the same type of suffering from happening again, but hopefully to be more watchful in the future to challenge these discourses before their harms come to the fore.

To turn now to the scholarship: we can see that the argument Levinas makes is *not* that symmetrical differences are unimportant. Rather, to counter Sikka's critique, we have seen that actually those identities are seen as important, *but* that they need to be approached in examination of whether they serve the needs of the Other. Levinas writes that, "Le retour permanent du scepticisme, ne signifie pas tant l'éclatement possible des structures que le fait qu'elles ne sont pas l'ossature ultime du sens" (AE 217/171). Identity, therefore, is not to be negated, but it is to be deconstructed; even though we often reconstruct it once again, that skeptical journey has signified my consciousness *as* responsibility for the Other. Of course, Levinas does not really have an answer for how to prevent paternalism in questioning – e.g. when predominantly male legislatures legislate for women's health – though he does seem to put faith in a self-skeptical subject, one who speaks in sincere desire for the good of the Other, "réponse tenue *pour l'autre*, sans aucune «prise d'attitude», responsabilité comme «irritabilité cellulaire», impossibilité de se taire, scandale de la sincérité" (AE 182/143). As a comportment to singular needfulness, to learning about what the Other needs through their identities and what those identities mean *to them*, Levinas argues that we can therefore be properly exposed so as to do right by the Other. From skeptical discourse there is the "possibilité à la fois d'idéologie et de délire sacré: idéologie à circonvenir par la linguistique, la sociologie et la psychologie; délire à réduire par la philosophie, à ramener à la signification, à l'un-pour-l'autre, à une mission vers Autrui dans la gloire de l'Infini" (AE 194/152). While it may be the case that for many – and especially for Drabinski – Levinas the Author may seem to not address the possibilities of his own enrootedness in a tradition, he gives us more than enough rope to hang the Author for any of the quotes which either seem to be or are generally racist or misogynistic. This thesis has been based in ignoring the author for the argument in the text; the implications for Levinas the man are therefore beyond the scope of this text, but should equally

apply to his words as they do for all Others. Therefore, we can show that Levinas' hyperbolic negation is *not* a means of ignoring symmetrical differences, but rather is the very real concern for the negative possibilities of those identities. The text therefore obligates a reader of its arguments to self-critique oneself, to recognize that the author either of AE or this monograph (both white, male, etc.) or its readers also self-critique, and realize that we are all enrooted, but enrooted for-the-Other.

To return to Drabinski: in respect of the immediacy of the Other being infused by *specific* meanings, we can certainly acknowledge that, in the text, Levinas agrees that there are specific meanings which may appeal to us. All our visible markers are infused with meaning as a result of our cultural horizons; however, insofar as Drabinski thinks that these markers alone can signify higher-order responsibilities, we would argue that such markers can *only* present responsibilities for a skeptical subject, one who approaches those identities with an outlook to asking about whether their identities are for-the-Other. Because responsibility for the Other's ageing and vulnerability lie at the heart of my own consciousness of them and reduction of them to identities, I am certainly called to know and to question how my representations of them have met or failed my responsibility. But I cannot do this entirely in immediacy – to think, as Drabinski seems to do, that every black person should be approached in the same degree as one affected by slavery, is to approach *all* specific Others in the specificity, and to thereby reduce the Other to my presuppositions of what their need is. To be certain about specific meanings for an Other, even if well-intentioned, ignores singularity, and can thereby bring about paternalism – to recall the example of male legislators, what they do they do in thinking that they do right for the female Other. What is rather needed in order to be exposed to historical wrongs is to participate in the skeptical discourse, to ask after what my own assumptions are, and to do so by approaching the

Other as singular, and asking how their identity has impacted their singularity. Only from the recognition that the Other informs me about their suffering can I thereby elide reducing them to a victim status which may or may not be felt by them, and thus we see that the solution Drabsinki argues for is actually attainable through Levinas' solution.

