

## LEVINAS SEPARATES THE (HU)MAN FROM THE NONHU)MAN, USING HUNGER, ENJOYMENT AND ANXIETY TO ILLUMINATE THEIR RELATIONSHIP

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is part of my journey with Emmanuel Levinas on a dystopic path to the ethical encounter. For the journey, I agree to be Levinas's human subject, to encounter his "other". And he agrees to traverse a path through my world, a world of food and eating. To ready me for the encounter, Levinas tells me the story of his ethics, narratively (we 'journey' through it), and so this paper is unavoidably 'story' too. To preface, then: The ethical encounter is a "face to face" encounter between a "human" subject (me) and an "other" (*Totality and Infinity*, 39). In my encountering the other face to face in the world of food, food production and eating, Levinas tells the story of the violences of my existence- of my 'eating' of the world at the expense of the other. Face to face with the other, I cannot void my responsibility for the needs and suffering of the other. In "proximity" with the other, I am guilty for eating; in proximity, I respond by giving the other "bread from [my] mouth" otherwise than Being, 100). In this first part of the journey, I am hungry, and Levinas leads me through scenes replete with food and eating. He shows me how this world can satiate my needs, but how it will, inevitably and inextricably, leave me, a not-yet ethical human subject, vulnerable and exposed.

**KEYWORDS:** Levinas; hunger; nourishment; enjoyment; anxiety; proximity; ethics; face to face encounter; the il y a; elemental; alterity; vision; elevation; *bonne conscience*; grasping

I wish to begin by asking how and where do I encounter "the other" in an ethical manner? This question would be somewhat irrelevant if this "other" were like any other thing that I may come across in the world. If the other were any thing, then I would, perhaps, encounter the other everywhere. But the other is, according to Levinas, specifically and exclusively another human.<sup>1</sup> It follows that my place in relation to this (hu)

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1. Throughout this paper, when referring to the ethical subject of Levinas's making, I will be even more specific. I plan to continually draw attention to the fact that this other human who I encounter *face to face*, is a (hu)man! The argument for this is complex and will be drawn out of Levinas's work by the end of part two of this paper. It is complex, but also self-evident in Levinas's work, if one chooses to look for it. At many times, he makes no disguise of it, using the term 'man' rather than 'human'. "It is only man who could be

man must somehow differ from my place in relation to nonhumans. According to Levinas, the condition of being (hu)man *does* place me in a very particular way within the world, and this opens my existence to the *potential* of the ethical encounter. I say only the potential of the ethical encounter, rather than the encounter itself, because, at this stage, I am not yet guaranteed of the stability of my ethical position or my status. Nonetheless, for Levinas, to be a (hu)man is to be transcendent: it is already to take a step upward. But what am I stepping up towards? I am stepping towards an absolute otherness, which Levinas calls alterity. And this alterity is only accessible through a (hu)man face. Furthermore, I, as one such (hu)man, can only access this alterity by encountering the face of *another* (hu)man. I cannot access it in my own face. The other (hu)man is always more transcendent than I. Nonetheless, I am a (hu)man, and this does give me access to a certain amount of elevation. I may not be placed as high as the ‘ethical other’, but I am certainly higher than the rest of the world. I am a subject that is beyond, or “above being,” and with this movement upward, the possibility of ethics opens before me.<sup>2</sup> But the light of (hu)man alterity is unbearably bright, so at the moment, I do not look in that direction. Right now, I am content to use my position, and this light, to illuminate the rest of the world. And from up here, the otherness of all other alterity on earth pales in comparison to the alterity of (hu)mans. (Hu)man alterity is entirely unknowable, whereas this world below me is already lit by my perspective on it. This is how Levinas begins the story of my relationship with the world. In the following two sections of this paper, I describe what I believe to be the hidden assertion and safety mechanism underlying Levinas’s descriptions of the subject in the world—that is the fact that, as one such subject, I will not encounter both the world and its alterity *at the same time*.

## 1. A HUNGRY STOMACH WITHOUT EARS

*In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not ‘as for me...’—but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach (TI:134).*

absolutely foreign to me” (TI:73). We could be lenient on Levinas (or his translator), and assume he means human. However, I prefer to be suspicious, and this is why I have chosen to describe Levinas’s human other as (hu)man. Sylvia Benso, in her book *The Face of Things* (2000: 35-7) says “The woman is *Autrui* [the Other] only as an ef-faced, forgotten other. That is, the woman is not properly *Autrui*”. Or, even more relevant to this discussion: “To be *Autrui*, the woman should cease being a woman”; hence my justification for using (hu)man.

For other examples of theorists who have argued that Levinas’s use of the term ‘man’ exceeds grammatical standards of the time, see Luce Irigaray’s “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas” (1991); Helen Chapman’s “Levinas and the Concept of the Feminine” (1988); Morny Joy’s “Levinas, Alterity, the Feminine and Women: A meditation” (1994: 463); Kelly Oliver’s *Family Values: Subjects Between Nature and Culture* (1997: 64-5); Craig Vasey’s “Faceless Women and Serious Others: Levinas, misogyny and feminism” (1992: 327); and Jacques Derrida’s “At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am” (1991: 39-40).

2. There are many writings by Levinas that deal directly with the transcendent notion of ‘above being’. See also: “The Transcendence of Words” (1949 (1989)) “Transcendence and Height” (1996), “From the One to the Other: Transcendence and Time” (1998), and “Transcendence and Evil” (1978 (1998)).

Here, where he describes the isolated ego, Levinas says that I am *entirely deaf to the Other*. I am *like a hungry stomach*—that is, I am *without ears*. Now, the question that I ask is, if I am without ears, then what senses am I using to enjoy myself? If I am without ears, can I at least touch, taste, smell and see what I eat? Of all my senses, I would miss hearing the least when I eat. But if I could not see and smell what I am about to eat, if I could not taste what I am eating or savour its textures and flavours, then surely one or any of these losses would result in more disappointment than a soundless meal.

When Levinas says that, in enjoyment, I am a hungry stomach without ears, he is referring specifically to my deafness towards the other (hu)man. In *Totality and Infinity*, he refers again to this targeted deafness:

It is an existence *for itself*—but not, initially, in view of its own existence. Nor is it a representation of self by self. It is for itself as in the expression ‘each for himself’; for itself as the ‘famished stomach that has no ears’, capable of killing for a crust of bread, is for itself; for itself as the surfeited one who does not understand the starving and approaches him as an alien species, as the philanthropist approaches the destitute (TI:118).<sup>3</sup>

Although Levinas has the ethical other in mind when writing about this deafness, deafness toward *everything* seems to be a repercussion, if not a deliberate outcome of enjoyment. As I am eating chicken soup, I am certainly deaf towards the starving (hu)man, but I am also deaf towards the chicken. However, I imagine that Levinas would say that there is no need to be deaf towards the chicken, for the chicken is not placing any direct ethical demands upon me. It *cannot* place any demands on me because it has no alterity that would open me to my guilt and responsibility. The world, as it is eaten, does not face me. Levinas says that I engage with the world, predominantly, as something that *appears* to be given over to my needs. In fact, how the world *appears* to me, is a major focus of Levinas’s explorations of (hu)man enjoyment. The world appears because I *see* it. And so, without saying as much, Levinas confirms the deafness that I experience toward the rest of the nonhuman world. Instead of hearing, I use sight. In fact, Levinas’s descriptions of the privileged position that my visual relationship with the world allows me are in direct contrast to my absolute inability to use sight to relate to the other (hu)man. Levinas completely undermines vision and light in relationship to alterity, but not, it seems, in relation to the world.<sup>4</sup> I focus in this section on Levinas’s descriptions

3. After reading Levinas’s paper “Secularization and Hunger,” it became clear that his reference to the “famished stomach that has no ears,” comes from Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*: “So Gaster was created earless.... He only speaks by signs” (Rabelais 1944: 652). Gaster is a reference to “Messer Gaster”, which translates to ‘Mr Stomach’ (SH: Translator’s fn. 7). ‘Messer’ is also ‘knife’ in German.

4. There are several theorists who have dealt with Levinas’s description of the sensual relationship between the ethical other and the (hu)man subject, but have only brushed over Levinas’s rather traditional reliance on light and vision as mechanisms for describing (hu)man cognitive dominance over the world. For examples, see Wyschogrod’s “Doing Before Hearing: On the primacy of touch” (1980); Cathryn Vasseleu’s *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (1998); Paul Davies’s “The Face and the Caress: Levinas’s ethical alterations of sensibility” (1993); Elizabeth Grosz’s “The ‘People of the Book’: Representation and alterity in Emmanuel Levinas” (1987). As far as I can tell, there are very few theorists who have analysed in detail Levinas’s use of visual metaphors *outside* of the ethical encounter. Irigaray’s paper, “The

of the spatial relationship between the world and the (hu)man subject, as facilitated by vision.<sup>5</sup>

*The world appears to me when I am alone and hungry*

I return to “In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone” (TI:134), and I ask what is it to be alone without solitude? For Levinas, this seems to mean that I am *separate* from everything while still being *in* the world. I am amongst others, but I still hold them at a distance. “A being...frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance” (TI:116). As one such being, this means that I have managed to wrench myself away from the world.<sup>6</sup> I have bundled up my loose ends and smoothed my edges so that everything that is with me in this separation soon begins to feel like me. My mind and my body are now consistent with what I think of as ‘myself’. I am a totality of myself. I am the same as myself. And as a consequence of this, I also realise that the rest of the world is other to me.

But I must qualify this statement: the world is *other* to me but it is by no means *absolutely other* to me. I give another example of how Levinas describes my separation from the world: “The I in the world has an inside and an outside” (EE:39). The inside of the I is what occurs in the mind that makes me *think* I am a totality. The outside of the I is what occurs outside of my mind, which makes my thoughts appear. But the result of this inside and outside of the I is that *everything* seems to be given over to my separation.

Fecundity of the Caress: A reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* section IV, B, ‘The Phenomenology of Eros’” (1993); Richard Cohen’s “Emmanuel Levinas: Happiness is a sensational time” (1981); and Alphonso Lingis’s “The Sensuality and the Sensitivity” (1986), are the only examples I have come across.

5. In this section, I will undertake a close reading and analysis of Levinas’s descriptions of vision, enjoyment and separation, particularly as they occur in “Interiority and Economy,” “Sensibility and the Face,” and “Exteriority and Language” in *Totality and Infinity* (TI:109-80,187-91,295-7); as well as “The World,” in *Existence and Existents* (EE:27-44); Part II of *Time and the Other* (TO:58-66); and “Intentionality and Sensing” in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (OB:23-45).

