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Locating responsibility after Heidegger: Levinas and Nancy

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A Thesis
Entitled

Locating Responsibility After Heidegger: Levinas and Nancy

By
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Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Master of Arts in Philosophy

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The thesis explores the intertwining of the ethical and the ontological, contrasting the works of Jean Luc Nancy and Emmanuel Levinas around central themes and questions posed, in part, by Martin Heidegger. The thesis evaluates their respective approaches to relationality and responsibility in relation to a number of central questions including finitude and the infinite, situatedness and the everyday, and their respective approaches to freedom and decision. While taking seriously the infinitely demanding sense of responsibility in Levinas’s work, I find the conceptions of relationality and responsibility in Levinas to be lacking with concern to situatedness and political considerations. These issues are connected to how Levinas conceives of ethical subjectivity. In response, Nancy’s thinking of relationality opens up an approach to ethical responsibility which is entirely rooted in our finite situatedness, and thus does not place the ethical apart from the ontological.
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“[W]hen we speak of ‘abandonment’... we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end.”
- Jean-Paul Sartre

“[N]ihilism can never be more than a transition, a shifting, ill-defined sphere, a period of wavering between two extremes, one leading to submission and subservience, the other to permanent revolt.”
- Raoul Vaneigem

“[W]hy is it an ideal to sacrifice at all? Why isn’t it ideal to have a really good time while you’re doing things? I think it’s a joyous thing to fight back against oppression. I think it’s all about saying, ‘I love life.’ Sometimes I hate life and it’s a big-ass drag but I’m still having an interesting time being here. The whole idea of suffering sounds very Christian to me.”
- Kathleen Hanna
Preface

Locating the (Un)Ground of Relationality

This thesis is oriented along the divergence of two paths of thought, in a quest to trace out their common origins and differing responses to some central demands. On the one side there is a thinking which seeks to raise ethics over ontology, to place “Ethics as First Philosophy.” On the other side, there is a thinking which takes the ethical as emergent right at ontology, a thinking which sees in our very co-existence a certain “Originary Ethics.” The first path roots ethical responsibility on the side of the Infinite, in relation to a Beyond which inflicts a demand upon subjectivity to substitute itself for the Other. On the other side, we encounter a thinking which articulates existence as “Infinitely Finite,” which takes up “a finite thinking” of existence, approaching sense and responsibility as taking place right at existence in this world to which we are thrown, or abandoned, without any such recourse to a “beyond.” On the first side, it is of course the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, on the other side of the divide is the thinking of Jean Luc Nancy. Between each of these is the seminal and demanding work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s work of fundamental ontology stands here as a sort of fork in the road between two divergent paths, but also as a fertile ground which has spurred the
growth of such demanding approaches to thinking the conditions of relationality and responsibility.

What I am primarily interested in here are the conditions of relationality and the possibility for thinking ethical responsibility as it is articulated within the respective works of Levinas and Nancy. I am concerned to examine, at a primordial level, how relationality and responsibility are experienced by the existent in each of these lines of thought. In the work of each author, there is a focus upon drawing out (or withdrawing) the conditions in which the subject finds itself in relation to others in the world. I am concerned here to test each of these respective approaches in order to assess whether and how their writings allow for responsibility to be thought outside of the traditional conceptions of moral subjectivity and normativity.

As such, the thrust of these investigations has primarily to do with assessing how it is in the thinking of Levinas, Nancy and Heidegger himself that the person is related to itself, its world and others, so as to trace out how one in each case is called into responsibility. I will also be looking to draw out how these different approaches to the primordial conditions of relationality weigh upon the existent’s ability to take up and carry out responsibility, in how responsibility is opened or delimited by the conditions placed upon existence in the respective approaches. I have chosen not to order these investigations under strict and imposed common parameters, but have chosen to develop each path of thinking within their own frameworks, to allow the central themes of each approach to be considered and appreciated within its own logic, as much as possible.

I will start here with an extended consideration upon the manner in which Levinas seeks to bind ethical responsibility to the Beyond, in what he sometimes refers to as the
relation of “Substitution.” I will be focused almost entirely upon the form of ethical
discourse developed by Levinas after *Totality and Infinity*, finding that the articulation of
the ethical relation in his work becomes more rigorous and refined at this time in
response to numerous criticisms of his earlier work, notably those of Derrida. And
though there are many continuing themes from his earliest work to his latest, my aim here
is not to present the evolution of Levinas’s ethical thought, but to examine it at its most
developed point, which takes place around the publication of his second opus *Otherwise
Than Being, Or Beyond Essence*. As such, most of the work analyzed and cited on
Levinas will be concerning that period, with a few exceptions.

After tackling Levinas’s ethical discourse from a number of angles, we will
briefly reapproach some of Heidegger’s thinking that relates most strongly to the
considerations at hand as we will begin to turn to the work of Jean Luc Nancy. Though I
will not always be explicitly relating Nancy’s work to that of Levinas, I think that overall
the development of many of their central points which circle around many of the same
concerns will resonate in a sort of dialogue, and that many of the issues raised in our
discussion of Levinas will be responded to in some way in the discussion of Nancy. I
have chosen to begin with Levinas for a few reasons, the first of which is the relative
status of prominence which his thought currently holds in discussions of Continental
ethics. The second set of reasons are perhaps more relevant to the work here, is that there
are numerous central issues in Levinasian thought which I find wholly problematic, and
as such I hope that by bringing out these criticisms first in the thesis I will raise questions,
topics and themes which Nancy’s path of thought might be better served to address. So
that is the general structure of the thesis.
As for the general intentions of the work here and what I hope to accomplish; I wish here to demonstrate that while Levinasian ethical thought aims to raise the demand of responsibility for the other to the first order of philosophy, his joint conceptions of a passively formed subjectivity and the asymmetricality of the ethical relation leave existence bound to an order which deprives existence of its own dignity. Though his thinking is in part inspired to give a binding to responsibility by Heidegger’s deficiency¹ in articulating the radically primordial ethical character of thrown existence and his aversion to everyday being-with-others (on the side of a romantic notion of authentic individualism); Levinas’s move to a thinking of transcendence ultimately furthers the devaluation and destitution of how we think co-existence. For while Heidegger at the very least understood our existence in the world as being-with to be ontologically constitutive of existence, Levinas moves to root subjective existence in a passive formation and indebtedness to a force Beyond being, beyond existence in the world. In this manner, the subject is no longer thought as being constitutively and always already in-common with others in the sharing of finitude, but is now radically separated from them, bound first and primarily to the Infinite. That is, the primary mode of relation for the Levinasian subject is a passive and one-sided relation with God. Though Levinas gives to thought a radically demanding sense of responsibility, the costs for the subject and for any possibility of interrelationality appear to be devastating and severe. We will address this concern by analyzing the harsh guilt and extreme isolation involved in the

¹ “Unquestionably, Heideggerean ethics is a long way from stressing the ‘being-the-there-with-others’… That sense is or makes sense only in the sharing that finitude essentially is, this is what is not emphasized. And this is doubtless the reason why it will have been possible… to treat a ‘people’ as an individual.” – Nancy, Jean Luc “Originary Ethics,” in A Finite Thinking, 194
intertwining of transcendence and responsibility which Levinas’s thought revolves around.

In taking stock of these difficulties in Levinasian ethical discourse, I will not simply be looking to condemn the project of Levinas’s thought, but rather I will be seeking to open up essential lines of questioning and problematics, points of rupture and points of departure which will need to be retraced from Heidegger’s work of fundamental ontology in order to rethink responsibility in a manner that is demanding and is located within the terrain of our shared existence.

So it is with these concerns in mind that I will arrive at the work of Jean Luc Nancy. For whereas Levinas steps off from Heideggerean thought by moving to a thinking that dwells upon the Beyond, the Infinite, and places passivity at the heart of subjectivity; Nancy’s thinking radicalizes Heideggerean thought in order to open up a thinking that engages right at existence, dwells upon finitude and engages existence as an experience of freedom and potentiality. In Nancy’s work, Being is the singular-plural of existence, neither a thinking of fused collective identity nor one of isolated and solipsistic subjectivities in need of a bridging to bind them together. Whereas the Levinasian ethical subject is radically separated from the Other, singular beings in Nancy’s thought are always already in-common, always already engaged in the originarily ethical spacing of co-existence.

So while Levinas seeks hope for the Good in an appeal to an Infinite beyond being, Nancy takes up a finite thinking of responsibility in which decision is taken up each-time in the here and now. For Nancy, Being is not stretched between the poles of a higher good and a fall into evil, but good and evil are each positive possibilities for
decision, in freedom risk cannot be locked off in advance. The demand for Levinas comes from Beyond, but for Nancy it emerges from right at the very thrownness and abandonment of everyday existence.

In moving through this trajectory of thought, on each side indebted but not bound by Heideggerean ontology, we hope to open up a thinking which does not sacrifice freedom for responsibility, nor responsibility for freedom, but finds each as emergent in the potentiality of our very existence.
Chapter One
Emmanuel Levinas and the Infinite Demand of Substitution

Preliminary Comments on Approaching the Work of Emmanuel Levinas

“It is impossible to ‘master’ [Levinas’s thought]. Perhaps this is Levinas’s intention.”

- Dermot Moran

While Dermot Moran was in one sense speaking of the contradictions and difficulties in treating Levinas’s work as philosophy, speaking to the frustrations of a skeptical observer; at the same time, Moran’s comment also points to a central facet of Levinas’s work, that the Other and the transcendence of that which is Beyond Being resist mastery by consciousness, by the logos and by ontology. As such, addressing the work of Levinas is a challenge on a number of levels.

David Wood points to the manner in which Levinas relies on hyperbolic terminology to insist upon the necessity and importance of his claims, and asks, “What if the very formulation of the ethical provided by Levinas, and the implicit proposal that vigilance is the only answer, are as much symptoms of the problem as responses to it? In particular, what if the hyperbole in Levinas’s formulations were a sign of the impotence of the stance rather than of its significance?” Moran also points to the rhetorical
methods employed by Levinas to “support” his assertions as a means of bypassing
reasoning and insulating his work from criticism and outside points of view:

“Levinas rarely offers arguments; he simply presents his analysis as if it were the way it
must be for everyone, not a position, to paraphrase Levinas himself, open to the views of
others. We are, in Levinas’s own terms, sucked into the sphere of the same. Levinas
seems always to assume that the reader will see exactly what he is saying and will be
convinced. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to argue against him, other than to
say that one sees things differently.”

Levinas’s dogmatism and lack of argumentation make it a daunting task to take
up his thinking in a critical manner. For quite a long time I have found it difficult to say
anything at all about it, except whether I found different points compelling or ultimately
useless. There are many points in his works, such as in *God, Death & Time*, when he
makes the case for a radical, non-objective and non-spatial heteronomy which obsesses
consciousness, such as when he writes parenthetically in *God, Death & Time* arguing that
heteronomy of consciousness’s affliction by the Other must be considered non-spatially:
“if it were spatial it could still be recovered by consciousness.” This is a manner, not of
giving reasons to support his claims, but of giving reasons for why he wishes to assert
things as such. Dermot Moran also takes aim at this tendency with Levinas’s work to
make unsubstantiated claims under the guise of argumentation, asking:

“What is the status of Levinas’s claims about the primacy of the other? Are they
phenomenological discoveries, uncovering neglected phenomena of our social life,
falsifiable empirical claims? Or are they idealisations, a fantasy picture of what ethical
relations with others ought to be? What sense can we make of claims like ‘since the
Other looks at me I am responsible for him.’ What force does the connective ‘since’
have here? In what sense does my obligation follow from the presence of the other?”