We have therefore seen that skepticism and approaching the Other in the name of God form Levinas' imperative to negate consciousness of the Other. We are called to approach the Other through consciousness of their singularity, comported to them by knowing that their identities are to serve their needs and not my own self-understanding of what I think they need. This is therefore not to deny the importance of identity – we had, of course, seen that I am responsible to Others through identity, and I can ensure that they are accounted for in their needs beyond my immediacy to them. But we saw that certainty about the sufficiency of the identities we hold can lead to suffering, which is why we must be unsaying our presumptions in light of what the singular Other demands. Therefore, to negate is a matter of ethical responsibility, and Levinas' negative hyperbole is therefore plausible as an ethical comportment.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter we have put forward a defence of the use of hyperbole in describing our encounters with the Other.

In regards to positive hyperbole, the excessive language – infinite responsibility, the face, obsession, hostage taking – are terms which reflect the extreme tension which is always already operative in our interpersonal encounters, *and yet* which only receive a full airing when we encounter the suffering of the Other. This is a descriptive claim which is hard to prove logically, because it is only really felt tragically. That said, the claim is nevertheless that by appreciating and being fully aware of the fact that the Other's needs are always calling to me, I can thereby comport

myself in this fact and co-presence the Other as vulnerable, and I as responsible. How we comport ourselves to one another matters for the success of our ethical horizons, and our entire political infrastructure – it is by endorsing a claim which locates subjectivity in responsibility for Others which is unceasing that we are then able to take up our obligations, whereas otherwise they would be quickly covered over in jargon of free and independent subjects, and thus ethics would stay hidden.

In respect of the hyperbole of negation, we have argued that Levinas' description operates within respect for identity and being as means of acting responsibly for the sake of all Others. However, in order that we do not fall into ignorance of our responsibility, and take Others at their measure instead of attending to their needs, we need to be constantly vigilant to treat the Other as one who shares in the needs of corporeal fraternity, and therefore that identity is to always be our means of meeting those needs. Identity so often gives us cause for division and opposition between one another because the Other taken at the level of identity offers up a persistence in essence, and it is much easier to dismiss an essential threat than it is to recognize human vulnerability. Skepticism offers up a better path to true political dialogue because it does not start from the opposition of my rights and preferences over yours, but rather it enables the dismantling of such oppositions by catching sight of the purpose of those rights and identities: being responsible for-the-Other.

Conclusion

“De la *signification* procèdent justice et conscience: les termes de l’un-pour-l’autre *apparaissent* dans le thème, dans le Dit, se comparent et se jugent dans la neutralité de l’essence. L’être en tant qu’être, est fonction de justice. La substitution s’y montre coexistence et corrélation, la proximité, monde historique c’est-à-dire simultanée dans un livre, la diachronie, à travers la diastase ou le déphasage de l’instant et la récupération de l’écart par la rétention, se *montre* temps continu et indéfini dans la mémoire et dans l’histoire, c’est-à-dire temps ramassable en présent. La subjectivité dès lors se *montre* comme Moi, capable de présent, capable de commencement, acte d’intelligence et de liberté remontant au principe et au commencement” – *Autrement qu’être* V.4 (207/162)

In the introduction to this monograph, we cited the beginning of AE V.3 as representative of Levinas’ extreme hyperbole – the Other was described as accusing me, persecuting me in infinite responsibility for their needs, recurring me back to my own ethical subjectivity on the hither side of consciousness. And yet, just one section later, the above quote occurs, as if all the hyperbole and excess which marks the whole of Levinas’ analysis can and should be understood within our everyday experiences. With quotes like these, the reader of AE cannot but be left wondering both whether Levinas’ description can really fade back into the structures of our normal experiences, and if so, what the point is of such an extreme and hyperbolic descriptive style.

In this thesis, our broad aim has been to understand how these two sections could appear within the same text, and indeed how they could be justified given their apparent contradiction. Posited only after his hyperbolic descriptions, Levinas does make an overture to the gulf between his descriptions and ordinary experience by claiming that everything is as he says, *but* that because the needs of the third party require attention, I must be conscious in order to be truly ethical. However, AE is fundamentally impoverished because Levinas never actually goes onto explain how consciousness does meet our ethical responsibility for all Others. Our goal in this thesis has been to rectify this omission, to fill in this gap.

We have done so by attending to Levinas’ description itself, trying to understand it in its whole movement as presented in AE. In particular, in understanding the encounter with the Other

as *deconstructive*, we have been able to fully understand and embrace the extremism of his terms as a result of the very fact that they are so rarely experienced in their full hyperbolic weight.