6. Ajzenstat (2001: 34) describes this process well: “From this [the throb of undifferentiated being], a human being wrenches herself, separating herself as a particular, a consciousness, an autonomous being. . . . Thus, she becomes able to see others as others, or to experience exteriority. But at the same time, and before she meets any others, she finds that in separating herself. . . she becomes her own sameness, which is to say, a being who is the same as herself, a being who understands herself to be herself, a being who, qua that being, is consistent with herself despite the possible existence of conflicts in the soul”. For a similarly vivid description of this separation, see also Wyschogrod’s “Derrida, Levinas and Violence” (1989: 184).

An interesting parallel can be drawn in Julia Kristeva’s description of the role abjection plays in the creation of an autonomous self. The abject is pre-identity: It precedes the distinction between subject and object. (I will describe abjection in more detail in footnote 52 in section two.) Using Kristeva’s work, Oliver (1993: fn.10) describes the separation, which I have spoken of in the text, in terms of the subject’s earliest relationship to the object. “The prototypical abject experience. . . is the experience of birth itself. It is at the birth of the child, and not before, that the identity of the human subject is most visibly called into question. Before the umbilical cord is cut, who can decide whether there is one or two?” (Oliver 1993: 57). According to Oliver, “between birth and birth” is also the place that Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as the object of our longing. “It is the space between our birth and our realization that we were born, a place forever lost to us” (fn.10,p.193).

The world appears as I think it to be. There is nothing outside of me that cannot also occur inside of me, represented by my thoughts. There is nothing in the world that is unthinkable.

This correlation between my inside (my mind) and my outside (the world) is made possible because of my sense of vision,<sup>7</sup> because, according to Levinas and many others, there is a very close conceptual link between thinking and vision.<sup>8</sup> Hans Jonas (1953: 152), through a thorough phenomenological explication of the relationship between vision and thought, demonstrates the way that the mind goes where vision points. I refer to his essay, “The Nobility of Sight,” to analyse how and why Levinas aligns thinking and vision.

There are several inextricably interwoven characteristics of vision that distinguish it from my other senses and help to facilitate my self-consciousness. Firstly, vision allows me to view many things simultaneously.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, my other senses construct simultaneity in a time-bound, non-spatial way. For instance, using touch I must seek out an object in space. Then, to construct a spatial picture of an object using touch, I must move my hand around the object. Any sense I gain of its position in space and of its form comes over time: As I move my hand over the object’s surface, I gradually build up knowledge of what it ‘looks’ like. The same occurs in hearing:

In hearing music, our synthesis of a manifold to a unity of perception refers not to an object other than the sensory contents but to their own order and interconnection. Since this synthesis deals with succeeding data and is spread over the length of their procession, so that at the presence of any one element of the series all the others are either no more or not yet, and the present one must disappear for the next on to appear, the synthesis itself is a temporal process achieved with the help of memory (Jonas 1953: 138).

In both hearing and touch, the knowledge base that I am gradually building can be torn down instantly. As I feel my way around a wall in darkness, I may think that

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7. Vasseleu (1998: 78) says that for Levinas, “light is the sensuous element within which consciousness finds and sustains itself, and makes itself a home. Light is ‘first experience’, or the condition of the apprehensibility of sensibility”.

8. Thinking is often described in metaphors derived largely from the visual realm. One early visual metaphor can be found in Plato’s *The Republic*. In his analogy of the cave, Plato maps the path of ‘knowers’ as they leave a world of “darkness and illusory shadows to a world of light and objects genuinely seen” (Heldke 1992: 205). Aristotle, in the first lines of *Metaphysics*, relates the desire for knowledge to sight: “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all the sense of sight. We prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason for this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things” (Aristotle 1924). Descartes also uses visual metaphors, to, as Lisa Heldke (1992: 205) describes it: “...shin[e] the ‘light of reason’ upon each of the objects of his consciousness, to determine whether they can be seen/known ‘clearly and distinctly’”. And Edmund Husserl’s (1982: 151) phenomenology explicates a perceptual understanding reliant on a “circle of light”. What lies just beyond this circle is just beyond our intentional regard, so through intentional focus, this darkness can be converted into light.

9. “Sight is *par excellence* the sense of the simultaneous.... An opening of the eyes, discloses a world of co-present qualities spread out in space, ranged in depth, continuing into indefinite distance...” (Jonas 1953: 136).

I am inside a room, when suddenly, as one corner turns in the wrong direction under my hand, I realise that I am in fact outside. Or someone may be telling me a story that I think I have heard before, until they change the way the story ends. On the other hand, as soon as I open my eyes, the world is spread out before me. Jonas calls this “the copresence of things”.<sup>10</sup> The scene that I see now is the same scene that was there before I opened my eyes; and unless things begin to move, it is the same scene that will continue to exist into the future. Over time, I may pick up more detail, but this is detail that was already there in the scene. In touch and in hearing there is a gradual building of knowledge, but in any one instant I never gain the whole picture. A whole seascape may surround me, but if my eyes are closed, I may only know that a cool breeze brushes my face, or that waves crash onto rocks far below my feet.

But how does this co-presence of things available to me through vision invoke thought? The key to understanding this causal relationship is to remember the way that simultaneity seems to substantiate sameness.<sup>11</sup> The transience of every moment that I may experience in touch and hearing is replaced with a certainty of my surroundings across time. And basically, this consistency gives me time to think: It gives me time to think *clearly*, so that I can begin to *know* certain things. I ask a question, such as the one Levinas poses when trying to ascertain the structure of thinking: “What shows itself in truth?” (OB:27). Levinas could just as easily be saying (with vision as his aid), “What appears to me?”. Because of the complicity between vision and thinking, we can take the two questions to mean the same thing. In looking at a scene, what *appears* to me *is* the truth. And because there is some consistency to this scene, I have time to compare what lies before my eyes.

This possibility is supported by two other characteristics of sight. Firstly, I am always at a distance from what I am looking at: “Our presence in the world is across a distance...we are separated from objects by a distance, which can indeed be traversed, but remains a distance” (EE:39). Secondly, because of this distance, I need not engage in any way with the scene before me in order to see it. Without needing to engage with the scene, I not only have time to think, but I also have time to think about the interrelation and proportion of things to each other and myself. So not only is my vision the precipitate for my cognitive processes, it is also the reason I can think *objectively*.<sup>12</sup> One way to imagine this objective perspective that I can have in relation to the world is that I *see* the world as if a pane of glass sits between the world and myself, preventing any physical contact.<sup>13</sup> And light is coming from *my side* of the glass, so the things on the other side of

10. “Only the simultaneous representation of the visual field gives us coexistence as such, i.e., the copresence of things in one being which embraces them all as their common present” (Jonas 1953: 144).

11. Steven Smith (1986: 77) describes this sameness across time as a “re-presentation,” or “a return to presence”: “The rationality of being stems from their presence and adequation. The operations of knowledge re-establish rationality behind the diachrony of *becoming* in which presence occurs or is foreseen. Knowledge is a re-presentation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain *other* to it”.

12. “Thus,” Jonas states, “objectivity emerges pre-eminently from sight” (1953: 144).

13. This description of the objectivity maintained by the (hu)man subject separated from the rest of the world is inspired by Heldke’s (1992: 205) metaphor of the glass wall which she uses to explain the control humans like to exercise over the world: “Subjects stand on one side of the wall, objects on the other. The

the glass cannot even see me. I can make judgements about what occurs on their side of the glass free from the worry that I may be having an effect on these events.

Yet my other senses are always in the process of making the world appear to me, and therefore, when I use them I undertake a less detached engagement with the world. Take touch: When I touch, the object touches me as much as I touch it.<sup>14</sup> In hearing, the object comes to me: I can only be a passive recipient of what the object does. Using either of these senses, I cannot maintain the active separation nor the autonomy that it would take for objectivity to be an outcome of my relationship with the world.

There is yet another repercussion of my visual relationship with the world. Because everything is already set out before me when I open my eyes, and my distance from the scene ensures that I need not interact with what I am viewing: I have the freedom to *choose* what I focus on. What I choose to focus on can be handed over, objectively, to my mind, as a thought. And as an abstraction or representation, the object of my intention takes on a new life.

The image is handed over to imagination, which can deal with it in complete detachment from the actual presence of the original object: this detachability of the image, i.e., of “form” from its “matter,” of “essence” from “existence,” is at the bottom of abstraction and therefore of all free thought” (Jonas 1953: 147).

In Jonas’s description, what occurs when I see the world is an *intentional choosing*. There is no scope for anything that I cannot fix within my sight to become thought. This suggests that the intimate connections Levinas makes between thinking and vision are forged by a ‘freedom of choice’ that *never* chooses the invisible. I choose to remove alterity from the world: I never choose to see it—I always choose what I can see. Thus alterity is invisible to me.

Levinas describes this generation of truth through knowledge as the intentionality

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will prevents any actual physical contact between subject and object, but, being glass, it allows subjects to make all ‘necessary’ observations of the objects. Controls are concealed on the subjects side of the wall; it is they who set up the conditions of observation, determine the questions which will be posed, and decide what counts as an answer to them. Although objects may surprise subjects—with unexpected answers, or with a refusal to provide answers—it is the subjects who set the terms of interchange. Thus, on the subject/object model for inquiry, not only are subjects separated from objects, but they also exercise autonomy and control over the objects of their inquiry. Objects, on the other hand, have comparatively little autonomy or control over subjects”.

Perhaps it is the architect in me that prefers to think about the relationship of sight and knowledge as viewing the world through a plane of glass rather than the way many philosophers seem to think about the relationship between sight and knowledge as the positioning of objects in relation to a horizon. Michael Purcell explains the use of a horizon of understanding in relation to Levinas’s work in “The Ethical Significance of Illeity (Emmanuel Levinas)” (1996: 126-7). The plane of glass is, in fact, describing the world through a horizon line. This is how architects draw perspectival drawings: The horizon line sits at the same height as the viewer’s eyes, with all objects located on this transparent plane and their edges ‘vanishing’ to the horizon line.