The overall effect is a quasi-religious tone that colors Levinas’s mature works,
amost in their entirety. Certainly such a style makes it difficult, if not altogether
impossible to apply critical evaluative standards to Levinas’s ethical system, and it seems quite intentional on his part that his thought ought to resist such attempts.\textsuperscript{10}

So finally, I have come to the work of Levinas for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the challenge of a philosophy which seemed to resist comprehension and stood so stubbornly at odds with my own thinking. Yet, the most important reason is that Levinas addresses what I take to be the most important philosophical issues of our time, the question of how we think about responsibility. I find the placing of the ethical above all -- as first philosophy -- as Levinas likes to put it, to be an important gesture, though one which comes with its own set of complications. Of course, it is also the case that the popularity of Levinas’s work has taken off immensely over the recent decades, and that his version of ethical discourse has begun to dominate the scene in continental circles. So, in order to investigate these concerns it seems highly appropriate to confront this thinking which has been so influential in the contemporary thinking of the ethical.

In the course of this chapter, I will seek to explicate the formation of the Levinasian ethical subject and the dimensions of the ethical relation at work in his thought. Through the course of this investigation, we will encounter a number of significant issues which will ultimately determine how and in what sense Levinas’s thinking of the ethical measures up to the demands of our world. We will notice that the development of the subject and that of the ethical relation are intimately intertwined, so much so that it is practically impossible to consider subjectivity outside of the ethical, and vice versa. This is important to keep in mind as I will begin here with a brief consideration of what “subjectivity” means and how it operates in the context of Levinas’s work on the ethical.
The Levinasian Ethical Subject: Being-for-the-Other

“The key concept in Levinas’ work is ethical subjectivity. The precondition for the ethical relation to the other is found in Levinas’ picture of the ethical subject. It is because of a disposition towards alterity at the heart of the subject that relatedness to the other is possible.”¹¹

Levinas writes to illuminate the surprise of coming to the other as one who we cannot subsume into a form of recognition, or view under a preconceived form of signification. He works to undermine and interrupt the thinking of the subject that aims at self-possession and the quest for knowledge. His thinking of ethical subjectivity moves to open up within consciousness something which is entirely inappropriable by it, a radical transcendence that comes in the form of the Other. The ethical relation is thus at the very heart of the Levinasian subject. It is indeed the formative aspect of the Levinasian subject. As Levinas pushes his case for thinking “ethics as first philosophy”, his philosophy itself places the experience of the ethical as the originary experience of all subjectivity. He insists, “my responsibility for the other is the for of the relationship, the very signifyingness of signification, which signifies in saying before showing itself in the said.”¹² That is, then, that true responsibility is an experience which cannot be formalized and explained within an understood context of rules and rights, and that the other exceeds the grasp of a categorization of this or that type. The experience of ethical responsibility for the other is beyond these conceptualizations. It is an an-archic experience, and as we shall see, that is because it originates beyond and prior to conceptualization.
Levinas’s descriptive ethical language portrays the subject as persecuted by thoughts which are beyond its ability to think, reawakening and reconfiguring Descartes’ conception of the infinite as that which can be thought yet exceeds the grasp of our understanding. For Levinas, the Other is the figure of this idea of the infinite, and it is thus the Other which exceeds our ability to possess, to grasp as knowledge and to understand through recourse to universal concepts. For Levinas, otherness cuts across consciousness in a manner which cannot be processed, and as such leads the subject to obsession with that which it experiences but cannot take hold of. “[T]he subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of re-presentation. The term obsession designates this relation which is irreducible to consciousness.”¹³ This obsession, due to its resistance to our capture, instills a desire toward transcendence. But the experience of the other in our lived existence is still but a reflection of the primordial experience, which Levinas contends is to have occurred in passivity, in a primordial past before all pasts. What he speaks of is an experience of the Other (God, the Infinite) forming the subject. I am thus not my own origin. I am then, and before all else, Other unto myself. I am Autrui, the other, in Levinas’ formulation: being-for-the-other.

The most succinctly developed articulation of Levinas’s thinking of ethical subjectivity is developed in his essay entitled “Substitution” from 1968. Robert Bernasconi tells us that “‘Substitution’ offers a reexamination of the Western philosophical concept of identity, which Levinas associates with self-coincidence, self-possession, and sovereignty.”¹⁴ Levinas seeks to overturn these conceptualizations of identity, structuring subjectivity instead as imbued from the start by otherness, that the subject is first and foremost a “being-for-the-other”. The subject articulated in
“Substitution” does not possess itself, but is rather persecuted and obsessed by a proximity to that which is other than itself, an otherness which affects it but which consciousness cannot take hold of. Given the subject’s inability to take hold of that which affects it, and cannot take claim to its own origin, it cannot be considered the sovereign of its own actions. Bernasconi continues, “In ‘Substitution’ the identity of the I is under challenge, specifically in the context of responsibility. Unlike the conventional conception of responsibility, whereby I am primarily responsible only for what I have chosen or for what I have done, Levinas conceives of a responsibility to which one is elected and by which one finds oneself answerable for everything and everyone, even for one’s persecutors.”15 As such, rather than a theory of subjectivity which seeks to orient the subject in his stable place in the world amongst others like himself, Levinas constructs an entirely disorienting subject position, one in which the subject is affected from without, passive to his own formation and driven by an obsession which exceeds his grasp.

Much of the novelty of Levinas’s thought in “Substitution” stems from his unique terminological system. There is a strict intertwining of terms in the essay which, when brought together, begins to make sense of the operations at work. Levinas begins the work by sketching the “traditional” conceptualization of consciousness, which he describes as possession of itself through the articulation of themes, that being always comes to find itself through an “ideality” and that this ontological process amounts to a rather safe assurance of identity. He writes that, “What arrives of the unknown is already disclosed, open, manifest, cast in the mold of the known, and can never come as a complete surprise.”16 So, in what amounts to a hasty critique of Kantian metaphysics, but
also perhaps of Hegel, Heidegger and so many others, Levinas lays out the stakes: that philosophy has closed itself to possibilities outside of its mastery, has made sure there is no adventure of being by keeping a place in which to assimilate anything which is unknown into the fold of the known, that it has sought to domesticate that which is other to it and has forgotten that which has no place in the sphere of being. “According to Levinas, ontology reduces all relationship with beings to knowledge; it conquers beings and never lets them out of its iron grip of understanding.” In Levinas’s view, within the entire scope of the Western tradition everything is related to what is certain and recognized in the image of the Same, thus allowing us to proceed with confidence in our self-mastery.

As Francois Raffoul comments, “with Levinas, everything revolves around the meaning to be given to ontology.” Raffoul goes on to describe Levinas’s interpretation of ontology, from Parmenides to Heidegger as “a thinking of the Same, a thinking which reduces otherness to the Same by the very power of its theoretical comprehensiveness.” Levinas counters what he posits as the thinking of possession and mastery, which he equates with Western ontology, by introducing the concept of *proximity*. Levinas describes proximity as “a relationship… with what is incommensurable” with a theme. It is an experience with otherness which resists any assimilation by consciousness and frustrates any schematism. Proximity indicates a “beyond” that is nonsignifyable by the logos. Levinas further describes proximity as that which “without any common measure with the present, proximity is always ‘already past’, above the ‘now’ which it troubles and obsesses.” The experience Levinas is already indicating here is that of the subject being touched by the Other, beyond being, in a passivity this side of all passivity. As I
have indicated, it is the thought of the infinite, or God, a possibility beyond all possibility which continues to affect consciousness precisely because consciousness cannot figure it into its sphere of understanding. Levinas refers to this inappropriable nature of the experience as “an-archic” in the sense that it cannot be subsumed within an arche, an order. It is foreign to consciousness, or as Levinas illuminatingly puts it: “obsession traverses consciousness contrariwise.”\textsuperscript{21} It is an experience which cannot be domesticated by representation, and as such, obsesses and persecutes consciousness (for being that consciousness seeks to possess, order and master knowledge in Levinas’s view, it is compelled by this itch which it cannot scratch, this thing which eludes its grasp, yet continues to affect it and touch upon it. It is as if consciousness were driven in spite of itself.)

Given the fact that consciousness cannot actively grasp this experience, Levinas considers this to be an “inversion of consciousness.” As he states, “This inversion of consciousness is without doubt a passivity,” but not just any passivity, Levinas goes further to describe it as a “passivity this side of all passivity.”\textsuperscript{22} It is the experience of the I for the Other. Consciousness, inverted by the obsession beyond its grasp, finds itself not as the heroic “for-itself” striving to know its world and make its place within it, but rather finds itself in delirium, disoriented by the experience of proximity.

As such, we are perhaps beginning to understand the titling of the essay as “Substitution.” The traditional notion of self-possession and self-identity is upset by the experience of the Other. The subject finds itself passively formed as an “I-for-the-other”, that is, as \textit{a substitute}. 
This primordial and passive formation of the I as intrinsically Other to itself instills a desire toward transcendence, a desire which obsesses the subject with that which is not itself: the Other. But, as Thomas Carl Wall notes, “as it will always be I who am for-the-other, a remainder or trace of for-myselfness is uneradicable, no matter how noble or ‘selfless’ I try to be.”23 As such, the subject cannot achieve a pure transcendence as “for-the-other,” and will be compelled continually to seek transcendence in the ethical act for the other, though it will be unable to fully quench this thirst for transcendence. This is the *obsessional* quality of Levinasian relationality, and gives a sense of how this experience is described as a *persecution*. It is such that consciousness yet asserts itself, and that the I presents itself as an “I”, so that even in the act for-the-other, pure transcendence is perpetually frustrated and postponed. This frustration can also be read as a compelling desire cycle, a repetition compulsion toward the Other, as the subject is bound in a position of being hostage to the other, having been formed from the start in passivity by a force beyond being. In a certain sense, the subject strives to reclaim its origin in the other, an impossibility which is disorienting for subjectivity and orienting of one’s being-for-the-other. This thinking of a “Good beyond being” that drives the subject is derived from Platonic thought, as it appears in the *Republic* as the highest and most principal of all the forms.
Levinas and Ethical Platonism

If Levinas indeed wished to put forth a thinking that would draw us towards the other in a manner of care and responsibility, why did he at the same time portray our lived relationships in such a manner of privation? If it stands that even the best of our acts in the world amount to nothing more than the betrayal of an ideal, how is this the least bit respectful of humanity? Does Levinas wish to issue a thinking of ethical relationality that responds to our world, or does he wish to put forth an impossible ideal; a tragic-heroic superfigure who lives only to take responsibility for all others and to thus aggrandize the Infinite through his tireless and humble self-effacing martyrdom of the subject?

Levinas doesn’t hide that he is influenced in a manner by Platonism. It is in the tragic-heroic paradigm that champions an impossible form of authenticity, a quest for ethical purity which can only end in failure and incompletion, but which drives the subject again and again; for the Levinasian ethical subject is driven not to do good, but by “the Good beyond being.” Levinas asserts the influence of the Platonic image of the Good beyond being upon his thinking, and combined with the notion with the Cartesian idea of the Infinite in the Third Meditation, to which Levinas equates with the Other, what we have is an ethical demand which comes not from the other, but from a beyond of this world. The Other stands in the place of the infinite and most high, we are obsessed by the proximity of this Other, which we cannot appropriate in knowledge, and we are called from without toward the Good. And just as compared to the Platonic order of the forms, the things of this world are, in a sense, merely shadows. All of our actions in this world pale to the true Good, which is Infinite and beyond being. And just as Socrates
was martyred for Plato’s ideals, the Levinasian subject too lives as a martyr, his greatest ideal perhaps being to sacrifice his own life for the Other. For, as we have gone over, Levinas’s ethics is based upon a conception of the subject that is “for-the-other” before it is for its own self. For Levinas, the subject is formed in passivity and cannot but be responsible to the other. (Though this is considered a “free” choice, in Levinas’s thinking, where freedom is understood as an experience of either accepting or rejecting this demand, where one can either accede to being-for-the-other, or deny the obligation on the side of one’s conatus and self-interest.) To be truly ethical for Levinas is to be-for-the-other, absolutely and in spite of all. To begin to understand the workings of this idea of the ethical we must examine how this notion of passivity forms the subject in his thought.