Deconstruction involves two moments in reading: the first reading is the faithful articulation and repetition of the dominant interpretation of the text at hand, whereas the second focuses on the text's blind spot or *aporia*, that which is outside and therefore what destabilizes the dominant interpretation in the first reading. In analyzing Levinas' account of consciousness within the description of proximity, we saw that our conscious comportment itself is our duty to the needs of all Others, it is our prospective duty. Through consciousness, we are able to identify the Others we interact with everyday within a horizon which allows for our needs to be accounted for, gives us roles, and permits us to attain a good life which is marked by the presence of enjoyment, the absence of pain, and the resources necessary to cease pain should it arise. All this happens *already* insofar as we are conscious – we were claimed by the Good without having had to take up this claim, and consequently subjectivity can be described as for-the-Other.

In having worked to articulate our prospective responsibilities for Others, we have been able to put forward a more robust and complete description of encountering the Other in immediacy than Levinas makes available in his own work. I encounter the Other within my attempts to identify their need and my place in respect of that need: thus, I am responsible for identifying what *is*, I am responsible for the first moment of reading. However, the Other was and is singular, and in the necessity of responsibility for all I had effaced that singularity: the Other, coming towards me anew in their singular need, thereby destabilizes my attempts to read them in their measure, in their comparability to all Others. Given that I am passive to the needs of the singular Other in immediacy, I am assigned by the exact nature of their needs – however, in passivity as well to the needs of all Others, even in singularity that Other's needs are already being

weighed and measured. We are fortunate to live in a time and country where, in encountering Others in immediacy, they are generally happy, or at least there is an absence of suffering: as such, the Others I usually encounter do have their needs met already when I encounter them. Insofar as their needs are met, the destabilization which had assigned me to the Other's singular needs finds that my responsibility is in fact being met, and so consciousness remains intact and re-affirmed in its activities. The deconstructive phenomenon governs our interaction with the Other, but the success we have in meeting their needs covers over this governance.

Immediacy, in Levinas' description, is therefore the site where we are already proactive in trying to account for the needs of all Others. Yet, immediacy must also be recognized in its fundamentally disruptive *potentiality*: the Other is always singularly needful, and thus our attempts to meet their needs by measuring them always runs the risk of missing their need, and potentially doing them harm. While the injustice of comparison is a normal feature of our experience – which is why our normal experiences do not register the Other in their hyperbolic need – the deconstructive potential is always there, and that without paying attention to it, we run the risk of not realizing that need until it is too late, when the Other is already suffering.

In having followed Levinas' in-born chronology – the for-itself, conscious ego encounters the Other in hyperbolic experience, and then emerges to find themselves recurred to ethical subjectivity yet conscious for the needs of all Others – we have proposed that Levinas' extremism serves the purpose of calling us to take up a position in regards to our ethical responsibility before such a position is foisted upon us in tragedy. Thus, reading AE is an attempt to pry open the eyes of the reader who has not had to go through tragedy, who has not had to witness an Other suffer, and who therefore might be rightfully surprised by the hyperbole Levinas claims to find in the face to face encounter. There, in AE, the reader finds a call to understand that we are infinitely

responsible, that we are so *already*, and yet that we run the risk of missing chances to be responsible until it is too late. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon us to approach my subjectivity as for-the-Other, and thereby co-presence the Other within the folds of my ethical obligation to them. It is further required that we recognize that the identities and political horizons which we are a part of exist for meeting our responsibilities to all Others, and thus requires a constant skepticism which tests the sufficiency of those systems for our current challenges. Levinas acknowledges that formulating a description of ethical subjectivity for one who has not felt its full weight is risky, but this is why he claims that we must at least begin to formulate this description: “Son commencement est-il bien accessible? Ne reprochera-t-on pas à la marche de ne pas être assez avertie des dangers de la route et de ne pas être pourvue en moyens d’y parer? Sans doute ne se dégage-t-elle pas complètement des expériences pré-philosophiques, bien de ses sentiers paraîtront battus et bien des poussées imprudentes. Mais le beau risque est toujours à courir en philosophie” (AE 24/20).

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