14. “The obtaining of the touch-experience itself is nothing but the entering into actual intercourse with the object: i.e., the very coming into play of this sense already changes the situation obtaining between me and the object. ...Subject and object are already doing something to each other in the very act in which the object becomes a phenomenal presence” (Jonas 1953: 145).

of “*bonne conscience*” (EFP:82).<sup>15</sup> It is as if light streams out of me, like the messengers of my *bonne conscience*, illuminating the world with my intentions to know it. With vision as my aid, I can build knowledge with more certainty than I can with hearing or touch, or any other sense. I need not explore all the surfaces of a rock to know its form. I give this rock its form through my perspective on it:

Things have a form, are seen *in* the light—silhouettes or profiles.... As silhouette and profile a thing owes its nature to a perspective, remains relative to a point of view; a thing’s situation thus constitutes its being (TI:140).<sup>16</sup>

In appearing at all, the world seems to belong to my knowledge. “Objects appear as this or that; to be perceived is already to be perceived as something” (Wyschogrod 1980: 181). More than this even, the material of the world is only given definition, only becomes lucid in the light of my *bonne conscience*. Thus, the illuminated world seems destined *for me*. Levinas says as much:

In existing, an object exists for someone, is destined for someone, already leans

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15. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas undertakes a complex description of the structure of cognition. He contends that in order to think I must get out of phase with myself. That is, I must ask myself a question about a situation that I am already in. “Are you hungry Angela?”, I say to myself. “Yes, I think I am,” I answer. In the time it takes for me to ascertain this information, I have come momentarily unstuck. Wyschogrod (1980: 180): “In this passing of time, the being of the subject who knows stakes itself for an instant only to recover itself”. If only for an instant, I have come unstuck from my own being in order to question that same being. This, the “getting out of phase of the instant” Levinas says, is how “thought is awakened in being” (OB:28-9). I have moved from a position of being hungry, to a position of knowing that I am hungry. But in moving into this position, time has also moved on, and I am no longer present in that previous moment. Yet still, it is true—I know that I am hungry. I am hungry, but in order to know that I am hungry, I have had to interrogate myself, and in this instant lost through my interrogation, I gain thought. In fact, it is more accurate to say that thought has occurred through a process of recollection, or “a recuperation in which nothing is lost,” from one instant in my being to the next (OB:28). What I ‘have been’ is lost to me, in the moment of questioning myself, but is then re-established in the moment of answering myself. I have gained knowledge of what I already knew in some other way. In other words, my thought, which has arisen between the moment of asking myself the question, “are you hungry?” and the moment of my answering, “yes,” comes as a substantiation of what is already given. In his paper, “Nonintentional Consciousness,” Levinas says: “The exteriority or otherness of the self is recaptured in immanence. What thought knows or what it learns in its experience is both the other and thought’s self. One learns only what one already knows and what can be put into the interiority of thought in the guise of recallable, re-presentable memory” (NC:125). Wyschogrod (1980: 180) describes this “recuperation” in terms of “fore-understanding”. “Fore-understanding lurks in the structure of intentionality itself, that which is fore-understood is lost and recovered by consciousness as a fulfilment of fore-understanding. And Levinas again: “The great principle on which everything depends: The thought [*le pensé*]—object, theme, meaning—refers back to the thought [*la pensée*] that thinks it, but also determines the subjective articulation of its appearing: being determines its phenomena” (NC:123). According to Wyschogrod (1980: 180), even if my expectations had remained unfulfilled—that is, I realise, in answering my own interrogation that in fact I am *not* hungry—I “attribute falsity” to my fore-understanding rather than throw into doubt this ‘getting out of phase with the instant.’ Even if I realise that I am not hungry, I have still come unstuck and then recuperated my being in order to think.

16. “Form is that by which a being is turned toward the sun, that by which it has a face, through which it gives itself, by which it comes forward” (EE:31).

toward an inwardness and, without being absorbed in it, gives itself (EE:40).<sup>17</sup>

Myself and the world are still separated. The world is still *outside* of me, but it now appears that the world is defined by what is *inside* of me. As Levinas says, “thought is always clarity or the dawning of a light” (EE:41). Light is the mechanism that allows my interior—my *self*—to envelop the exterior world without removing our separation. Perhaps this is why, then, when I am hungry—when I think that I am hungry— “the world offers the bountifulness of terrestrial nourishment to [my] intentions...” (EE:30). We remain separate, this world and I, yet it relinquishes its autonomy, as if it never *had* any autonomy, as if it were always mine. We are in relation, but this relation is not an encounter with any ethical resonance. It is a relationship in which what *appears*—that is, what is the same as me—predetermines the other.

Within the work of intentionality, the same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other (TI:124).

This ability I have to determine the other is what elevates me. I am eminent. My separation from the world can be understood as “an exaltation, an ‘above being’” (TI:119). And with this privilege, I am also taken a step closer (a step ‘upwards’) toward the *possibility* of an ethical encounter. Levinas asserts the importance of this step upward: “The I is thus the mode in which the break-up of totality, which leads to the presence of the absolutely other, is concretely accomplished” (TI:117-8). In order for the *face to face* encounter to be ethical, my totality—my separate, intentional existence—must break up. But, paradoxically, in order to meet *face to face* with the Other, I must first and foremost consider myself to *be* a totality. I cannot yet hear the call of the ethical other. I am without ears. What is not clear is how I can maintain this position long enough to encounter the other (hu)man ethically. So again, I look away from the face of the Other and turn my attention back to the world.

I am separate from the world, and the first repercussion of this separateness is that I am very, very hungry. As a finite being, I have always a limited amount of resources stored in my body to burn in order to live. I am a hungry stomach without ears. Ears alone do not help me find the food that I need. I am hungry, and I know that I am hungry, because I can see and I can think and I do this separately and in an elevated position in relation to the world. This allows me to see that below me there are many, many things for me to eat. But my elevated separateness also opens me to a slightly more precarious predicament. In a sense, I am like my vision: I am ‘noble’ just as vision, according to Jonas, is ‘noble’. And it is this nobility that makes sight an incomplete

17. Levinas restates this relationship between the world and my intentions again: “The miracle of light is the essence of thought: due to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours in the horizon which precedes it; it comes from an exterior already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom” (EE:41).

And again: “Light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us” (EE:40).

And again: “It takes form not in an additional quality inhering in objects, but in a destination inscribed in its revelation, in the revelation itself, in the light. Objects are destined for me; they are for me” (EE:30).

Derrida (1978: 92): “Everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself”.

relationship with the world.<sup>18</sup> I, too, cannot survive merely by knowing or seeing that there is food for me to eat. What I am, *alone and eminent*, cannot sustain me in my separateness. I need to feed and to grow and I must do this from what is separate from me, using more ‘vulgar modes’, from the ‘more vulgar’ aspects of the world. For, of course, I cannot feed off other nobilities;<sup>19</sup> I will not eat (hu)man flesh. I have removed myself from the world, taken a step up, but in order to remain elevated—separate and alive in my separateness—I must constantly bolster what I am, using the world to do so.

With my hungry stomach leading the way, I deal with this need by climbing back down from my elevated position and immersing myself in what I have only just managed to separate from. But now that I must act upon my needs, will I not also sacrifice my elevation? To be certain, I maintain a separation from the world even when I am on the ground because of my visual distance, yet this does not necessarily ensure my ‘transcendent’ distance. Need my return to the world be a relinquishing of elevation? Perhaps what happens to my elevation can be understood by keeping this in mind: my position of eminence only has meaning if there are ways that my eminence can be practised. “A king with no subjects to rule over ceases to be a king” (Jonas 1953: 149). I cannot simply look at what I need. I must have what I need. I must touch it. I must eat it. And with sight in charge, perhaps I can touch the world without any loss of eminence.

In order to explore this possibility, I return to that aspect of vision that deals with the unknowable. “The concept of intentionality is one specific direction; intention prohibits inundation by a field of undifferentiated sensibles” (Wyschogrod 1980: 181).<sup>20</sup> What this means is that the light that flows from my *bonne conscience* illuminates everything in the trajectory of my vision, voiding the space between the things that I see and me. As Levinas puts it:

The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. Vision is therefore a relation with a ‘something’ established within a relation with what is not a ‘something’. We are in the light inasmuch as we encounter the thing in nothingness. The light makes the thing appear by driving out the shadows; it empties space. It makes space arise specifically as a void (TI:189).

Even when I am immersed in the world, I am not touching the world. If I have my eyes open, then I am at a distance from the things that I am looking at; and if I am at a distance then this distance is a void. This is fine if I am only *looking* at what I want to eat.

18. “Sight...is incomplete by itself; it requires the complement of other senses...its highest virtues are also its essential insufficiencies. Its very nobility calls for the support of more vulgar modes of commerce with the importunity of things. In this sense...eminence pays for itself the price of increased dependence...” (Jonas 1953: 135-6).

19. It is interesting to note that, at one point in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas interchanges ‘the absolutely other’ with ‘nobility’ when he describes the difference between ‘man’ and ‘non-man’: “It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of treason—infinitesimal difference between man and non-man—that implies the disinterestedness of goodness, the desire of the absolutely other or nobility, the dimension of metaphysics” (TI:35).

20. Wyschogrod’s “Doing before Hearing: On the primacy of touch” (1980) has been useful in alerting me to a particular passage on the privileges of vision in *Totality and Infinity* that I had initially overlooked and which comes into the discussion below (see TI:189-92).

But how can this ability to pass over nothingness translate into my *contact* with food?

Levinas draws a direct correlation between touch and vision: “Inasmuch as the movement of the hand that touches traverses the ‘nothing’ of space, touch resembles vision” (TI:189). If I am intent in my actions, if I see what I want to eat and then *grasp* it in my hand, then I will manage to traverse the void between me and my food. When I grasp something, I remove some of the usual elements of exploration that touch involves. Instead of moving my hand over an object to explore its form, by grasping the object I have taken hold of it in a way that overrides any necessity to explore it.<sup>21</sup> In seizing something, I acquire it, and then, perhaps, I may turn it over in my hands using my eyes to illuminate its form. For Levinas, grasping something is akin to comprehending it.<sup>22</sup>

All the unfathomable mystery of a thing shows itself to us and is open to our grasp. By virtue of its forms the world is stable and made up of solids. Objects can be defined by their finitude: form is just this way of coming to an end [*finir*] where the finite [*le fini*] is the definite and is already exposed to being apprehended (EE:33).

Grasping something is always a matter of avoiding what I do not want to touch. Grasping avoids the void;<sup>23</sup> and in avoiding the void, it deems the void to be nothing. This again, is a confirmation of how Levinas views the relationship between a subject and the rest of the world. As a subject that can think, that can see, that knows itself to be hungry, that can grasp what it needs, it is I who determines the fate of the other.