It comes as no surprise then that Levinas always posits the subject as lower than, and infinitely more responsible to the other than the other is to the subject. In fact the issue of the Other’s responsibility to the subject is explicitly not factored into the ethical relation. It is not a relation of equals. The Other is most high, it is in fact conceived as our access point to the Infinite. It stands in the place of a demand to which the subject can never be equal. So, similar to the condition of the cave dwellers in Plato’s allegory, the Levinasian subject lives amongst shadows. Even it’s “purest” desires to “selflessly” act ethically for the other can manage to increase its guilt, for in those desires and actions, it reaffirms the I. If it is “I” who seeks to do good, I am thus reaffirming my own self, the self who eats the other’s food and takes up their space. The subject can’t manage but to get in the way.
This subject is in this world, and upon his shoulders rests the demand he must assent to, the demand to value the other human being most highly and to place the other before himself, to strive to do the Good for the other, ultimately for the Other that is beyond being. For Levinas, the Good we strive to achieve is beyond our reach in this world. The good is described by Plato’s Socrates in the Republic as “[N]ot only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior in rank and power.” From this passage, we can see how the idea of the Good is unlike the other forms, in that it reigns over them, does not itself have a distinct representation in being, but is the supreme idea which makes all other knowledge possible. Derrida places this Platonic idea of the Good as a sort of apex to the ordering logos of sovereignty writing that “It is to this idea of the Good that, in accordance with political or politicizable figures, the ultimate sovereign power is granted.” That the Good holds the power of ordering the visible and sensible world, it is the ineffable idea which sits atop and ahead of the realm of reason. Derived from its context in the Republic, a document attesting to the necessity of sovereignty over human affairs, it is the place of God in human action which Levinas is instantiating back in the theistic realm, taking away from the political. Brian Schroeder observes that “Paradoxically, the Good functions as both the limit principle for knowledge and truth and as the open horizon of possibilities.” As a limit principle the Good stands as “the impossibility of absolute knowledge.” It is clearly in line here with the idea of the Good marking out the territory of sovereignty over the subject’s actions. What is knowable is due to the Good, which also marks out the line which is not to be crossed. The Good then is that which determines the possible and the impossible.
The influence of Platonic idea of the Good beyond being is openly confessed early on in Levinas’s mature work and orients the direction of that thinking. Our responsibility to the other is continually conveyed as being beyond our thought, beyond our means and beyond this world. The ethical actions we attempt in this world may be ordered in relation to the Good, but they cannot attain the fullness and quality of the Good beyond being. Ultimately the other, whom we aim to do right by, is God. God is the true figure of the sovereign Other, the one whom we seek to honor through our actions toward other humans. For in Levinas’s conception, our primordial disposition to the other is formed in relation to God, and is not to be found in our day to day lived interactions with other humans.

So, as in Plato’s cave allegory, for Levinas, it seems, the Levinasian subject lives in the shadows, chained to this earth-bound existence. But the light that cuts across the walls, a light we cannot grasp in knowledge, but which obsesses us, is the call of Infinite, the pull of exteriority which calls the subject out of the shadows and toward its responsibility for the Other. And though this exposure is beyond the subject’s capacity to think, it is precisely for this reason that it obsesses the subject all the more. The other for whom the subject takes up our ethical duty is a reflection of this inappropriable and ineffable force, before which he is absolutely passive.

We can also see here a parallel with the Platonic conception of memory as evidenced in the *Meno*. There, Plato’s Socrates aims to show how even an uneducated slave can discern basic mathematical truths, and uses this demonstration to argue for a form of memory gleaned from a realm beyond being, when the soul pre-existed in knowledge of the forms. Levinas also uses a myth of a pre-existent experience to explain
the ethical desire for the other, though this of course is not a form of knowledge, like with Plato. But just as it is an effect of an immemorial past that is to allow the slave to discern knowledge in the *Meno*, so it is such an experience which is to have commanded the Levinasian subject to the Other. In each case, the primordial formation beyond being is not remembered, but its effects are argued to be at work and determinitive in the person’s relation to the world. (I would find it reasonable here to simply comment that such foundations for experience and understanding are purely mythological, stories crafted to hold a system of thought together, like a Lacanian *point-de-capiton.*)

It becomes clearer as we go along that Levinas’s system of ethical philosophy works in the manner of a circular chain: Proximity requires responsibility, but only a responsible relation can bring beings into proximity. Also Levinas consistently writes about the an-archy of the ethical relation, (that nothing is prescribed, graspable or given in advance) the subject who is exposed to this ungraspable exteriority and freed from ontological self-concern is still grounded in a very particular sense. For each subject, each I as understood in Levinas’s thought, is in relation and in the service of the infinite, governed by that which is beyond being: the Good. Levinas may hope that such a philosophy can instill caring responsibility in a world of chaos and violence, but in so doing, Levinas places this world in the shadows of another. He places sense and meaning in a realm beyond our co-existence and infinitely beyond our grasp. To guard against the perceived ethical ambiguity of ontology, Levinas manages to go whole heartedly in the other direction, moving away from existence. It seems he is hoping to guarantee safety by dismissing the sense of this world altogether in favor of the governing force of the Infinite.
Absolute Passivity and the Formation of the Levinasian Subject

“The oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with an absolute passivity.”

As “the victim of a persecution” the Levinasian subject is always already formed by Otherness, but this is not in any sense of an active becoming and has little or nothing to do with a shared co-existence. It is rather due to an absolutely passive formation prior to myself, prior to my own existence that I am afflicted. As we will see, it is a destiny to which the subject’s actions, as giving and ethical as the subject may strive to be, can only be a betrayal of this originary experience.

Thomas Carl Wall writes, “Levinasian Autrui will never have been identified yet will never be without identity, for I am Autrui myself, and outside this identification, I am NOTHING… my very self is beyond me, is without essence, is otherwise than (my) being.” The Levinasian subject is thus conceived in this manner as entirely bound up with this Other that persecutes its consciousness, to the point that to rebel against this persecution would leave the self as nothing. It would be to abandon its very own origin, to reject its only possible identification.

This formation of the subject by the Other, in a radical passivity which precedes the subject’s freedom, affects the subject and orients it toward a singular obligation. It is an obligation which transcends comprehension in the logos. As Wall states, “This is clearly no ethics I might ever understand or theorize, for it is above me and prior to me.” The subject thus is to carry out an obligation which is above and beyond its comprehension.
Fabio Ciaramelli stresses that for Levinas, the subject is “free” insofar as it is freed from “ontological self-concern” of the conatus (that is, the desire for self preservation and overcoming). In its being as Autrui (other) to itself, it is then “freed” to give of itself ethically for the other. As such, the formation in passivity is thus construed as a liberation from interestedness (particularly self-interestedness) which would inhibit its ability to take up its ethical obligations. Rudi Visker articulates the Levinasian difference between a supposed “pre-ethical” freedom, in which the subject is concerned for its own conatus and caring for its own whims, and a “freedom that is imposed upon us from outside and is thus able to provide the orientation we need.”

Our responsibility is thus not an “engagement” which we would have a free choice to enter into or withdraw from. “The ethical act is, to be sure, a free one, but the freedom implied in it is of a different type.” This supposed freedom is the imposition of the horizon of “the Good” which orders the subject and imposes its delimitation upon my freedom. The subject in responsibility is thus “free” to accept or deny the demand placed upon it. Fabio Ciaramelli gives an explication of the intertwining of subject formation and ethical obligation in Levinas’s mature works that can help us appreciate the unique solitary demand placed upon the Levinasian subject, he illustrates that:

“I am obliged to the other, without being ontologically compelled to do so (since I can still refuse myself to the other). Levinas stresses that I am the only one who can respond to an appeal so personal and so direct that it arises immediately from my orientation toward the other, from my position in the relation…. Hence, in the same event which displays my own ipseity prior to any intelligible ontological identity whose form I might share with others, an absolute obligation arises concerning that which is irreducibly mine, not only now, in the contingency of this event, but always. The authority of this obligation, upon which the meaning of my subjectivity depends, is grounded not in the universality of the logos, but in the immediacy of the transcendence of the other who places me under obligation. In my position as a subject, responsible for another, I am affected by an infinite transcendence that I am unable to comprehend through the (arche of the) logos.”
We are confronted with the absolute and unique position of responsibility in which Levinas frames ethical subjectivity. From this formulation, we can gather that Levinas thus envisions a theory of ethics and subjectivity that is precisely not structured in the manner of a universal command, or a subjectivity which can be understood as one being like all others. Inversely, the ethical subject is irreplaceable. As such, only I, in my place, can take up this responsibility, and the call is addressed to me alone. There are no abstractions or generalizations because the obligation transcends our ability to grasp it in consciousness. It is not spoken in the logos or delivered as a universal command which can then be delegated and shared. What it comes from is an experience with that which is inappropiable and beyond our comprehension, an experience with the infinite. Ciaramelli aims to demonstrate that this demand of the Levinasian subject is in fact universalizable, and that we must be able to read his work as applying to each subject in their own, but this manner of extrapolation which might bring all subjects together into the discussion of ethical responsibility is not on the table. While the sovereign may be ordering all in this manner, the ethical subject is only to concern itself with its duties and responsibilities. This is also a central theme of Levinasian ethics which cannot easily be glossed over.

It is particularly revealing here that Levinas’s idea of a “pre-ethical freedom” views subjectivity as merely selfish and borderline animalistic, unconcerned by its world and others. To Levinas, existence itself does not give a horizon to freedom, does not place the existent into a horizon. Life without the ordering of the sovereign (the Infinite,
and Good) upon being is taken as lacking in structure and significance. In this system, to be ethical necessitates one being ordered and restricted by a higher power.

So we are yet left with an ethical system in which the subject is in an entirely asymmetrical relation to the other. That the relation of the I to the other is older than any self, and is actually prior to any self-relation. The I, in absolute passivity and in a past prior to all pasts, is affected by the Other. Levinas writes that “Passivity has no sense other than in the one-for-the-other, pushed to its end (to the point of the one hostage of the other), in which man finds himself in his identity as unique and irreplaceable: for the other, without a return toward oneself.”

The subject is hostage to the other and should carry no expectation of reciprocity; it is an entirely asymmetric relation. In fact, Levinas would assert that to command anything of the other on my part would be unethical. It might make one wonder how it is that the other is not acting unethically by “commanding” me and making me their “hostage.” But it is not the other who does so, at least not in the sense of consciously willing a demand. The original formation of “being-for-the-other” is not formed through relation to a particular other human being. In fact, it cannot be, for this mythical formation is to have taken place prior to any existence, in all passivity and in an absolute past. It is a myth which contends that before all else, before any existence, there is Otherness. I am not my own origin. And just as significantly, before I have any relation to other human subjects like myself, I am in relation to the infinite, that which exceeds my ability to think and obsesses me for all time. It is this originary, passive experience with the Other (which is the figure of God) which orients the subject toward the other person. I am thus construed as in relation to the infinite
before all else. The subject is uniquely formed and called from a voice beyond being. The sovereign speaks to the subject in a one way communication.

Yet, as a finite being in the world, the subject can only betray the purity of this originary relation. No lived relation can be purely ethical for Levinas, for in the world, every act the subject takes up always comes with the assertion of the self, always a remainder which slips from the fragile image of the pure ethical relation.

“This anteriority will be, for Levinas, a dissymmetry and a goodness without measure that (de)structures the self as a relation with a never present Other. We add, therefore, that any relation that the I establishes with an other subject will only betray the pure anteriority that, in Levinas’s thought, imperiously orders me to the Other. Furthermore, we must note that, as immemorial, this anterior relation can only be betrayed, and therefore any relation to another remains paradoxically faithful to the Levinasian ethique.”

So, we cannot expect to attain the purity of the ethical relation. As such, something like desire, a desire structured like a superegoic guilt, drives the subject forward. In each case, there is a feeling of loss, that I have not done enough, cannot do enough. And yet, it is this experience of failure which gives the subject it’s impetus to pick up again. My responsibility cannot be completed. I continue to be persecuted as a hostage of the Other, obsessed by this demand which I cannot fulfill and this experience of proximity which I cannot grasp. And as a hostage, I am acting out the will of an Other.
An Anonymous Mimesis.