To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity. This result is obtained from the moment of the first ray of light. To illuminate is to remove from being its resistance, because light opens a horizon and empties space—delivers being out of nothingness (TI:44).

I am dependent on the world, but this need not compromise my eminence. In fact, Jonas suggests that it is perhaps the ability to grasp that separates (hu)mans from the rest of the world, thereby ensuring our elevation:<sup>24</sup>

21. Jonas (1953: 141) describes the difference between a static touch and feeling: “Thus mere touch-impression changes into the act of feeling. There is a basic difference between simply having a tactile encounter and *feeling* another *body*. ...The motor element introduces an essentially new quality into the picture: its active employment discloses spatial characteristics in the touch-object which were no inherent part of the elementary tactile qualities. ...The touch-qualities become arranged in a spatial scheme, they fall into the pattern of *surface*, and become elements of *form*”.

22. Levinas also says: “Presence is now ‘at hand’” (NC:125). It is as if the necessity to explore an object through touch, into the future (point by point) is removed in this action. The future is deemed a recovery of the present. What is still to be known is yanked out of the future with one swift grasp. This grasping through knowledge, Levinas insists, should be taken literally: “The immanence of the known to the act of knowing is already the embodiment of seizure” (EFP:76). This is a subtlety that the translators of this Levinas paper “Non-intentional Consciousness” illuminate through their explanation of the word ‘maintenant,’ the French word for ‘now,’ which means ‘main’ [hand] and ‘tenant’ [holding] (NC:fn.1,p.243). “Grasping” something is also used by Levinas interchangeably with “comprehending” something. I need *not* have it in my hand in order to grasp it.

Levinas also discusses Husserl’s epistemology in terms of grasping. See, “Beyond Intentionality” (1983).

23. In Vasseleu’s words (1998: 86), this is a sort of “immobilisation”.

24. Martin Heidegger (1968: 16) expresses the connection between grasping, hands and thinking in a

An organ for real shape-feeling exists probably only in the human hand.... There is a mental side to the highest performance of the tactile sense, or rather to the use which is made of its information, that transcends all mere sentience, and it is this mental use which brings touch within the dimension of the achievements of sight (Jonas 1953: 141-2).

The world relinquishes its autonomy to my need and my comprehension because its separateness is based on nothing. My hand becomes an extension of the ray of light that beams from my eyes. It traverses the scene before me and is only stopped by the surfaces of things. It is as if the world is a folded surface that can be smoothed by my understanding. My eyes need not delve any deeper and nor need my hand. Any depth that these things contain can be uncovered, with a little probing. The resistance that I do feel in them—the pressure of their form against my hand as I grasp them—is simply power for the cause. It proves the world to be separate from me. Separate, and indeed, not transcendent:

If cognition in the form of the objectifying act does not seem to us to be at the level of the metaphysical relation, this is not because the exteriority contemplated as an object, the theme, would withdraw from the subject as fast as the abstractions proceed; on the contrary it does not withdraw enough (TI:109).

The world is either comprised of these opaque forms of things that display a little resistance to my grasp, or is transparent, displaying no resistance to the penetrating beam of my *bonne conscience*.<sup>25</sup> It is as if the glass wall that separates me from the world in my objectifying gaze still exists when I grasp the world. Although now the glass wall can be seen for what it is—something to look through, not at. The glass wall is not a physical barrier; it is no barrier at all. I must always consider it to be nothing if I am to maintain my sense of eminence in relation to the world.

*Fleeting enjoyment, or being hungry again*

With my separation from the world, facilitated by my vision and my grasp, my (hu)man potential continues to drift upward. I can sustain my elevation—my separateness—by grasping the world with my eyes. The world appears as if given over to me, because, at this distance, it *looks* as if it is. But as a (hu)man, I am a *series* of endless needs, or hungers, that must be satiated. I cannot content myself with surveying what I have already, through the light of my intentions, conquered. It is a little clearer why Levinas considers me to be a hungry stomach without ears. But there is a further part of the passage from *Totality and Infinity* that needs to be clarified. Levinas says: “In enjoyment I am absolutely

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slightly different, though concordant way: “Apes too have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence. Only a being that can speak, that is, think, can have hands...”

25. Benso (2000: xxii) undertakes the important work of demonstrating otherwise in her book, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics*. She suggests that perhaps “things silently laugh at the illusory vanity of abstract philosophical speculation, which in its act of grasping irremediably loses exactly that which it thought it would be accessing”.

for myself...without ears, like a hungry stomach" (TI:134). What is yet to be explained is why being a hungry stomach is the experience of enjoyment.

The interesting thing about hunger is that I do not experience it as a feeling of *lack-ing* in something. How could I, a (hu)man standing so solidly conscious of what I am—wrenched away from the world to make a refined totality—be lacking? No, according to Levinas: My needs constitute me as a lover of life. As a (hu)man, it is love of life that sets me apart from the rest of the world. It is not an attribute simply added onto being. As a (hu)man, life is love of life:

Life is love of life, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear to my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth [prix] of my life (TI:112).

I love that I am a hungry being who must seek out food in order to be satisfied. And I love that I will feel content once this hard work has been done. In addition to this, my 'elevation' above the world is further secured in my enjoyment. Why? Because for Levinas, the fact that I would *risk* 'being elevated' for enjoyment proves that enjoyment is not an *accident* of being. It separates me from pure being, that is, from everything else that is not (hu)man, and it is in this sense that I 'risk' it.

One becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment which is also an exaltation, an 'above being'. The existent is 'autonomous' with respect to being; it designates not a participation in being, but happiness. The existent *par excellence* is man (TI:119).

If I were a less 'elevated' being in the world, a tree for instance, then I would not, according to Levinas, be capable of taking such a risk. "The I exists as separated in its enjoyment...and it can sacrifice its pure and simple being to happiness. It *exists* in an eminent sense; it exists above being" (TI:62-3). Levinas calls this elevation a sacrifice; I have lost what a tree maintains—that is, imperturbability in being. Levinas describes this 'imperturbability' as the "ataraxy" of pure being; there is no necessity, for a tree for instance, to generate meaning out of life. The difference for Levinas, then, between a tree's existence and my existence is thus:

It [happiness] is an outcome, but one where the memory of the aspiration confers upon the outcome the character of an accomplishment, which is worth *more* than ataraxy. Pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment (TI:113).

The difference between loving life and purely existing goes some way towards demonstrating how I can maintain my 'elevation' even while being immersed in neediness. Happiness becomes my access to 'height'.<sup>26</sup>

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26. As a riposte to Levinas, we could consider "love of life" using the terms that Elizabeth Costello (the protagonist from J.M. Coetzee's eponymous novel), uses—that is, "an embodied soul". On the surface, this is precisely the way that Levinas does think of (hu)mans. As Vasseleu (1998: 86-7) says: "The body, as the event of position, is the very advent of consciousness. Levinas rejects the dualist notion that consciousness can be divorced from a substantive. Consciousness begins as a sense of corporeality; as a sense of consciousness's base or place, its point of departure, the condition of its inwardness or in-stance". Although this does not

Another way that Levinas deals with the discrepancy between the simultaneous elevation and groundedness of my position is by explaining my happy neediness as the conversion of my elevation above the world into a temporal dispersion. The explanation of this leads on from the importance that enjoyment plays in my life. Levinas describes the condition of being a (hu)man, who is separate but happy with the neediness that this incurs, as an “act that resembles its ‘potency’” (TI:113). That is, enjoyment gives (hu)mans a reason to exist. In fact, for (hu)mans, happiness is what makes the activity of living possible, “if activity means a commencement occurring in duration, which nevertheless is continuous” (TI:113). The potency of enjoyment comes in its temporality, which is built on the temporality of satiation. “Pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment. Enjoyment is made of the memory of its thirst; it is a quenching” (TI:113). I need the world, but I can *see* how to fulfil this need. I must grasp the world, eat it, and then I will no longer be hungry. However, I know this satiation will not last. I will be hungry soon enough. Being (hu)man means that my enjoyment will never last because my satiation never lasts, and therefore happiness comes again and again with every newly satisfied need. “Each happiness comes for the first time” (TI:114). This hunger and satiation and hunger again sets the condition for the continuity of living as a (hu)man. To be (hu)man is to live the beginning and ending of an infinite number of needs.<sup>27</sup>

Each moment of a need satiated marks an independence from the meaninglessness of just being alive. For Levinas, here again is proof that happiness is the mark of separation between (hu)mans and the rest of the world.<sup>28</sup> It is not that a tree is not happy, but that it is not aware that *this is happiness*.<sup>29</sup> Enjoyment is meaningless without recognition, by the tree, that the happiness that is with it for an instant will need to be replaced in the

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seem fundamentally different to the way Levinas imagines (hu)man life being filled by its contents, in Costello’s description, this filling of the body by the soul extends to all animals: “To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*. . . . To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes’ key state [cogito, ergo sum], which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell” (Coetzee 2003: 75).

27. “Desire as a relationship with the world involves both a distance between me and the desirable, and consequently a time ahead of me, and also a possession of the desirable which is prior to the desire. The position of the desirable, before and after the desire, is the fact that it is given. And the fact of being given is the world” (EE:30).

28. Let me, again, counter this argument with one made by Elizabeth Costello: “Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve. When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh” (Coetzee 2003: 108).

29. That is, a self-consciousness about happiness. Not all human emotions are accompanied by self-consciousness, but in the case of nonhuman beings, it seems that all emotions are without self-consciousness (Nussbaum 2001: 126).

next.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, I am reflective, and so I am aware that happiness does not last but instead must continually be reinstated. Separation is produced through my being a subject who is aware that I need the world but who can, over time, continually—although be it momentarily—overcome this need. In Levinas’s words:

To be sure, need is also a dependence with regard to the other, but it is a dependence across time, a dependence that is not an instantaneous betraying of the same but a suspension or postponement of dependence... (TI:116).

I am a needy being, but I am liberated in this neediness. Separation becomes the difference between my needs and their satiation. This, rather than simply the present moment of happiness, is what defines the eminent position of the I in relation to the world. It is now possible to make a more specific statement about the relationship between happiness and height: it is the *temporality* of my enjoyment that becomes my ‘height’ above the world.

A being...frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance. This distance can be converted into time, and subordinate a world to the liberated but needy being (TI:116).

Yet, the displacement of my elevation onto the fleeting nature of happiness places my transcendent potential in a precarious position. This is because if my happiness is only momentary, then I am not assured of always being happy. To be certain, I can, over time, again and again, rediscover happiness, but what if I cannot satisfy my next moment of need? According to Levinas, if I fail at happiness, then I suffer. Again, this suffering is not because I need, but because I need and cannot satiate my own neediness. I suffer because, from the beginning, my life is founded on happiness.