“An anonymous mimesis precedes and permanently erodes all identity. My being is not my own.”

Wall makes plain that which Levinas himself seems to obscure, that subjectivity in the Levinasian ethical schema is largely the acting out of a role which has been set for the subject prior to its own existence. The Levinasian subject, in sum, is formed by an Otherness which is not his own and is beyond being. Furthermore, this forming takes place in absolute passivity, that the subject is not a free or willing subject. Levinas makes it a fundamental point in his thinking of the ethical that the subject must be bound by a command, before his own freedom, to give of himself for the other, that the ethical act is NOT a willed act. Additionally, all of the language associated with Levinas’ ethical thinking: substitution, persecution, obsession, hostage; all of these speak to the fact that the subject is driven by forces that are fully outside of itself and, importantly, which it cannot get a grasp of. These forces compel the subject as a for-the-other, but it is not of the subject’s choosing. Levinas stresses that it cannot be of the subject’s choosing, for anything associated with freedom, willing or even a conscious understanding on the part of the subject will necessarily add up to a self-serving ego in Levinas’s estimation. The Levinasian subject is thus pushed along through this “anonymous mimesis” he is not acting out his own script but is acting out the destiny ordained by the Other. The subject is passive in this act, an act which achieves its apotheosis in the total giving of the self for the Other, even to the point of death.

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2 Though it is formative of the subject as “being-for-the-other,” Otherness itself is inappropriable to the subject, the Other is the inappropriable itself.

3 The subject is driven to atone for its originary guilt.
Levinas asserts a thinker such as Heidegger argues for “a freedom without responsibility, a freedom of pure play.” Contrary to this interpretation of Heideggerean subjectivity, Levinas insists “we are here distinguishing a responsibility that rests upon no engagement and whose inscription in being is made without our choice.”

We will take the opportunity to question the necessity of such a reading of fundamental ontology, but I must first ask what sort of “ethics” there can be without a thinking of freedom, what sort of responsibility we can conceive that does not involve a semblance of decision? If the subject is truly obligated without its choice to carry out its responsibility, then it is either a simple matter of success or failure. Though, as we have gone over, it is always a matter of failure, for the subject is always destined to get in its own way, asserting its own self in each attempt to transcend for-the-other. But, no matter, this sort of hypothetical form of carrying out responsibility bears little resemblance to what I would think of as a taking up of responsibility, or a true concern for the other or a thinking of the ethical. As Thomas Keenan asserts, and I tend to agree, the most true event of responsibility comes when we find ourselves without recourse to rules, without a clear command which we can simply assent to. We are left to find our own way, to create our path. For Levinas, there are no rules or stable grounds to rely on, but there is also no free decision. For Levinas, however, freedom and responsibility are inherently contradictory.

Levinas intones that responsibility precedes any sense of a “for myself” in the subject; “Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself.” Certainly, it is one thing to argue that I have
responsibility, or that there is an ethical obligation that outstrips making amends for wrongs I may have committed. This is quite simple enough, as any minimally self-respecting person understands that there are many things in this world that we must address, though we would not possibly be expected to take credit for their occurrence. But Levinas goes further than that position, which amounts to little more than common convention, to get back to the integral point of his philosophical system, that the subject is more for-the-Other than for himself. It is crucial to understand the tone in the way Levinas writes about this Other and the subject’s obligation to it. At all times it is obvious that the subject is in an inferior and guilt-stricken position, while the Other takes on a mystical hue.

Levinas goes on to assert that this is “A responsibility stemming from a time before my freedom – before my beginning, before any present… Responsibility for my neighbour dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past, an unrepresentable past that was never present and is more ancient than consciousness of…” Again, Levinas is making the quasi-religious assertion of a formative experience that is ineffable, unrepresentable, and that crucially precedes our freedom and existence. It is most important in Levinas’s system that it be entirely clear, the subject is bound hostage to this obligation before any encounter with a lived other person, and that it is in no way the subject’s free choice or conscious thought which inclines him toward “the Good.” In fact, as Levinas flatly asserts: “No one is good voluntarily.” It certainly seems as if it must be a matter of faith in this sentiment for the reader, in order to buy into the necessity of Levinas’s claims. Man’s freedom is selfish and man’s inclination is to kill the other,
nobody is voluntarily good, and therefore there must be a formative experience outside of being and against man’s freedom which binds him to the good.

While Levinas insists that the call of the ethical that persecutes the subject gives no explicitly prescriptive content, and that it in fact tells *nothing*, it is nonetheless *not* the decision of a willing and free subject. He unequivicolly states, “The ethical relationship is not the disclosure of something given but the exposure of the ‘me’ to another, prior to any decision.”40 The Levinasian subject is bound and determined, but without a clear guide, acting out a mimesis which is not of his own creativity or choice. It is evident that Levinas fears that a subjectivity which is left as abandoned and thrown into the world would approach the other with no concern other than its own self interest and the drive of the conatus. But why should this be the case, other than that Levinas wishes to assert that it would be so? If the Levinasian subject, acting without freedom and unable to grasp his own situation, can yet *fail* in his endeavors, then what is the benefit of this conception of subjectivity? Levinas hyperbolically promotes a vigilance in order to push the ethical to the forefront, but it never seems enough.

The Psychological Burden and Lonely Destitution of the Levinasian Subject

At this point it begins to become clear that this conception of subjectivity carries with it a strong neurotic and exceptionally guilt ridden component that would seem almost debilitating. It is a vital aspect which of Levinas’s work on the subject which needs to be tempered for this conception of the subject to have any practical viability. While the infinitely demanding nature of his thought is largely what tends to give his writings such force and feeling and is unarguably a major reason why his work has had
such a powerful impact on so many readers, it seems nonetheless painfully evident that were one of his readers to fully take up and live as Levinas writes that they would be crushed by the overwhelming sense of persecution. Adding to that, the fact that the mythical originary “relation” with the Other can only but be betrayed also works to engender a natural disposition toward guilt and neurosis in the Levinasian subject.

Another important problem of the Levinasian subject is its severe isolation in its responsibility. Though it is conceived as his identity to be “for-the-other,” the Levinasian subject does not share in a real relation with the other persons to whom he is obligated. The subject is all alone in his obligation, unable to take himself as being on equal footing with others, and prone to viewing his attempts at doing the Good as perpetual failures.

Coming to an other in this manner does not respect the lived contexts and situations in which we coexist with the other. And for Levinas, it is clear that though the emphasis weighs heavily upon the ethical responsibility to other humans, the subject is not truly in relation to these other humans. I am always beneath them and they cannot share the my responsibility, I cannot petition them for help and cannot express my circumstance through recourse to the logos without losing the true sense of my obligation. I am all alone in this burden, and even my assertion of an “I” is taken as an infringement upon the Other, for I take the food of someone else, take up space which someone else may have needed and persist in asserting my own presence, though I am obligated unto the Other. The subject is thus imbued with neurotic guilt, through and through. To invite others to share with me my responsibility would only add to my guilt.

Simon Critchley addresses the isolation and guilt inherent in the Levinasian subject, by diagnosing its tendencies within a psychoanalytic framework. What he finds
is that the subject so conceived is repetitiously reliving the effects of a severe trauma. Critchley explains: “Traumatic neurosis is the disorder that arises after the experience of a trauma, where its effect lives on at the heart of the subject. Like other neuroses, it is compulsive and repetitive: the original scene of the trauma is obsessively and unconsciously repeated, perhaps in nightmares or insomnia.” In this context, it perhaps makes more sense why Levinas uses the sort of hyperbolic language that David Wood finds so frustrating in his philosophy. In a sense, has transferred an experience of trauma onto his ethical subject, has imbued it with a profound and formative experience which cannot be processed by the conscious mind and that is thus replayed in a debilitating repetition, as if it is compelled to relive and attempt to work out the effects of this trauma which is lodged in its unconscious. Andrew Cutrofello discusses this manner in which Levinas’s thought works as a repetition compulsion:

“To ‘say’ that the relation to the other involves a passivity more passive than any passivity is to bear witness to something that precedes the subject’s very capacity for capacity; in this sense the encounter with the other is ‘older’ even than the faculty for receptivity. To attest to this passivity is to ‘say’ something that cannot be mastered as something ‘said.’ All meaningful assertions, considered either as sentences or propositions, belong to the order of the said. By contrast, every ‘saying’ – though it issues in the production of something said – attests to that which does not belong to the order of being, to the non-ontological ‘fact’ of the ethical relation. This is why Levinas’s own discourse is structured by a kind of repetition compulsion. Attestation always fails, not because speech is unable to master the ethical relation but, on the contrary, because it can only master it, reducing it to something thematized, to something merely said. Hence the work of attestation must be perpetually – obsessively – renewed.”

Simon Critchley diagnoses the subject as such, “In short, the Levinasian ethical subject is a traumatic neurotic.” Critchley argues that, “the ethical demand is a traumatic demand, it is something that comes from outside the subject, from a heteronomous source, but which leaves its imprint within the subject… Ethical
experience in Levinas is rooted in the claim that responsibility begins with a subject approving of a demand that it can never meet, a one-sided, radical and unfulfillable demand. It is beyond our purview or concern to assess whether Levinas himself is acting out a sort of neurotic repetition through his construction of the ethical subject, a manner of attempting to address his own trauma through writing. Whatever the case may be, the subject so construed is left face-to-face with the traumatic Real which he cannot make sense of, and left to perpetually encounter this unfathomable burden again and again without mitigation. Critchley makes the case that, for the infinitely demanding sense of responsibility to maintain a viability, and for the subject to maintain himself without falling into a downward neurotic spiral, that there must be recourse to sublimation, in the Lacanian sense.

While Critchley argues for the necessity and importance of an infinitely demanding sense of responsibility, that “Ethics should be infinitely demanding,” he wishes to maintain such a demanding sense of ethical demand while locating it in a human context. Critchley finds the Levinasian subject in a position not entirely dissimilar to Heidegger’s ideal of authenticity, or the Existentialist subject who is condemned to freedom and bears the weight of the world on his shoulders. These are tragic-heroic figures. They carry an absolute burden, are judged by an absolute and impossible measure, and bear the weight of an impossible sense of failure, bad faith and inauthenticity. But for ethics to work in our world, the demand must be placed in our world. And we must be able to accept the infinitely demanding nature of ethics without expecting a heroic subject to take the burden on its own to address the enormity of the
demand in a single act. The ethical subject needs to be brought back into the world he shares with others.

David Wood describes the Levinasian ethical subject as “A guilty monad scurrying out to carry his infinite obligations then scurrying back,” for the subject in Levinasian thought is not in relation with others, he is stuck in a relation of pure asymmetry. Wood recognizes in the absolute nature of the demand a certain vigilance, but also expresses grave concern and reservation that the structure of ethical subjectivity so construed deprives the other of agency, as the other is often expressed in terms depicting it as a distant and impersonal object, a demand without relation. He writes, “The idea that the obligation is all mine (and mine more than others) is clearly meant to define the nature and purity of obligation. But can this not be taken to deprive the other of all capacity for moral agency?” Wood is concerned that if we are serious about saying “never again” to the travesties of our history, such as the Holocaust, then we must spend more time thinking about how the other is in all sorts of relation with us, rather than “absolutizing the other’s alterity.”

I would add to Wood’s characterization that the Levinasian subject is a guilty monad who must always scurry back disappointed and dejected, while immediately being brought back out to take responsibility anew for each newly encountered Other. The subject here is intrinsically neurotic, obsessive, and would likely become anxiety ridden. He feels entirely undeserving of reciprocal care and must always view himself as the lesser partner in any relationship. He is vigilantly ready to give himself, to the point of death, for any other that comes before him; but he cannot justify the least bit of attention to his own needs or desires. In fact, his own freedom is to be viewed as a negative and
corrupting force. The only thing that can give this subject any sense of “self” is his
tireless care for others, and even that bit of self is something that is taken to mean he is
not fully “Good” enough.

The “tragic-heroic” subject that Levinas crafts is constantly and from the first
instant faced with unending and limitless responsibility, the full scope of which would
leave any mortal human as a mere shell. For as his conception of the subject as “the
other within the same” shows, the self is passively and above all else to be in the service
of “the Other,” for the first other present, for any other, and is even responsible (guilty)
for the other’s responsibility. For the subject in this position there are truly no alibis, nor
is there anywhere to defer the burden. To top this absolute burden off, the ethical
command prescribes nothing, as Levinas himself holds, it is without content. There is no
recourse, but only obligation without possible resolution; only responsibility without any
means for discerning which path to tread. It is indeed a disorienting prospect and one
which needs to be viewed as a problem, not an answer to our thinking of the ethical.

An Ethics of Failure

Indeed, even in taking ethical care for the other, the self cannot live up to her\(^4\)
quest for selflessness. Every act, according to Levinas, carries with it a “selfish” element,
the putting forth of an “I myself” who helps. As such, there is the potential for guilt even
in the most ethically “selfless” of acts. As such, how can we expect the Levinasian
subject to be a mentally healthy and intelligent subject? As he is, radically isolated in his
infinite responsibility, how can he manage to become a minimally sane and productive

\(^4\) I am somewhat hesitant to bring in the feminine or non-gendered pronoun when talking about the
Levinasian subject given his obscure descriptions in *TI* of the feminine and maternal as Other.
person, a participant in the world with others? In the end, it would seem that the incredible burden of the Levinasian subject is caught in a hopeless contradiction, for how can a person, so riddled with unending guilt while being isolated in their obsession and persecution, survive in a healthy enough manner to be of any help to anyone?

Levinas has a compellingly interesting point in his insistence that the ethical relation cannot be grasped and understood in full by an ontology (traditionally construed or otherwise) because the relation with others is not a form of knowledge. As he bluntly states in one of his final lecture courses, “Responsibility is not a knowledge.” But of course, the ethical relationship of substitution is always beyond being which is what for Levinasian thought makes it inappropriable as knowledge. The experience of proximity cuts across our consciousness in a manner which cannot be grasped and thematized by the knowing subject. The move away from thinking responsibility within the grasp of recognition reveals the ethical as a demand which cannot be finished and seems to open the possibility of thinking responsibility in the each-time of existence. But in the same movement, Levinas closes off the freedom of decision in finite existence, placing the grounding for responsibility out of our reach, in the sphere of the infinite.

What Levinas fails to address in placing the origin of responsibility beyond this world are the conditions of our facticity and situatedness which shape and make more specific the possible forms of action our ethical responsibility can take in the world. For all of the time and care he puts into asserting our supreme indebtedness to the Other, he fails to give a proper consideration of how we co-exist with one another in our world. This is how he intends it, of course. The negative reaction to ontology is so strong in his work, and the emphasis on the personal and unique experience of responsibility so
unwavering, that he almost entirely neglects a development of how we actually live with one another. The negative associations with Heideggerean ontology lend to Levinas’s disposition to see any sharing out of responsibility as a form of evasion and any attempt to think about co-existence as an attempt at assimilation to the same. It’s no surprise then that the fragility of the ethical relationship leads to its fracturing once the “third person” enters the scene. There is a working toward a sense of “justice” in regards to the political that Levinas asserts in relation to the third person, but it becomes clear that the level of absolute responsibility is entirely dissipated once the subject is placed in a broader context than the face-to-face encounter. As such, the question in my mind is raised: are we not always-already in a political context, a social context with many others even as we may only be “face-to-face” with a particular individual? The answer in my view is “yes,” we are always already affected and informed by these contexts, and thus if Levinasian ethics is to make sense or have much value to informing our actions in the world, it will have to hold up in a context that is more than me, the other and the Infinite.

As Simon Critchley has argued, this sense of infinitely demanding responsibility and resistance to the order of the same need not be destroyed by the introduction of the shared social world, given that we can part with some of theistic and psychological baggage tied up in Levinas’s conception. We must conceive of an ethical thinking in which our actions can count as more than failures, otherwise we may condemn ourselves to an entirely hollow form of subjective existence.
A Subjectivity Without Context or Relation

And in the beginning of his work, through to the end, the main thrust of Levinas’ thought has always been toward transcendence. The Other is the location of transcendence for Levinas. The so-called “ethical relation” is transcendence. Through the other, the subject can have a relation to the beyond, to the infinite, that is to say, to God.

Simon Critchley describes how Levinas uses the Cartesian notion of the infinity of God in the Third Meditation to substitute the Other for God in the ethical equation. Critchley writes, “It is this formal structure of a thought that thinks more than it can think, that has a surplus within itself that intrigues Levinas because it sketches the contours of a relation to something that is always in excess of whatever idea I may have of it, that always escapes me. The Cartesian picture of the relation of the res cogitans to God through the idea of the infinite provides Levinas with a picture or formal model of a relation between two terms that is based on height, inequality, non-reciprocity and asymmetry.” 49 Though Critchley argues that it would be incorrect to simply equate the other with God, nor to say that “I actually do possess the idea of the infinite in the way Descartes describes.” 50 The important thing is that this formulation is able to be transformed by Levinas to give a model for the type of ethical experience he is after. “One might say that the ethical relation to the face of the other person is the social expression of this formal structure.” 51 And while I concur that Levinas does not simply equate the Other with God, it is yet the figure of God as the Infinite which places the Other in this position of height over the subject. I am also concerned that in this formal structure, the Other begins to take on the appearance of a generic construct, in which any
other can fit, in spite of whatever uniqueness and difference individuals may have
between each other. Just as Levinas chastised the traditional notion of consciousness in
ontology for subsuming the unknown into the known, it seems that Levinas’s ethical
formulation, in a manner not entirely dissimilar, allows the formal structure of the ethical
to appropriate any other into the position of this image of the Other, that the Other
becomes a genre for Levinas.

The Status of Otherness in Levinas

“The face is present in it’s refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be
comprehended, that is, encompassed.”

“The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his
epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common
to us.”

Though the former quote indicates a radical singularity of the face of the other as
something which transcends simple articulation, the latter quote takes matters much
further. Here, Levinas goes well beyond proclaiming a thinking of difference, or an
ethics of difference. He goes so far as to proclaim that the Other is “infinitely foreign”
and totally breaks with what could possibly be common between us. There is no share
between the subject and other, it is a radical and complete divergence. As such, there is
no relationality or any sense of co-existence in Levinas’s thought. The “ethical relation”
which Levinas promotes is one of absolute asymmetry, the subject is a servant who shall
go unrecognized by the other. Perhaps in some sense the Other takes on the appearance
of a Pagan god, one who lives amongst the mortals but is not of their world. The
Levinasian subject may have a relation with this Other, but it is one of making sacrifice and surely the subject is not so arrogant as to think the gods will wish to have a reciprocal relation with him, or would dare to be so bold as to think that they owe him a debt.

So, the question grows in my mind: does this mythical and metaphysical ‘anteriority’ of the Other reduce or subsume alterity and difference by placing it under the genre of an ideal ‘relation’ to Otherness? While Levinas is obviously committed to stressing the “irreplacability” of the I in order to instantiate the inescapability of the ethical obligation to the other, it seems to me that things are not so clear with the status of “the other” in the ethical relation. Of course, Levinas portrays the other in the manner of Descartes’s conception of the infinite, which Descartes explicitly locates in the idea of God. It is an idea which affects thought and yet exceeds all signification. It is an idea that cannot be grasped by the logos. Instead, as Levinas insists, the infinite operates on our consciousness as an obsession, that which cannot be grasped but which nonetheless compels us. The Other is figured in just this manner. The Other’s status as ungraspable by ontological designation and conceptual thought implies a unique singularity and makes the relationship to the Other one of transcendence. Yet, in spite of this figuring of the Other as beyond comprehension, it would seem that in the context of Levinas’s ethical thought, the other is indeed quite replaceable. As Levinas insists in numerous places, I am responsible to the first other who comes along. It does not matter if the other is a friend or an oppressive enemy, a neighbor, or a complete stranger; the obligation is the same in any case and runs to the extreme of the subject laying down her life for the other. I find this to be a consistent result of Levinas’s formulation of subject formation in radical passivity, as formed in relation to the (big) Other that is God. If I am formed
before myself, and before my freedom, in obligation to this Other which precedes all existing others in the world, it starts to seem that the other humans we encounter operate in this ethical schematism under a Platonic doctrine of the forms, where the other humans we engage are but the images of the pure form of the Other, which is God.

Reading Levinas’s conception of otherness in this manner is consistent with his espoused reasons for working on ethical philosophy. Levinas, from the start, was concerned with transcendence and it is no secret that his work has always been driven in a theistic manner, so transcendence ultimately for him is inclined toward a relation to God (the Infinite, the Other, that which is beyond being). Levinas moves into his focus on the ethical relationship as he finds it to be the only means of experiencing transcendence in this world. For him, the human other takes on the role of opening us to the Infinite and a relationship that is “beyond being” in that it cannot be subsumed by ontological designations.

All of this, I believe, makes it rather debatable as to whether Levinas succeeds in making the other a true singularity, a truly unique and irreplaceable being. On the one hand, it is the case that he insists the other cannot be understood in advance, cannot be explained by ontological language and that the ethical relation cannot be prescribed outside of the singular experience of the face to face with the other. But on the other hand, the other human has the appearance of being an operative tool in this ethical structure, a means to the end of arguing for the subject’s personal relation to God, who while not explicitly equated with the Other, certainly looks the part.

While each Other may be singularly unique, it becomes unclear to what extent this singularity matters in the context of the Levinasian relational structure. Matters are
complicated further once we bring in the fact that all situatedness and context is seemingly thrown out the window in regard to the ethical relation. I am to be entirely obligated to the other, to any other, no matter what the circumstance, no matter if that other is a friend or an oppressor. So, the question for me becomes, has “the Other” been operative as a genre in Levinas’s thought all along? Does the Platonic conception of “the Good beyond being” that Levinas holds in such a central place in his thought also imply a Platonic conception of the Other? In spite of all the hyperbolic insistence on the irreducibility of the other in his work, I cannot shake the sense that the other is still working as a generic concept, and that, on the whole, the ethical relation has been placed in the service of another world. Perhaps context is not so important to Levinas because it isn’t the things of this world which are of most concern to him.

**The Levinasian Subject in the Political world.**

While I would argue that the boundaries between what constitute political concerns and what constitute ethical concerns are difficult to clearly separate, if not often impossible, we find in Levinas’s thought that there is a great divide between the thinking of the ethical on the one hand and the political on the other. In fact, the arrival of the third person onto the scene entirely interrupts the binary ethical relationship. When not contained in the asymmetrical relation of the I and Other, the fragile ethical bond is broken apart. Dermot Moran points to some of the core problems arising in this troubling deficiency in Levinas’s ethical thinking:

“Levinas is creating a new dogmatism, centered… around the other rather than the self.... Though Levinas claims to be doing ethics, his ambiguous account of the role of the other… is of no assistance in resolving moral claims which, for instance, often force us to choose between others, rather than between self and other, as Levinas portrays it.”

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A major issue that arises in the context of Levinas’s ethical thought concerns the radically divergent positions that individual subjects may find themselves in in-the-world. The facts of racism, sexism, classism and poverty, heterosexism, and myriad other forms of oppression and abuse, differences in status and power… all of these have a massive effect upon both the potential agency of the subject and the immediate external consequences of the subject’s actions.