To despair of life makes sense only because originally life is happiness. Suffering is a failing of happiness; it is not correct to say that happiness is an absence of suffering. Happiness is made up not of an absence of needs, whose tyranny and imposed character one denounces, but of the satisfaction of all needs. For the privation of need is not just a privation, but is privation in a being that knows the surplus of happiness, privation in a being gratified (TI:115).

This is why Levinas describes my elevation also in terms of a sacrifice. “The I exists as separated in its enjoyment...and it can sacrifice its pure and simple being to happiness. It *exists* in an eminent sense; it exists above being” (TI:62-3). I have given up my pure and simple being to a life dependent on happiness and therefore vulnerable to suffering.

And without happiness, “life dissolves into a shadow” (TI:112).<sup>31</sup>

30. What seems to be missing in a tree and limited in nonhuman animals is the ability to have “temporal emotions”, which are emotions that involve memory or expectation—or in other words, that involve “conceiving of a life as a temporal process with a beginning, a development, and an end” (Nussbaum 2001: 144). For the case of the difference between human emotions, such as happiness, and other animals’ emotions, see *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Nussbaum 2001: 89-138).

31. “When reduced to pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into a shadow” (TI:112).

When one has to eat, drink and warm oneself in order not to die, when nourishment becomes fuel, as in certain kinds of hard labor, the world also seems to be at an end, turned upside down and absurd, needing to be renewed. Time becomes unhinged (EE:37).

Even if this does not mean death, death might prove more favourable than living life as a shadow.

The contents from which life lives are not always indispensable to it for the maintenance of that life, as means or as the fuel necessary for the ‘functioning’ of existence. Or at least they are not lived as such. With them we die, and sometimes prefer to die rather than be without them (TI:111).

So, with my happiness comes trepidation, because of the possibility of each moment of happiness being my last, and my life dissolving into a shadow. But what is this life as a shadow? We know that it is suffering, but is life as a shadow also life that has lost its separateness? For Levinas, is living as a shadow like living as an animal, or a plant, or an ocean, for whom awareness that happiness has been lost is not possible, for whom pure existence, happy or not, is the only possibility? In other words, is it that, as a lover of life, I am constantly at risk, because of the constancy of my neediness and my dependence on the world? Am I at risk of the world reabsorbing me? That is, I may not die, but I could become indistinguishable from all the other beings whose lives simply begin, then end? Might I lose my separateness? I am the one that must absorb the world in order to subsist in my happiness.

Such an explanation would situate separation as a (hu)man ‘experience’ or ‘privilege’, rather than an attribute intrinsic to (hu)man existence. If I were to be reabsorbed by the world then I would lose my ability to enjoy the world and my eminence would fall heavily from its elevation. But this is not so. According to Levinas’s description of being (hu)man, I *cannot* remain (hu)man and return to the simple being of the rest of the world. My very (hu)manness is shaped by my separateness from the world. “The unicity of the I conveys separation. Separation in the strictest sense is solitude, and enjoyment—happiness or unhappiness—is isolation itself (TI:117). If I lose myself in the world and become unable to rise above the risk it places in my future, then I do not simply accept this and fall into an apathy, or ataraxy, of the ‘simply existing’. No, if my happiness is threatened, then I do not fall from my eminence. I suffer in my separateness. I suffer, because from the beginning I am happiness. To suffer is to be separate but unhappy in this separateness. If I am inept at negotiating my separation and my need, for whatever reason, then I find myself in the precarious position of being needy without the potential to satiate my own neediness. I may find myself at the mercy of the world, with no control over what will become of me.

Let me put this in another way: I am still (hu)man—I still have a hand that has the intention to grasp the world, but I am now a shadow of that intention. In fact, it is on this nether side of (hu)man transcendence that I find the location of the ethical other. The ethical other lives life like a shadow. As a shadow, the ethical other has a hand of sorts, and perhaps even the intent, but not the *ability* to grasp. Instead of reaching out to grasp

the world, the ethical other's hand faces up, outstretched and open. Alphonso Lingis says: "He faces me with his eyes, unmasked, exposed, and turns the primary nakedness of the eyes to me; he faces me with a gesture of his hand, taking nothing, empty-handed" (1986: 227). For Levinas, this is the absolute limit of (hu)man suffering. In order not to be hungry, in order not to suffer, the ethical other must rely on the world for satiation.

In the introduction to this section, I said that I would turn away from the height of the ethical other so that I might spend some time examining the world below. I have closed my ears to the call of the ethical other, and in the process, I have found enjoyment. What I am learning is that I need this enjoyment if I am ever to respond to the ethical other. If I am not happy and satiated, then how can I give anything away? But in closing my ears to the ethical other, I have also closed my ears to the otherness of the world. I do not hear, or encounter, any otherness at all. And, as if in confirmation that there is nothing to hear, I also find that there is nothing to *see*. With my face turned away from the ethical other, I see only objects given over to my enjoyment. And between these objects and myself there is nothing. In my enjoyment, this nothingness that I cannot see is my only experience of the otherness of the world. As a consequence, I hardly experience this nothingness at all.

## 2. EATING SENSIBLY AND THE ANXIETY OF THE IL Y A

*Enjoyment does not refer to an infinity beyond what nourishes it, but to the virtual vanishing of what presents itself, to the instability of happiness. Nourishment comes as a happy chance (TI:141).*

So far, I have written around the moment of satiation without directing my attention to what happens in the moment itself. We know what life is like just prior to satiation. I am separate and needy of the world. But I can see what I need and I can anticipate the satiation of my hunger. We know what life is like just after. I am full and happy, even if only momentarily. But during? Levinas says that, in enjoyment, I am a hungry stomach without ears. I know what this means for the world, and for the ethical other. Both will have their needs ignored. I will use my vision to turn away from the face of the ethical other and to make the world appear as given over to my needs. But still, what does this enjoyment, at the cost of the world and the ethical other, feel like to me?

To investigate this moment, I recap on the difference between myself with a need still requiring satiation, and myself with a satiated need: For Levinas, in both of these instances, there is a perceptual and spatial difference between me and the world. In both these cases, the otherness of the world is not my concern. Beyond the world's slight resistance to my touch when I grasp it, and the sense of empty space that sits between me and the rest of the world, I do not seem to register any particularly potent otherness. Nothingness takes up the space between me and the objects of my need, and, mostly, I do not notice this space at all.

But there are two moments when the otherness of the world affects me more directly, and both occur in the temporal gap between need and satiation. In this gap, I find myself, not at a distance from the world, but absorbed by the world. The nothingness that once sat behind and around the objects of my need, as void, floods into my immediate space, so that I cannot gain a perspective on it, so that I cannot see it, so that I cannot think it. If I maintain control over my life, then I can grasp things and not experience this flooding. If I let go into my life, either through enjoyment or anxiety, then this otherness *grasps me*. Sometimes Levinas calls this otherness the “element”. Sometimes he calls it the “*il y a*”.<sup>32, 33</sup> In this section, I try to explain how my experience of the otherness of the world can change from being purely contented sensibility in enjoyment to utterly terrifying in anxiety.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Experiencing the contentment of sensibility*

One of the best examples of the first way that I experience the otherness of the world is when I eat something. A moment such as this takes “I am a hungry stomach without ears” to another dimension. Up until this moment, being a hungry stomach without ears has meant that I have used my senses in a way that would maximise my capacity to glean sustenance from the world: I used my vision to locate what will satiate my hunger, and then I used my hands (facilitated by my vision) to grasp this food in a way that undermines the usual reciprocity of touch. In both of these engagements, I have

32. In English, the *il y a* translates to “there is”.

33. Some contend that Levinas conflates the “element” and the “*il y a*” (translator’s note in TO:fn.15), while others that the *il y a* is the limit of the element (see also Wyschogrod 1989: 186). This second position seems to be closer to Levinas’s explanation of the relationship between the element and the *il y a*. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says: “The elemental extends into there is” (TI:142). Perhaps it is this limiting characteristic of the *il y a* that means that it is often used in negative terms by both Levinas and his commentators. Conversely, Levinas seems to use the term “element” when he is speaking of enjoyment.

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas uses the term “*il y a*” exclusively. See the sections “Existence with Existents,” and “Insomnia” (EE:51-64); in *Time and the Other*, Levinas uses the term “*il y a*” (TO:44-51); in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas uses the term “the elemental” in “Element and Things, Implements,” “Sensibility,” “The Mythical Format of the Element,” and “The Home and Possession” (TI:130-2,135-40,140-142); in “Sensibility and the Face” (TI:190-1) he uses the “*il y a*”; and in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas returns to exclusive use of “*il y a*” in the sections entitled “Being’s ‘Other,’” “Sense and the *There Is*,” and at the beginning of the concluding chapter “Outside” (OB:3-4,162-5,176-8). In “Signature,” in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas refers to the *il y a* (S:292) and in his essay “On Maurice Blanchot,” in *Proper Names* (OMB:127-70) Levinas describes the origins of the term “*il y a*”.

34. For examples of how others have interpreted the *il y a* and the elemental, see John Sallis’s “Levinas and the Elemental” (1998); Simon Critchley’s “Il y a—A Dying Stronger than Death (Blanchot with Levinas)” (1993), and his book *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (1997: 31-83); Philip Lawton’s “Levinas’s Notion of the ‘There Is’” (1976); John Caruana’s “The Catastrophic ‘Site and Non-Site’ of Proximity: Redeeming the disaster of being” (1998); Edith Wyschogrod’s “Derrida, Levinas, and Violence” (1989); Maurice Blanchot’s *Thomas the Obscure* (1973: chapter two); and Danne Polk’s “Good Infinity/Bad Infinity: *Il y a*, *Apeiron*, and Environmental Ethics in the Philosophy of Levinas” (2000). Most of these theorists concentrate their readings on the *il y a*, with only brief reference to the elemental. However, Polk (2000: 36-7) and Perperzak’s “Levinas on Technology and Nature” (1992: 475-6) describe the elemental in terms of enjoyment rather than (or as well as, in the case of Polk) horror.

maintained my distance from the world.

But when I actually eat the food that I have gleaned, what then? I return to the chicken soup I was eating in the last section. I bring the spoonful of soup to my lips and sip. Once liquid is inside my mouth, I can no longer see it. And if I can no longer see it, I can no longer grasp it. All I experience of chicken soup now are the sensations of it in my mouth—how it feels on my tongue, against my teeth, how the broth deepens and then sours slightly as I swallow. Sight has lost its usefulness, and I discard it in favour of the enjoyment of savouring the taste and texture of my meal: I close my eyes.

And what happens to the distance between me and my food in this moment? It entirely dissipates. While I am savouring this mouthful of food, there is no physical distance between me and the world. I become my sensations. Food macerated in the mouth becomes me. Besides the lack of recognition I have of the nothingness that sits between me and the world, this is my first real experience of the otherness of the world. “The objects of the world, which for thought lie in the void, for sensibility—or for life—spread forth on a horizon which entirely hides that void” (TI:135). “Sensibility”<sup>35</sup> is my experience of this otherness that Levinas describes as the “the elemental”.<sup>36</sup>

Once I am absorbed in the taste of this soup, I do not know what is happening—I simply live what is happening: “One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset” (TI:135). When I think, my self moves outward to encapsulate the world. In this sensibility, the element comes incessantly upon me,

...as the wave that engulfs and submerges and drowns—an incessant movement of afflux without respite, a total contact without fissure nor gap from which the reflected movement of a thought could arise. It is to be within, to be inside of... (TI:135).

If I am to enjoy something, I have no choice but to relinquish my separation from the world. I must surrender my distance to the pleasure of intimate contact. I cannot maintain a distance from this elemental experience, because it does not cling to something that I can distance myself from. In Levinas’s words:

The solidity of the earth that supports me, the blue of the sky above my head, the breath of the wind, the undulation of the sea, the sparkle of the light do not cling to a substance. They come from nowhere. This coming from nowhere, from ‘something’ that is not, appearing without there being anything that appears—and consequently *coming always*, without my being able to *possess* the source—delineates the future of sensibility and enjoyment (TI:141).<sup>37</sup>

35. “Sensibility establishes a relation with a pure quality without support, with the element. Sensibility is enjoyment” (TI:136).

36. “Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it the elemental” (TI:131).

37. Here, Levinas says that these sensible qualities do not cling to a substance. But at other times he says that they do: “Sensibility does not aim at an object, however rudimentary. It concerns even the elaborated forms of consciousness, but its proper work consists in enjoyment, through which every object is dissolved into the element in which enjoyment is steeped. For in fact, the sensible objects we enjoy have already undergone labor. The sensible quality already clings to a substance” (TI:137). In this passage, Levinas justifies this ‘clinging to substance’ through the object’s exposure to “labor”. Here, Levinas is beginning

His descriptions of the element *coming always* with its *incessant movement*—it seems as if my absorption in the element could go on forever. But why, after all the effort I have put into maintaining a safe distance from the world, would I allow such a situation of complete, and potentially infinite, absorption, to occur? I would suggest that I allow this immersion in the element, because it *does* have an end. From my previous experience, I know that the world eventually withdraws from me. I taste the rich complexity of the broth, I melt the silk texture of it onto my tongue, and then, gradually, its pleasures dissipate into memory. Until the next mouthful of soup, I am again separate from the world. I no longer taste it. Again and again, I dip into my bowl to reacquaint myself with the pleasure of immersion, and again and again, I manage to swim through this immediate sensibility and find myself separate on the other side. Once the bowl is emptied, I am satisfied. My stomach is full. I allow myself to be absorbed in the pleasure of these sensible qualities because I know that *they will satisfy me*. “Objects *content* me...” (TI:135).<sup>38</sup> Nourishment, exemplified by alimentation, is this satisfying process of enjoyment:

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other...as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation (TI:111).

And once I am contented, I know that I will return to separateness. I know this because I remember being satisfied before. I know these things before I begin to eat. I know them before I lose my thoughts to the sensibility of the world. If I did not know such things before I took my first mouthful of soup, then I may not take it at all.

So, in this scene, my experience of the space between myself and the world has completed a circle. “Things come to representation from a background from which they emerge and to which they return in the enjoyment we can have of them” (TI:130). The middle state of immersion is exactly that: It sits in between my need and the satisfaction of that need as a finite space. I move from a state of separation, (albeit, a hungry, needy separation) to a state of immersion, back to a state of separation (with a full stomach). Another way this movement can be understood is as a journey from illumination, to a time of darkness, back to a state of illumination. This middle space of sensibility, wedged between my need and its satiation, is the moment when I experience the mystery of life. But then, as Benso states, this mystery is “immediately recuperated through the awareness of one’s own sensibility and sensory perception” (2000: xxxiii). I experience this mystery, this darkness, because, momentarily, I relinquish my grasp of the world. I abandon myself to this darkness. I may even close my eyes in order to further enjoy the

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to set up an important distinction between the world that has undergone labor (and that therefore allows sensible quality to cling to it) and the world that has not undergone labour (and that therefore sensible qualities cannot cling to).

38. This phrase comes from a larger statement: “Objects *content* me in their finitude, without appearing to me on a ground of infinity. The finite without the infinite is possible only as contentment. The finite as contentment is sensibility” (TI:135). Later, it will be apparent that what is finite about objects is that they create containers for the otherness of the world.

sensations in my mouth. (Am I a satiated stomach without eyes?)<sup>39</sup> But on the other side, I regain my separation and the world returns to its distant place within my perspective. And what about the otherness of the world? Again, it becomes that void space between the world and me.

*Experiencing the horror of the il y a*

Sometimes, this scene is not quite so circular. Sometimes, instead of my consuming of the world going through a complete cycle of need to enjoyment to satiation to need and around again, it gets caught in the middle space of immersion. Levinas describes this as my being delivered over to the element:

Possession by enjoyment is one with enjoyment: no activity precedes sensibility. But to possess by enjoying is also to be possessed and to be delivered to the fathomless depth, the disquieting future of the element (TI:158).

Something goes wrong in that moment of pure sensibility that changes it from enjoyment to “horror” (EE:56-8). At such times, instead of the element serving as an access to satiation, it delivers me over to the world and its otherness. I am absorbed by the world, experiencing, with pure sensibility, intimate contact. I am swimming for the edge of this space of immediacy, and yet I cannot *reach* this edge.

Or, at least, I think that I will not find it. Both the light of my *bonne conscience* and my intentions for reaching the other side of this immediacy are absorbed by this nothingness surrounding me. I cannot *see* anything. This moment is terrifying: not because I have finally dissolved into this immediacy, never to be able to reunite the parts of my self that make me into a separated, elevated being, but because I anticipate such a future for myself. Perhaps I cannot find the edge of this space because I am so terrified of *not finding the edge*. This anticipation of failure is my second experience of the otherness of the world. Levinas describes this otherness as the “*il y a*”. He says it is a place in which nothingness reigns. There are no things. There is no way that *I* can be there. The *il y a* is a space denuded of every *thing*, including me. Because I cannot be where there is nothing, substantiating the nature of this otherness of the world is impossible. I, as an ‘elevated’ (hu)man, must remove myself from the world, as well as relinquish my elevated perspective on the world. I must turn off the lights to my *bonne conscience* and try to *hear* or *smell* or *taste* what the world looks like—I certainly cannot *see* it. To see it would mean that I would create a world shaped by my intentions to know it, a world formed by my perspective. That is, according to Levinas, there is no formed matter without my need to make it manifest. Without me, there is only matter—pure materiality, an ‘existence’ removed of its ‘existents’ (EE:51). In order to understand the *il y a*, I must try to describe a scene that I can never witness, because it is a scene that exists without ‘me.’ For Levi-

39. I need not necessarily close my eyes in order to experience the sensible. The immediately sensible can also be visual, but this would be a visual experience entirely different from the detached distant vision that facilitates thought. Perhaps, it can be understood to be a little more like the visual experience of the ethical encounter. In the *face to face* encounter, Levinas describes both hearing and seeing as more akin to touch. “The visible caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches” (LP:118).

nas, though, what so usefully stands in for the impossible is my ability to *imagine* such a scene (EE:57-8; TO:46).<sup>40</sup> So, I will imagine: I imagine I reach the *il y a*.

To reach the place of pure existence, it is necessary to imagine that everything around me has disappeared. First, the words I am reading vanish letter by letter, then the keyboard that I tap my words into falls away leaving the surface of my desk, then, the desk itself disappears, then the light cast through the form of my lamp, then the walls and floor of my room. As if setting up a chain reaction, every thing that touches some other thing, with this touch, passes on its own disappearance to the other, until there is nothing left—except, of course, me. I stay long enough to survey the expansiveness of this disappearance, and then, after the shortest of instances, even I am gone. Once I take my leave, I have reached a place that cannot be reached. There are no words to read, there is no lamp to see them by, or desk or room or city or a consciousness to witness this pure existence. If I were able to reach this place, I would not even be capable of knowing I was there. But what, then, *is* there? There is nothing. The world is left with nothing—yet still there persists something of this nothingness. And what persists is “the fact that *there is*” (TO:46).

This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is ‘being in general’ (EE:52).

Although Levinas describes the *il y a* as a persistence of nothingness, this does not mean that he imagines it as a void. It is not a coalescence of the negative spaces remaining when the positive space of subjects and their objects disappear. Such a space would be an *absence* of any presence. Rather than a removal, the *il y a* is a *submergence*; it is a swallowing up of the possibility of individual beings by “being in general”. The *disappearance* of beings is achieved through the *reappearance* of being. So there is existence, but, according to Levinas, no *thing* to take up this existence. The *il y a* is full of the “presence of absence” (EE:60), full of the presence of nothingness, full of the absence of everything.

But the *il y a* is an absence of *my* presence. It is empty of the light of my *bonne conscience*; empty of materiality, corporeality and individuality. It is removed of me. There is no world as I know it, for the world is illuminated and given form through my *bonne conscience*. Because I cannot ever reach a place where “I” am not, *anticipating* the *il y a* is my only access to the *il y a*. It is always a potential, never an actual; It is an otherness I can never reach.<sup>41</sup>

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40. Sallis (1998: 154) on Levinas’s strategy of employing the imagination to find the *il y a*: “In order to approach this existing without existents, Levinas calls upon imagination. Omitting all indications as to how imagination is to be construed here, how it is to be, as it were, detached from the complex of determinations it has undergone from Plato on, omitting also all indications regarding the complicity of imagination with the question of being, Levinas simply proposes that we imagine something, or rather, that we imagine—or try to imagine—nothingness”. See also Polk’s (2000: 36) paper, in which he describes Levinas’s use of imagination to explore the *il y a* as a critical response to Husserl’s famous passage in *Ideas I*, where he tries to imagine the total annihilation of the world. See also Wyschogrod (1989: 184).