While Levinas holds that the subject is called uniquely and it is he alone who can answer the call, a call which commands him to give of himself and put himself in a position of inferiority to the other, even to take responsibility for the other’s responsibility; there are many considerations which call these obligations into question. Consider these potential issues amongst many other possible examples: Within this context of Levinasian thought, does the black or Latino person in the United States act selfishly and immorally to bring their own under-privileged status into consideration when engaging an other, especially an other who promotes or engages in racist behavior? Does the homosexual in our society fail in her responsibility by taking her place in the broader political context, as part of a group that is oppressed and deprived of equal rights, into consideration when dealing with a bigoted other? Is the poor or working class subject acting unethically if she does not jump to give of herself for a class-biased and wealthy other who wants to cut her social services for the benefit of his own profit motive? Should a woman “turn the other cheek” and take responsibility for the sexist man abusing her, and for his responsibility on top of it? It would seem that the answer from Levinas would have to be “yes” in each case, which I find very troubling.
Beyond all of these potential examples, which each point to a certain self-interest on the part of the subject involved, we should also consider more broadly how all of our actions are engaged in broader ethico-political contexts. We all share, in various degrees, a responsibility for addressing these large societal issues and our actions may have just as much bearing on them as do the actions of those directly implicated or effected. So, to add another layer, we might consider these external considerations in our own dealings with others. For I find it increasingly difficult to draw a line between what constitutes the “ethical” realm and the “political” realm, when our inter-subjective relations with an individual other have the potential to affect in some way the lives of others outside of that relation and often take place within more broadly “political” contexts. I hold that the hope for a thinking of ethics such as Levinas’s necessarily requires an accountance of such considerations. I think that Fabio Ciaramelli’s effort to universalize the call of responsibility is an important start in this direction, in order to get past the myopic despair of the tragic-heroic subject and to take ethics into the world. It can only lie in the universalizability of responsibility, the universalizability of an absolute command that is each time uniquely my own. Though, at this point it would seem we are also moving back into Heideggerean territory and I fear Levinas would reject such a conceptualization on the grounds that it is no longer a singularly asymmetrical demand.

As it stands, I have grave concern that Levinas’s ethics, as pure as it aims to be, and though it prescribes nothing in particular, would seem to be on the verge of prescribing martyrdom. Perhaps the subject who finds itself in relation to an “otherwise than being” may find these concerns within being to be of secondary importance. Though Levinas aims to locate a source and origin of purity and ethical goodness, he can
only locate it beyond this world. As such, it troubles me that ethics for Levinas oftentimes seems to be more about aggrandizing God than about caring for others in our world. By sacrificing the self for just anyone, whatever the consequence or benefit of such potential martyrdom may have, the emphasis is that the subject is recognizing itself as lower than the Other. All in all, does it make sense for the disadvantaged and unprivileged among us to perpetuate their status as “lower,” and to not take their circumstance into consideration in regards to what constitutes “ethics”? Is “ethics” only about being self-effacing?

We may note that Levinas also held political views, of course, and he found it appropriate to support the aims of the state of Israel. One might cynically suppose that those getting bulldozed and gunned down in the settlements in Palestinian territory are doing what is ethically correct in that they are both martyred and assigned responsibility for their own demise in the media. The Palestinian subject is, after all, in the way and taking up the other’s space. Perhaps they’ve just been given a golden opportunity to do “the Good”? Of course, this is a cynical exaggeration and there is no reason to believe that Levinas’s motives contained ill will towards Palestinian individuals. What it does point to is that events in our world are complex and that it can be quite difficult indeed to attain a sure notion of what is right and what is most helpful.

Keeping only the one on one encounter in view, we are allowing the subject to fall into a myopic and potentially destructive pattern of guilt-ridden behavior that may very well have negative consequences for more than just the passive Levinasian subject. If I do not take the position of others outside of the face to face into account, I may be in fact
risk putting them in greater peril, or in some manner acting to their detriment, by
sacrificing myself for an other who means to do them harm.

As Andrew Cutrofello describes the relation of ‘substitution’, “In substitution, I
put myself in the place of the other, or more precisely, I find myself always already
obliged to assume responsibility for the other – even to the point of being responsible for
the other’s responsibility… Levinas characterizes substitution as the state of being ‘held
hostage’ by the other… As taking on the other’s responsibility, substitution involves not
only the subject’s persecution, but the subject’s responsibility for its own persecution by
the other…”55 There is no exception made here to the consideration that there are some
who are worthy of our giving of ourselves and others who much are less so. As Levinas
frequently intones, I am responsible to the first other on the scene, the first other who
comes along, be they friend, neighbor, enemy or stranger. I am no more or less indebted
to the friend than I am to the oppressor.

The lack of situatedness in this thinking of responsibility places extra burden on
the already oppressed. The oppressed subject becomes responsible for their own
persecution. To be fair, Levinas would likely point out that this isn’t exactly the case and
that it is in fact “I” who am responsible. Certainly, it is true that Levinasian ethics only
speaks of a singular, individually experienced and unique responsibility of the subject.
But from the outside, it seems to amount to the same thing. The overwhelming and
hyperbolic nature of his writing seems to engender the sort of religious fervor and
frenzied attestation which Levinas himself had once claimed so dangerous.

So I hold that we must be able to have a respect for others and an
acknowledgment of our own fallibility and our own responsibility toward others in the
world *without* requiring a completely passive disposition and a complete willingness to assume absolute responsibility for the responsibility of any other who comes along. We find ourselves in the world (thrown, abandoned) with nowhere else to turn. We are responsible for making sense in our world, though we may only be the inheritors of our situations, for there is nowhere else to appeal. It may be true that some will prefer to act in the manner of mastery and accumulation, persecuting others and ignoring the call of the ethical, taking the face of the other as yet another object of no particular value or concern. It is our responsibility too to counter these views and to stand up against actions and ideologies which disrespect the ethical and which take others and our world as something to use in the quest for selfish gain, nationalistic glory, or economic expansion.

A mystical and mythological appeal to obscure affectations from an infinite “beyond” cannot have any bearing, and it is unclear much of the time whether Levinas even means for his thought to bear on these ethico-political sorts of issues.

Levinas’s formulation of the subject takes place in radical passivity and it is a relation to that which is not of this world, to an infinite which we cannot fathom. It is precisely here where I must diverge, where I must say that “I see things differently,” whether or not argumentation is possible on these points within the Levinasian schema.

I am concerned to locate a thinking which can allow us to actively think, and to think actively (and thinking itself is also an action, perhaps the most exemplary form of action) this world and our place in it, a thinking which locates itself in our world and concerns itself with our world. Levinas, perhaps due to his own traumas or perhaps for other reasons, did not find it possible to place the origin of the ethical in this world, found this world and the philosophies of the world to neglect the solemn obligation of the
ethical. He certainly had good reason. He did not find it possible that human freedom
could be its own ethical origin. I feel that if we cannot locate the ethical right at our
world, as something that we all share in, singularly and together, we will continue to find
ourselves faced with calamities such as the Holocaust. While it may be a difficult
prospect indeed, we have nowhere else to turn.

As Thomas Keenan states so well, “Responsibility is not a moment of security or
of cognitive certainty. Quite the contrary: the only responsibility worthy of the name
comes with the removal of grounds, the withdrawal of the rules or the knowledge on
which we might rely to make our decisions for us. No grounds means no alibis, no
elsewhere to which we might refer the instance of our decision.”56 Quite importantly,
and quite distinct from the Levinian position, Keenan’s idea of responsibility hinges
upon the self who finds herself without recourse to a stable ground or a wellspring of
rules to answer for her circumstance. But it is here, in this moment and in this place,
though there may be no certainty to take solace in or to appeal for answers, that
responsibility takes place. So, is it possible that the demanding sense of responsibility
which Levinas sought to instill can in fact exist within being and be taken up by a free
subject? Do we have anywhere else to turn?

The Persistence of Responsibility.

While I have taken apart many of the central tenets of Levinian ethics, revealing
issues which I argue to be irreconcilable, I would nonetheless hold that there is a
powerful demand in this thought which cannot be ignored, and which demands to be
taken seriously in our thinking about responsibility. There are of course many
reservations, particularly this philosophy’s dependence upon a particular theistic experience, but also in regards to the emphases placed upon passivity and the problems inherent for inter-subjective relations in his thought. There are yet lessons to be gained and inspiration to be taken from this absolutely demanding thinking of the ethical relation. While the Levinasian subject may be burdened with severe psychological guilt and over-determined by his radical isolation, Levinas’s formulation of the subject also gives something else, holding forth the absolute importance of taking responsibility for our own responsibility. There is an affective dimension to this thought, similar in a number of aspects to reading Sartre’s description of the existentialist subject, a subject who takes up total responsibility in spite of all, in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Though we have pointed to Simon Critchley’s criticism of such thinking as relying upon a tragic-heroic paradigm, and with good reason, the demandingness of such thought and the example of such a figure still offers a sort of literary inspiration for our real life and less then heroic efforts, even in our mundane and average everyday existence. It is the sort of inspiration and demand which Critchley looks to Levinas to give to our thinking of ethics and political commitment, a demanding sense of responsibility to inspire our actions in the world.

We can perhaps still see in Levinas’s thought a call for approaching the other as an Other in a most respectful manner. Aside from all of the talk of the infinite and the asymmetricality of the I-Other relation, Levinas’s writing about the other person brings out a sense of deep love and caring for the other human being. When he talks about the other exceeding our grasp and obsessing our thoughts by being irreducible to our concepts, he brings us to consider the person beneath all of our categorizations and
designations as someone who deserves our care. The naked face, as articulated in Levinas’s earlier mature thought, presents itself to us in vulnerability, opens to us and invites us with the implicit call to not harm them. The other can surprise us, too, and open us to experiencing new possibilities. From these valuable and sincere insistences to approach the other with kindness and an open mind, we can take great inspiration from Levinasian ethics.

While some of Levinas’s thinking of the subject can seem to imply a debilitating guilt for taking up space and resources from an-other; Levinas’s thought can also instill in us an awareness of the resources we use and a reflection upon the privileges we may have which other’s do not, or that we may have precisely at the expense of others. It may incline us towards a solemn recognition of the responsibilities that come with such relative fortune and ward against self-serving social Darwinist thinking and other self-serving justifications for greed and competition.

Perhaps most importantly, it gives us an infinitely demanding sense of responsibility. Levinas’s thought makes it felt that responsibility is not a series of obligations to be checked off of a list, but is an absolute and ongoing demand. Even in the face of unfathomable burdens and a limitless responsibility, the Levinasian thinking of ethical subjectivity holds out the possibility of not succumbing to the anti-ethical pressures which surround us.

We would do well to incorporate such an infinitely demanding sense of responsibility into our own thinking, incorporating them into a thinking which places the ethical right at existence, taking our co-existence in the world, and the facticity and situatedness which that entails into account. In fact, I would like to make the case for an
ontological thinking which holds a central and primordial place for such a thinking of responsibility. It is this sort of responsibility which Simon Critchley distills from Levinas to put to work in a broader context. It is also the sort of responsibility that Thomas Keenan advocates for in our experiences in reading, ethics and politics. It is, I think as well, a similar sense of infinitely demanding responsibility which Jean Luc Nancy aims to place right at the center of ontology in his work on “Originary Ethics,” a work which contrary to Levinas, retraces from Heidegger to locate the (un)grounding of the ethical within ontology, an ontology of this world that is shared out between-us.

**Looking Back from the Beyond: Finding the Ethical Right At Existence**

Levinas scrapped a thinking of being-in-the-world in the wake of Heidegger’s political miscues, in order to ground the ethical beyond the reach of totalizing thought and totalitarian impulse. Yet his thinking leaves the ethical relation at an untenable impasse, on the one side conceiving of subjectivity as an existence bound by unbearable guilt and detachment from others, while at the same time binding the subject’s existence to a transcendence before which she is passively bound and torn from herself.

Francois Raffoul is one of the thinkers who has attempted to retrace the terrain of Heidegger’s project, in order to find a path for thinking the ethical that would bring ethics back into the world, and to open up relationality on the plane of existence. In one of his works he hoped “to demonstrate, ultimately… that ethics pervades through and through our factical existence and therefore does not need to be founded in some problematic ‘beyond,’ after having been first taken out of existence: on the contrary, facticity reveals the responsibility of the existent and the finitude and alterity of such responsibility.” So
for Raffoul, the conditions of our existence, that which we inherit in our being-in-common with others in the world and the facts of our shared history, already give the demand for responsibility. Responsibility originates in the throw of existence and in the taking up of our facticity. Raffoul attests that ethics is always already present in factical, finite existence.