41. Is this space of nothingness what Lyotard is invoking when he describes what happens when our

I can imagine that this world of the *il y a* is not the world as it is now. I suggest that Levinas imagines that this is a world removed of *every thing* because of his crucial belief in the illumination and form that our (hu)man *bonne conscience* provides the world. But what if, rather than imagining this world as a world without things, we imagine it as a world without our *bonne conscience*? Thinking of the *il y a* in this way explains why I can experience the horror of the *il y a* when I am still conscious and in the world. The space of the *il y a* is not simply emptied of things as much as it is emptied of my *bonne conscience*. Levinas might say that these scenes are one and the same thing: Both the objects of the world and my consciousness of them are my presentations. One is the outside of me, and one is the inside of me. But a world emptied of my intentions is much more frightening to an elevated, needy being than a world without things. Without my *bonne conscience*, I no longer have a mechanism for shedding light on the world; I no longer have a way of understanding the world as given over to me. *I can no longer grasp the world*. And to be truly horrified, all I must do is imagine such a place. The world looks exactly the same; I can still see *things*, but I have no control over them. The *il y a* is full with the absence of my intent.<sup>42</sup> The anticipation of the *il y a* submerges me, swallows up my expectation of the future based on the happiness of the past. It removes my control from every present moment, until all that is left is persistence in being—not my being, but being in general, or perhaps the being of beings that do not exercise such a conscious intent upon the world. The world is full with this absence of my intent, “like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence” (EE:59);<sup>43</sup> or, perhaps, like the sounds of a language I do not understand, or of wind moving through trees.

Perhaps the answers to these questions can be sought in Wyschogrod’s description of the *il y a*: a space in which being in general persists and submerges all formation of beings, as “an ontological ‘black hole’” (1989: 184). No formation of being can escape the pull of its undifferentiated space. Levinas calls it “nocturnal space” (EE:52).<sup>44</sup> This gives us a hint at its appearance perhaps. But he clearly distinguishes between a phenomeno-

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sun explodes in 4.5 billion years? “Negation without remainder. No self to make sense of it. Pure event. Disaster. . . . Matter asks no questions, expects no answers of us. It ignores us. It made us the way it made all bodies—by chance and according to its laws” (Lyotard 1991: 8-11).

42. Polk (2000: 36): “to imagine the total annihilation of the world is to imagine the loss of intentional consciousness as well”.

43. Or, an “atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence” (TO:46).

44. Levinas draws on Blanchot for his depictions of the *il y a* as night; and Blanchot (1986: 49) writes that the *il y a* is Levinas’s most fascinating concept. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas takes a definition of the *il y a* directly from Blanchot’s *Thomas l’ Obscure*: “The presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night, the horror of being, the return of being to the heart of every negative movement, the reality of irreality are there admirably expressed” (EE:fn.1.p.58). See also Levinas’s essay on Blanchot in *Proper Names* where he refers to Blanchot’s “second night” or “black light” (OMB:133,137), which are two variants on a series of terms Blanchot (1981: 102) uses to describe the *il y a*, the others being “Night” or “other night”. Many links have been made between Blanchot and Levinas. For examples, see Levinas’s own discussions of Blanchot in *Proper Names* (OMB:127-70). See also Purcell’s “The Ethical Significance of Illicity” (1996: 128-9); John Caruana’s “The Catastrophic ‘Site and Non-Site’ of Proximity” (1998); Critchley’s *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, and “Il y a—A dying stronger than death,” (1993); and Davies’s “A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas” (1990).

logical night, that is, the night that appears after day, and the *il y a*'s night of anonymous existence. If the *il y a* were understood as the night that is opposite to day, that is, as a duration of time without light, this would underestimate the indeterminacy of the *il y a* in two significant ways.

Firstly, a phenomenological night involves the *dimming* of light. On the other hand, the *il y a* is a darkness that would be better described as *blackness*, because blackness is more than a lack of enough light to illuminate the forms of the world. The blackness of Levinas's *il y a* is a true blackness, the result of the absorption of all light. I could not project my consciousness to such a place to illuminate my existence, because this night absorbs the possibility before I can even formulate the intent. The *il y a* cannot be seen; the *il y a* can only ever be barely imagined by me. In the world that I inhabit, do I imagine this *il y a* sitting enclosed within the forms of things? Do I know it is there although I do not know what it looks like, nor will I ever know?

So how do I experience the terror of this blackness, if not with my eyes? In face of the knowledge that it is unseeable, still, I try to see it with my eyes. Faced with the fact that it is unknowable, I persist in trying to imagine it with my mind. Once, lost in the bush, I came close to the horror of the *il y a*. For two days, my friend and I trekked, looking but finding no way out. We were trapped, deep within a valley, forced through a stream bound on either side by bush and mountains. At one point, the stream turned a sharp corner and opening out before us were towering sheer cliffs. Nestled in the cracks in its face were dozens of egrets. Remembering that scene now, I can say that it was intensely beautiful. But at the time, I looked but did not see it. All that I had at that time was fear. I could 'see' no way out of this elemental space,<sup>45</sup> I could see nothing in this

45. At times such as this, I do not experience the element as something containable. "The element has no forms containing it; it is content without form. Or rather it has but a side: the surface of the sea and of the field, the edge of the wind; the medium upon which this side takes form is not composed of things. It unfolds in its own dimension: depth, which is inconvertible into the breadth and length in which the side of the element extends" (TI:131). Lingis, in translating this passage, uses "side," rather than "face," to translate this term, in order to reserve the English term "face" for the face of a (hu)man for "visage" (translator's note in TI:131). I consider this to be quite an interesting turn: is the *face of the elemental* removed from its close association with the face of the Other through a translation? But then Levinas says: "To tell the truth the element has no side at all. One does not approach it. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element" (TI:131).

There are other moments when Levinas seems to create a more confused line between the *il y a* and alterity. In "God and Philosophy," Levinas describes God as having a sort of ultra-alterity, "other than the other, other otherwise," which takes God closer to the *il y a* than the face: "prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is*" (GP:165-6). Caruana (1998: 41) explains the reason for this move by Levinas as thus: "For the later Levinas, it is structurally important to maintain the possibility of seeing in the *il y a* a face of an irate God who attacks the self in the Night of existence". Wyschogrod writes that Blanchot reads the same alliance between Levinas's concept of the *il y a* and transcendence: "Blanchot interprets the *il y a*...as an effort to describe the obverse of transcendence" (Wyschogrod 1989: 183). Note that the 'obverse' is defined as a 'counterpart' of something, or that which complements something else. Interestingly, this reading of the *il y a* being complementary to transcendence has been slightly lost in the translation of Blanchot's paper (1986: 49), through the use of the word 'reverse' instead of 'obverse.' Still, the point is there: "The *there is* is...Levinas's...temptation, too, since as the reverse of transcendence it is thus

space, devoid of my intent.

Secondly, the night of the *ily a* differs from a phenomenological night in how it persists, in its blackness, as a continuous indeterminacy enduring beyond the possibility of light (EE:53). The night that is the opposite of a phenomenological day ends with light. But the night of the *ily a* is neverending. This is the ataraxy of *purely being* (TI:113). It is the inability for ‘failure’ to shake being’s intent to *purely be*. This is the same ataraxy Levinas finds in the life of a tree, or the life of a nonhuman animal, or the life of the sea. However, my experience of this nocturnal ataraxy of the *ily a* differs from the way trees or animals experience it: from the outset, my life is ‘above being’. I cannot experience the imperturbable existence of a tree, because I will always *think* about imperturbability. I will always be separate from it; I will always be outside of it. And the ataraxy of pure being, when experienced from the outside, is terrifying. It represents a continuation of the future that is no longer mine to claim enjoyment from. The *ily a* when I was lost terrified me, because I could see no end to it. The egrets, trees and rocks were the only witnesses to my existence, and in their imperturbability did not care whether I lived or died.

According to Levinas, my fear in these moments is not a fear of death (EE:57).<sup>46</sup> Vasseleu (1998: 85) describes the nature of my fear as thus: “The presence of night—a collapse of things into indeterminate nothing, a horror which can also occur in the midst of daylight—erodes the continuity of consciousness”. It erodes my love of life (the temporality of happiness): The *ily a* is the potential for suffering. This is “the unforeseeable future of the element”:

...not because it exceeds the reach of vision, but because, faceless and losing itself in nothingness, it is inscribed in the fathomless depth of the element, coming from an opaque density without origin, the bad infinite or the indefinite, the *apeiron*

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not distinct from it either”.

46. Levinas deals specifically with death in the following passages: *Time and the Other* (67-79); *Totality and Infinity* (232-40). Lawton makes the following points about Levinas’s subtle analysis of death: (1) Levinas argues that death taken to be annihilation is impossible, because there is always “*pure existence*” or “*l’ily a*”. (2) Levinas rejects Heidegger’s notion that death is a liberty. Rather, he suggests that the relation with death is an experience of pure passivity; (3) Finally, for Levinas, suicide is a contradictory concept (Lawton 1976: 75, n.30). On all these points, see also Critchley’s book: *Very Little...Almost Nothing* (1997: 31-83). John Caruana points out that Levinas’s analysis of death paves the way for his conception of ethics. This is demonstrated in the way that Levinas reads Hamlet’s utterance, *To be or not to be?* as having ethics rather than ontology as its premise. “‘It is the human possibility to dread injustice more than death’ that reveals to us the truth of what it means to be a human being. And once again, Levinas concludes: ‘To be or not to be, is perhaps not the question *par excellence*’” (Caruana 1998: fn.5).

(TI:158).<sup>47</sup> There is nothing to grasp.<sup>48,49</sup>

The switch between experiencing the element as the very essence of sensual enjoyment and experiencing the element as the very essence of terror is dependent on anxiety. If I feel insecure about my future, my whole experience of the world can turn on me. Levinas explains:

The element suits me—I enjoy it; the need to which it responds is the very *mode* of this conformity or of this happiness. The indetermination of the future alone brings insecurity to need, indigence: the perfidious elemental gives itself while escaping (TI:141).<sup>50</sup>

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas uses the example of insomnia to demonstrate the power of anxiety to turn a situation of pleasure into a situation of terror. In this case, the potential satiation of tiredness is turned into the impossibility of sleep:

The impossibility of rending the invading, inevitable, and anonymous rustling of existence manifests itself particularly in certain times when sleep evades our appeal. One

47. Interestingly, the narrator in Sue Woolfe's novel, *Leaning Towards Infinity* (1996: 274), is amused about the use of the word "apeiron" to describe infinity, because it means "something despised". She continues "My mother's scarlet pen had laughed about apeiron, the ancient Greek word: 'the word for infinity, meant something as dull, as grubby as a dirty handkerchief. (as my apron???) [The ancient Greeks] didn't want anything so incomplete as apeiron.'" This, Woolfe's narrator speculates, is why the Greeks invented pi. "They wanted a simple, underlying pattern. So spell-binding, it stopped thought" (Woolfe 1996: 304).