Jean Luc Nancy retraces the terrain of the “originary ethics” in Heidegger’s thought, locating responsibility right at the level of finite existence, revealing also the contradictory nature of an appeal to the infinite to ground ethical responsibility, writing that, “Dignity is possible only if it measures up to finitude, and finitude… means the condition of a mode of being whose sense makes-sense as a ground and a truth. (Infinitude, by contrast, would be the condition of a mode of being that results in a sense being produced, acquired, and related back to itself.) Schematically speaking, therefore: ek-sistence is sense; it has no sense.” As such, Nancy’s appraisal of “infinitude” is prescient in relation to our appraisal of the Levinasian ethical subject. The Levinasian subject is formed by its passive relation to the Infinite, it acquires its sense from the infinite, as something given, something which is not its own and which it cannot appropriate in its ownness. For Levinas, this inability to appropriate is what binds the subject to the supposed “Good.” So, as this sense is related back to the Infinite, as the subject’s obligation to the Infinite is met in the face of the Other, the anonymous mimesis carried out by the Levinasian subject is but a circular play of a produced and static sense which circulates in a circuit: originating from the Infinite and back to the Infinite.

What Nancy has to say about finitude makes the case that sense is found, and is made each-time, right at finite existence. Our existence does not have sense as a product
or static obelisque around which meaning is rallied. Existence is rather the making of sense. In finite existence, sense is always already given and also always to-come. It is between-us, and in the sharing out of the world that we make sense, and that nothing else can make sense for us.
Chapter Two

Jean Luc Nancy and the Decision of Existence

The Work of Conscience and the Implications of Co-Existence

“Only those who have read Heidegger blindly, or not at all, could think him a stranger to ethical preoccupations.” – Jean Luc Nancy

“The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence.” – Martin Heidegger

I would like to offer here a brief reexamination of the notion of the “call of conscience” in *Being and Time*, as it is here that Heidegger offers a thinking which most strongly reveals an imperative toward responsibility within the work of fundamental ontology. It is common to assess Heidegger’s thinking of being-with as bound up in the so-called inauthenticity of the They, in his pessimistic articulation of everyday being as an abdication of responsibility amidst the general mass of humanity. What is less often considered is how emergent right within this articulation of lostness in average everydayness, Heidegger also roots the call of conscience as an insistent pull upon Dasein towards its responsibility for taking up its facticity. The call summons Dasein toward a “willingness that constitutes authentic responsibility; and the stance in life that it brings

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5 The “They” is an English rendering of Heidegger’s *das Man*, which has also been rendered the “one” (as in “one says” or “one might be inclined to…” It is common in English to refer to the general disposition or to make assertions about anonymous others, in the manner of “you know what they say.” What the thinking of the “They-self” asserts is this manner of placing oneself in this anonymous context of the everybody, which Heidegger portrays as the general and common inauthenticity of being-with-others.
into being is what Heidegger calls resoluteness” or Entschlossenheit, which Nancy will translate as “decisiveness.” This “call” which affects Dasein in the very same here and now in which it exists in the everyday as being-with, is in some sense the inclination upon Dasein (being-there) to be-the-there. Dasein is called to take up responsibility for responsibility.

I contend that although (or perhaps also, because) Heidegger’s thinking of conscience is proposed as a means of ascent out of the “lostness” of the everyday, the formulation of conscience developed in Being and Time serves as a fruitful point of entry to thinking the sense of responsibility for decision. As this location of the thinking of conscience opens to a thinking of the mundanity of decision which takes place right at the everyday in our co-existence with others, a rethinking of the everyday manner of decision which Jean Luc Nancy retraces through Heidegger’s text. The manner of thinking conscience in Being and Time is not operative in the common, (negative), sense of a “bad conscience,” but rather works as a positive and compelling force, one which calls Dasein to think the openness of its situation, to make sense in the here and now and to make itself a ground for action in the absence of any metaphysical grounding or ideal norms existing above our factical existence. As Oliver Marchart observes on Heidegger’s thinking of the un-grounding of existence, “the ground grounds only on the very basis of its abyssal character: that is to say, only via its very own absence, via what we might call its absencing or ‘de-grounding’. The a-byss is the never-ending deferral and withdrawal of ground, a withdrawal which belongs to the latter and cannot be separated from it.”

It is the retreat of any solid grounding on which to base action and give sense to one’s
circumstance into which the call draws Dasein, to be the there, to be a ground for responsibility.

Heidegger articulates that being in the mode of everyday existence entails a pervasive ontic determinitive force which orients our reasoning and mode of acting in the world, from the collective weight of habits, customs and social expectations amidst the political climate one exists within, and he describes this force in a manner which is thoroughly pessimistic. While the account of the pervasiveness of idle talk and the everyday mode of being as the They-self point to a general lostness\(^6\) in the world, which engenders an abdication of responsibility; the call of conscience gives another possibility to indicate how existence exists as its own grounding right at, or as, the abandonment\(^7\) of existence. The call brings being to its there, in the everyday, to appropriate and make sense of our facticity.

The call, in a sense, can be read as an indication of how the *proper* of Dasein takes place right at the supposed *improper*, the authentic right at the inauthentic\(^8\). What is most near to Dasein emanates in exteriority, from right at the place in which Dasein is deemed “lost” in the banality of the everyday, amongst the “they,” that is: the call calls forth Dasein to take up its being as a ground right amidst that which is not its own.

\(^6\) That is, in going along with the herd, in operating in the mode of average understanding and appealing to common forms of recognition, like the “everyone knows...”

\(^7\) Abandonment is a term which Nancy uses often which builds upon Heidegger’s conception of “thrownness.” To be abandoned to existence is also to be given over to existence. As Nancy writes, “abandoned being, being-thrown-to-the-world in a dereliction, constitutes a positive possibility of being in-the-world.” (Nancy, *Birth To Presence*, 43) As such, to be thrown, abandoned, is in one sense to be banned from appeal to sovereignty, to be blocked from access to closure and a recourse to a proper identity. At the same time, it is a gift, to be given over to responsibility for the positive possibilities of existence. It is to be abandoned to the sharing in and sharing out of the spacing of our co-existence. Abandonment also indicates that the sense of existence lies within existence itself, for us as existence to make sense. Sense circulates between us and is not to be found outside of existence.

\(^8\) Or as “inauthentic,” that the “essence” of Dasein lies in its existence means for Nancy that to exist is to not have an essence, to be essence-less. As such, there is no properly proper place of Dasein, existence always takes place right in the world, as situated, factual and finite.
As such, the call of conscience does not call upon Dasein to become its “true” self, or to be “authentic” in a manner which would be apart from its existence in the “inauthentic.” The call does not come from somewhere “beyond” being, but from right at being-in-the-world. The call is heard as if from within Dasein, but in the sense that Dasein is entirely bound up in exteriority. There is no pure division between the interiority of consciousness and the exteriority of the world in this experience. Conscience calls Dasein to its responsibility for making sense of its situation, in its thrownness, its abandonment to the world. In the absence of grounds, being itself (which is nothing other than existence) is called to become a ground. “Thus the thinker says, in our time, that abandoned being, being-thrown-to-the-world in dereliction, constitutes a positive possibility of being-in-the-world.” It is this sense of a “positive possibility” which must be emphasized here, if we are to think responsibility right at existence, without recourse to the romantic notion of authentic resoluteness which Heidegger resorts to in the analytic. We must think decision right at the throw of existence, as being-there. In doing so, the call reveals itself not as the regretful bad conscience of one who merely bemoans their lostness, but as an impetus to a futural oriented project. As Felix Ó Murchadha writes of the call, “The rupture, which is its essence, has a futural orientation in that it reveals the lack of an underlying ground and the newness of the future.” Conscience as such instills a break with the prescripts of our everyday world, illuminating the openness and ungrounding of our existence. Conscience for Heidegger is not prescriptive, but opens existence to its own responsibility for decision.

Conscience in fact prescribes nothing. This indefiniteness of the call is essential to keep in mind. This silence of the call should not be read as a “lack” of something
which should be there but as an opening to possibilities. We are called to keep open the open, to become a ground for decision. Thinking and action are here intimately intertwined. Thought gives sense to action, and in this sense, thinking is action par excellence. That Dasein is called, but not instructed. (Who would be giving instruction?) It is that Dasein is presented, as it were, with its abandonment. Existing as thrownness, with nowhere else to turn, Dasein is called to make sense of its situation: to decide for existence and to take up responsibility right at its world in the here and now. Each time Dasein must take up that which is inappropriable, its facticity, as its own. The call presents an imperative, an imperative to Dasein’s abandonment.

As for the guilt experienced in conscience, it is not to be understood as the negative after-effect of a bad conscience, mulling over its mistakes. It is conversely an active pull in the moment towards one’s very responsibility for deciding, in this place and in this time. Raffoul writes, “Being-guilty should be understood positively; as Being-a-basis, positively I am myself a nullity, which… implies that this ‘not’ has nothing in common with the negativity of a lack or privation. The ‘not’, Heidegger insists, ‘is constitutive for this Being of Dasein – its thrownness.’”\(^{65}\) This is not a thinking of regret or the feeling of a lack, but a compellingness toward taking up one’s possibilities and responsibility to decide upon one’s possibilities. The call of conscience acts then, in the absence of any grounds or “values” which would guide action, to call Dasein to be-a-basis, to be a ground for its existence. The call demands nothing less than responsibility for responsibility.

The silence of the call, as I have stated above, is indicative of Dasein’s responsibility for decision, in that it is not a matter of fulfilling a given essence or
enacting a dormant and pre-given possibility. This silence of the call also gives us a potent conceptuatization of what responsibility means for Being-thrown into the world, that the content of the call remains to be decided. The call is a demand, absolutely, but the content of the demand remains to be decided. What is disclosed in the call is Dasein’s responsibility for its facticity, for that which is not its own or of its own doing. As such, for Dasein to take up responsibility in the world, it is imperative that existence is made its own grounding. Sense is not given, but we are responsible for sense. Existence carries the weight of responsibility for making sense of existence.

According to Steven Crowell, for Heidegger “Conscience… calls one to take over being-a-ground, to answer for oneself, to legitimate by giving grounds, that is, reasons.”66 If this is the case, what does “being-a-ground” mean here, in the context of Heidegger’s text? The call of conscience arises “from within,” but a “within” of the self that is responsive to exteriority, a call which calls one to the specificity of the situation to which one must respond. The call then is a demand arising from right at the world, where something gives to thought a call that it must make sense of its situation. Whether this “demand” has to do with the issuance of reasons in a normative or legalistic sense is not what is at issue. The issue is that Dasein is called upon to become a “ground”, that it is in a situation of having to decide, when there is nowhere else to turn, nowhere else to lean upon for assurance of what is to be done. The call then is a call for “giving grounds,” but precisely not in the sense of giving grounds which would necessarily match to a codified system or set of external norms. It is not a matter of accountability. The call issues an imperative to thinking to make sense of its situation, right at existence. Dasein is confronted with its own responsibility for responsibility.
“I ‘belong’ to myself because I have to assume this existence (this potentiality-for-Being) into which I am thrown… Dasein is delivered over to itself (it is thrown), it is given to its Being in order that it may be it. Mineness designates this ‘self-relation,’ if it be understood that this self does not exist prior to this relation, but is ‘thrown’ into it. It is this connection between mineness and thrownness, between Being-mine and the necessity of ‘assuming’ thrownness in a potentiality-to-be, which comes to light in the phenomenon of the call of conscience.”