48. Levinas identifies his analysis of the *il y a* with Blanchot's "disaster" (EI:fn.p.50). Caruana (1998: 42) investigates Blanchot's (1986) use of the term in *The Writing of the Disaster*. "Blanchot exploits the rich etymology of the word *désastre*: to exist or live without a guiding star. The *disaster* (from the Italian *disastro*, no star) is the worst possible prognosis in augury, signifying that one is born either under an unlucky star or without a star with which to plan a course of life. For Blanchot, the *disaster* is dreadful, *effrayant* (*frayer* is to clear a path; hence, *ef-frayant* literally means to be without a path of direction). The *disaster* is absolutely terrifying because there is no direction or point of reference by which to orient life".

Returning to the point I made in an early footnote (fn.13 in section one), addressing the use of a horizon to make comprehension of objects relational: in the *il y a*, rather than a horizon organising materiality, according to Levinas, "there is a swarming of points" (EE:53). These points in space do not refer to each other. There is no horizon and therefore no perspective and no distance. This is why the *il y a* is a situation that involves no one and no thing.

49. Levinas refers to this ocean: "Nothingness is still envisaged as the end and limit of being, as an ocean which beats up against it on all sides" (EE:60).

In this sense, the experience of the *il y a* does not seem that dissimilar to the ethical relation. There is no place outside of the *il y a* from which to view it. Is this not how Levinas describes the *face to face* encounter, that is, as a relation with no relation? Caruana (1998: 33) looks at the movement from the "unredeemed disaster" of the *il y a* to the "catastrophic redemption" of the *face to face* encounter. Whereas the disaster is terrifying because from within it, I have no sense of direction, no sense of how to hold onto the future for myself, it seems the catastrophe is an altogether different experience of the future. "The Greek *katastrophe* originally signified an overturning. ...'catastrophe' in the context of Levinas's work has to be understood primarily in a Jewish manner, rather than a Greek one. ...In this particular context, catastrophe is inseparable from theophany—the manifestation of God as *the* agent of catastrophic events—and issues relating to justice and ethics" (42). In the disaster, there is no direction for me. In the catastrophe, "god" (re)directs my path.

50. Polk (2000: 36) puts this anxiety in terms of "an attack": "We fear this impersonal being because it is alien to the self; anonymous, it attacks us from the future; it dissolves the 'here now' into a 'nowhere,' into an impossibility of determination".

watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful. The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held by being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence (EE:61).<sup>51</sup>

With the power of this anxiety in mind, I return to eating and ask does eating also hold the potential of such terror? Eating does seem to present the possibility of a different spatial experience of the *il y a*. For, if I experience the terror of the *il y a* when I am lost in the wilderness, then it comes to me from the outside in—a gradual working away at me interiorly by the undifferentiated presence of the exterior world. In eating, I would experience this dissolution from the inside out. There are nonetheless similarities between the terror of the *il y a* that Levinas describes and the scene that I face everyday as I eat. I enjoy my food, I experience with pure sensibility its flavours and textures in my mouth. I swallow. Once I swallow, I relinquish control over what happens next. As was the case while I was chewing my food, my eyes remain unable to keep the process in check. I lose my intentions to biological process.<sup>52</sup> But on the possibility of eating provoking anxiety in me, Levinas remains silent. In the place of such a possibility, he simply writes: “Nourishment comes as a happy chance” (TI:141).

51. Benso (2000: 166) offers us another way of thinking about this—that is, that attention, or listening, which are two aspects of the ethical encounter, can also be likened to insomnia.

52. Interestingly, if I do *see* this process in action, then I tend to be repelled—not terrified, but I experience a form of disgust at what should be going on inside my body rather than outside. Vomit, faeces, people eating with their mouths open—all these things uncompromisingly expose me to the dissolving barriers between myself and the world. Kristeva refers to this as “abjection”. In a definition that could just as easily be used to describe my terror of the *il y a*, Kristeva (1980 (1988): 135-6) says abjection “is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so...”. When she introduces the notion in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (in Oliver 1997: 230-1) uses the human relationship to food as a prototypical example of abjection. In the case of food, rather than to terrify, the abject makes me feel like throwing up. It is disgusting to me. “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly.... Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream...”. I think that the reason it has this effect is the same reason that the *il y a* terrifies: the abject threatens my identity because it threatens the distinctions between subject and object, between what I intend and what I never intended. And for some reason, I feel better if this dissolution remains invisible to me—hidden by the body. For Kristeva, this abjection has a very important consequence- it helps me separate: “since this food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me,’ ...I expel *myself*; I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. ...I give birth to myself amid the violence of...vomit” (in Oliver 1997: 231).

And some foods seem to “exude” the *il y a* even before I have begun to eat them. There are foods that look or taste or smell like bodily fluids such as the mucilaginous okra; or foods that smell like acrid sweating bodies, such as blue cheese; or foods that smell like rotting flesh, such as the durian; or foods with eyes; or foods that bleed. See also Rosemary Pringle and Susan Colling’s (1993) work on the relationship between women and butchery and its link to the abject. “Kristeva argues that becoming abject is the body’s defence against cannibalism. If it is disgusting, it won’t be eaten” (in Oliver 1993: fn.10).

*Returning to elevation (from a different perspective)*

At this stage, as I am on my journey towards the ethical encounter, the potential of exposure to the *il y a* has a more potent hold on my actions than any potential of a *face to face* encounter with the Other. But if my enjoyment relinquishes my control over my future, then how will I ever reach the ethical encounter?

For Levinas, to encounter the face of the ethical Other, I must separate from and elevate above the world. In this movement, two relationships with the world crystallise, both intricately and inextricably interwoven with my neediness.

*The first is a relationship built on happiness.* I need the world, and my neediness is happiness. The world that I need I see from my elevated perspective. From here, I can see its limitations; from here, the light of my consciousness illuminates much of it, and what my light does not reveal is only in shadow. With the turning of the world, all its aspects will be revealed. Every part of it is within my grasp. It is shaped by my need. It is other to me, but only to the extent that it is not yet me. It is not other in the radical sense that (hu)man alterity is, that is, an otherness that defies my understanding. The world's otherness is that which resists my sameness, but it is ultimately understood.

But the elevation I have established I must 're-embody' if I am to enjoy the world. So, I come 'down' corporeally, materially, into the contents of my life. If love of life is happiness, then the contents of life become all important to me. "Contents...are not my being but more dear to me than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun" (TI:112). Even those needs that are not about my subsistence in being are all important to me as a lover of life. For the duration of my life, by the temporality of my happiness, the contents of my life that I love become the *point* of my life.

*The second is a relationship built on terror.* With temporality, I risk suffering. In separating, I have gone beyond being. I have released the world, and its 'otherness' now attaches the things that I need to its nothingness. It attaches them, not to a fixed point that I could perhaps sever, but to nothing. Re-embodying (eating, thinking, warming myself under the sun) I must absorb myself in the elemental if I am to enjoy myself. And with every moment of anxiety I feel at this prospect, I anticipate the *il y a*.

In my elevation, I set myself up for the enjoyment of the world but also for the terror of the *il y a*. With the potential of my elevation to expose me to such suffering, I ask again why does Levinas make elevation a prerequisite for the ethical encounter?

For Levinas, the 'absence' that (hu)man elevation creates in the world—an absence that is taken up in the present by the *il y a*—*devalues* the existence of the rest of the world subordinating it to (hu)man need. And by describing the *il y a* as horrific, so too the nonhuman world is found to be inherently horrific. So with one upward stroke, Levinas negotiates a departure for (hu)mans from the rest of the world. While (hu)mans are set on a movement upwards, the rest of the non(hu)man world finds itself locked into a position that allows for little movement. For now, the nonhuman world is held tight by two opposing forces. From above, this world removed of (hu)mans is weighed down by the neediness of (hu)mans. And from beneath, the world is tied firmly in place by the heavy

grip of nothingness. While (hu)mans have made a somewhat dubious escape, Levinas sees no such future for the rest of the nonhuman world. The future of the world is dictated by an existence that I am *beyond*. The things that I need from the world are suspensions of the *il y a*. They do not elevate their own existence as I do mine. My elevation makes my future distinct from the future of things: their future leads nowhere.

Things that arise from the *il y a* can never rise to my elevation, because the *il y a* sits at the opposite end of the spectrum from my elevated position. In fact, it is my elevation that brings the world into form. If it were not for the height of my elevation (the light of my *bonne conscience*), then these things would have remained a part of the elemental formlessness of the world. Levinas can describe things as giving of themselves to my needs because it was my needs that gave them their form. Thus, the elevated position that Levinas ascribes to (hu)mans allows me to feel at ease about using the world. But elevation does not alleviate the possibility of suffering: it gives me the right to try my hardest at happiness by using the world. And because the nonhuman world is unconscious to happiness, it cannot—according to Levinas—suffer from my use or consumption of it. This is the most important consequence of Levinas’s positioning of (hu)mans in an elevated relation to the rest of the world.

Levinas’s notion of (hu)man elevation is also crucial to an understanding of how Levinas’s ethics manages to avoid the alterity of the (hu)man world. The spatial manifestations of avoidance will be considered in later works, but for now, I continue to chart Levinas’s dystopic path of the (hu)man subject toward the face of the (hu)man other. For, as it stands, I, as that elevated (hu)man subject, am not yet capable of the ethical encounter. Before I can proceed on my ethical journey, I must first find some security against the force of the *il y a*, a force that my elevation has released against my future. Instead of giving in to the recklessness of the *il y a*, I must find a way to resist the *il y a*. This ‘resistance’ is what Levinas deems to be the precursor to ethics—not a surrender to the immediacy of enjoyment that brings me up against the terror of the *il y a*, but an enjoyment that suspends itself, and, in being suspended, acts as security for me against the *il y a*. For Levinas, eating does not bring up immediately the terror of the *il y a*. But why, then, does eating bring up immediately the terror of the *il y a* in me?

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