In Raffoul’s explication, the call emanates from within Dasein as the call to take up, in one’s ownness, that which is precisely not one’s own: that is one’s facticity, the throw of existence. Facticity not my own, but it is also that which is most mine. I am not responsible for the fact that so many things are as they are (my place in the world, my race, social class from birth, location, the history which I have inherited, the political realities of the world, etc.) but these facts are much of what make up who I am in the world. They are brute facts of my existence which I must appropriate as my own, to take responsibility for them as I decide. This is a matter of being responsible for my responsibility. Even an “inauthentic” un-deciding in relation to my facticity is a matter of decision. I decide if I am going to ignore my racial privilege in society, or my class status, or what have you. I am responsible in this (non-) decision, but I am not taking responsibility for responsibility. I am thus leaving the measure of myself deferred, claiming to not have an obligation to take up my facticity.

“I am thrown into existing, that is, into a Possible, a ‘having to be.’ Dasein exists only in such a way that it projects itself toward possibilities in which it is thrown. What I have to be, then, what I have to assume, is precisely my Being-thrown as such. What is ‘mine’ is thus what can never belong to me, what evades me, what will always have escaped me. Heidegger underscores this incommensurability: ‘The Self, which as such has to lay the basis for itself, can never get that basis into its power; and yet, as existing, it must take over Being-a-basis’ (SZ, 330). For what I have to appropriate, ultimately, is the inappropriable itself: in the call of conscience, I must appropriate my Being-thrown-into-death…”
The recognition of one’s being-toward-death, for Heidegger, summons the self to its own finitude. As such, the so-called “being-towards-death” is a life-affirming manner of thought. By appropriating the fact of its existence as finite, that one’s existence “is neither what precedes nor what follows essence”, one is called to take up existence is its own, to take responsibility for decision.69 The call toward the appropriation of this “inappropriable” fact then is operative (in its inoperativity, its absence of prescription) in calling the self to take up its possibilities, as a being abandoned to decision in the world. It is an absolute positivity. Rather than a voice emanating within an isolated solipsism, the call is emergent as the pull of exteriority, which engages the self to take up as its own this to-be-decided of our existence in which we share: the call calls being towards its ownmost self, which takes place right at the level of its everyday co-existence with others.

It is necessary that we make it explicit that the mineness of Dasein be understood in this regard, as taking up one’s facticity, of that which is inappropriable and improper to one’s own self, as its own responsibility and situation. The operation of mineness is thus not one of a solipsistic enclosure, but of being-there precisely as being-there, as one’s being takes place in the here and now. “[T]he solitude of mineness should be thought through indissociably with Being-with, in the sense that Being-with will turn out to be a feature of the very singularity of the existent, and that this singularity is never that of an ego without others.”70 As a being which is primordially co-existent with others in-the-world, Dasein must not be thought of in the manner of the Cartesian isolated cogito.

“Heidegger’s account of being-there as always social – of being-there as always ‘being-with’ – indicates the way in which Heidegger takes issue with the predominantly solipsistic underpinning of many traditional ways of thinking of human being… Just as being-there does not first find itself apart from the world, but finds itself only in and
through the world, both self and world being given together, neither does being-there first find itself apart from others, but is instead always already there among others.”

This “being given together” of existents in the world is what Nancy speaks of as “co-appearance;” beings co-appear, each singular and different from any other, but each formed and informed in their ownness by the shared plurality of existence. Being then is always an existence exposed in exteriority. The sharp division between the “interiority” of the individual and the exteriority of the world is never possible in the manner of Cartesian thought. Heidegger radically refutes the Cartesian gesture and approach to thinking subjectivity for being solipsistic. But being for Heidegger is always already in-the-world and with-others. This is why, though the call of conscience is said to arise from “within” the existent herself, the sense of interiority and exteriority in regards to Dasein is a radical divergence to traditional notions of subjective consciousness. As such, the call, while said to arise in one’s very ownness is at the same time a “call” from exteriority, calling one out towards one’s “there” in-the-world: to be the there.

I would like then to consider the call of conscience as the pull of the “right-here, this time” of existence, into the spacing of the open. The thinking of conscience understood within the context of thrown existence is one that evokes our responsibility to our situatedness right at the everyday, rather than a heroic overcoming or isolationism. Given the contours of fundamental ontology, conscience cannot be understood simply as the bad conscience of foresight, but should be read as the potentiality of existence itself asserting itself upon consciousness, when decision presents itself as ours to decide for. The project of fundamental ontology therefore moves away from a thinking which would articulate a singular substrate of all being, rather opening a thinking in which essence is nothing other than the taking place of existence itself.
Ontology’s Two Formal Possibilities

“Ontology has only two formal possibilities… Either Being is singular (there is only Being, it is unique and absorbs all the common substance of the beingness of beings – but from that moment it is clear that it is not singular: if there is just one time, there is never ‘once’); or, there is no being apart from singularity: each time just this once, and there would be nothing general or common except the ‘each time just this once.’”  

Jean Luc Nancy lays out what he contends to be the two exhaustive possibilities for understanding the work of ontology, specifically in relation to reading Heidegger’s work on fundamental ontology. On the one hand, there is the type of reading of Being which would be the one Levinas reads as being at work in Heidegger’s thought, in which Being is taken as an all encompassing unity of beings, a common substance which gives identity to beings under the order of the Same; in this sense, Being is seen as a genre. As Nancy suggests, within such a formulation, temporality has little meaning in the sense of an as yet determined unfolding, for there is but one truth: Being would be its own unfolding and possibility would then operate as the revelation of an essential nature. Contrary to this deterministic reading of Being, there is another possibility, one in which Being is nothing other than singularity, that is that Being is thought as an undetermined and open (un-) ground of freedom, a thinking of exteriority. In the context of this second possibility of ontology beings share in no common identity or substance, but we share in the openness of responsibility for the “each time.” It is a sharing of “what cannot be finished.” In this sense, ontology is no longer a thinking of identity and essence, but a thinking that takes place right at the space of existence.

Surely, if Levinas reads the work of fundamental ontology on the terms of the first formal possibility, then being-with can only but take on the appearance of a
subsumption to a common identity within the sameness of Being. In that case, Mitsein would not truly be a relation of singular beings, for beings would relate to each other only in the sense that they share in the relation to the Same of Being. But upon the second possibility, being-with becomes the equiprimordial situation of Dasein, as singularities whose “mineness” is intertwined and co-formed with the others whom it shares this time with. On the second reading of ontology then, the interiority of the Dasein is explicitly formed and informed by exteriority and difference.

Under the first possibility, we are merely the unfolding and circularity of an infinite sense. On the second, we are responsible for making sense, each time. Nancy insists, “This is how we must understand Heidegger’s Jemeinigkeit, Dasein’s ‘each time as my own… which… defines ‘mineness’ on the basis of the ‘each time.’” Given such an understanding, the mineness of Dasein then would not constitute a solipsistic form of self-concern for the sameness of the ego (which is how Levinas takes it) but would be an open and free responsibility for existence, each time. Nancy continues, “singularity… is immediately in relation, that is, in the discreteness of the ‘each time just this once’: each time, it cuts itself off from everything, but each time as a time opens itself as a relation to other times, to the extent that continuous relation is withdrawn from them. Thus Mitsein, being-with, is rigorously contemporaneous with Dasein and inscribed in it, because the essence of Dasein is to exist ‘each time just this once’ as ‘mine.’ One could say: the singular of ‘mine’ is by itself a plural.”

It is this thinking which gives one of Nancy’s major works its title, Being Singular Plural. These three terms are intimately intertwined in Nancy’s rethinking of ontology. Being is the spacing and exposure of co-existent singularities. Nancy’s approach to thinking ontology in this sense is more of a materialist philosophy than Heidegger’s, giving an approach to thinking which locates itself right in the world, in
which existence is one of embodiment, and where being exists in exteriority in contact with others.

**The Everyday World of Bodies**

In relating Nancy and Heidegger’s thinking of being-with in the sense of embodiment, Sarah Sorial gives this insightful reading of singularity as it works in the sharing of co-existence:

“Singularity refers to a subject’s alterity, her difference that cannot be captured, subsumed or understood. A singularity is remarkable and unique, a point of origin which is marked as different from everything else around it. However, this difference does not close it off from others or community; singularity does not isolate the subject in her difference because the singular being is ecstatic – it is exposed, open and vulnerable to the other, always affected, touched, and invaded by the other. This openness that lies at the heart of singularity is one that propels the subject into relations with others and entangles it with others.”

Here, embodiment is exposed as both the manner in which existence exists in openness and through which we enter into relation with others, as well as representing the limit and the difference between existents. The singular plural sense of existence takes place in this in-between of embodied singularities, in a play of *differânc*.

As Sorial asserts, the other’s body represents a limit (and is a physical limit) to that which we can share. But when she writes, “[t]he insurmountable distance between myself and the other means that I will never be able to understand the other’s embodied existence,” it may seem to imply a privation, in that something is lost by this inability to come to closure in complete knowledge of the other. In fact, it is the case that this very impossibility at achieving closure or attaining a completion of understanding is at the very center of making sense possible. We who co-appear share in this impossibility of
resolution, our existence as singularities who share in responsibility for our world is
driven by, and given life by, our incommensurable differance from one another, in the
movement of sense. This limit to our ability to appropriate the other as a completion is
consistent with the inessentiality of thrown existence, our co-appearance as a plurality of
finite singularities sharing the spacing of the in-between. It is this spacing in which we
make sense, the spacing of existence.

“Nancy allows us to think of space, of, if you like, the giving of being, in a way which
builds on but is crucially different from Heidegger… A singularity, it should be noted,
exists as such in relation to other singularities – thus we come to think space not as an
objectifiable, mathematizable extension or presence, but as a temporal unfolding in which
singularities, prior to any logic of a subject, expose themselves to each other.”78

Nancy’s thinking of space thus radicalizes how we understand being-with, in that
being-with is absolutely the primordial condition of thrown existence, there is no being-
there without being-with. There is no sense to a subject before co-existence and exposure
in the between. In fact, there is no place for a thinking of a before in this regard. Being
is always already being-with. The solitary existence of the cogito, of the isolated
consciousness, has no sense and can only be but the thought experiment of one who
exists as being-with-others. Being is always shared-out, in contact with others, in the
spacing of the world.

In one sense, it is something which both Levinas’s and Nancy’s respective
thoughts of relationality share: that the other presents the subject with a radical limit to its
knowledge and mastery, blocking its ability to achieve closure and to appropriate that
which is exterior to it. At the same time, it is contact with others which opens the subject
to its ownmost possibilities. Yet, it is also here that their respective thinking on
relationality is exposed in a most radical divergence. For Nancy, singularity and
difference, the very impossibility of closure is that which we share, which (in a matter of speaking) unites us in this share, (in the openness of our co-existence), in responsibility for making sense of our world, in our time, each time. As finite singularities, we are abandoned to (co-) existence. Meaning takes place right at existence, in-the-world. For Levinas, the other is a figure of infinite transcendence. In the Levinasian conception of relationality, the subject and the other are on purely asymmetrical terms, in which the otherness of the other works upon the self as a persecution, a demand to take responsibility on its own. While Levinas insists that he is working contrary to the totalizing and solipsistic thought of Western ontology, the thinking which he develops of an infinite sense which forms subjectivity and places the I and Other in pure asymmetry, produces a form of most radical solipsism. In a contradistinction to the first possibility of ontology under Nancy’s formulation, Levinas indeed does not present a figure of Being which unites beings in a unitary sense. He radicalizes the break between beings, such that they do not share in making sense for their world. Their relation to one another is not a sharing at all (as the relation of I to other is entirely asymmetrical), but rather, each subject in their radical ownness and isolation carries out a radically unsharable demand. Beholden to the Infinite, the subject for Levinas is conceived in a sense which relegates meaning in this world to a beyond. It is as if Levinas inverted the totality of Being on the other side, that beings do not share in an identity with one another, but are united by their isolation, in the experience of that which is radically exterior to them. Separation between beings as thought here can never be reconciled in this world.

Yet, in reading with Nancy, even thought as isolated singularities, the “existential solipsism,” even if beings are thought as separated, it is “this very separation that there
opens the relation to others, or better, that the existent is opened as an indissociably singular and plural being.” In this sense, our separation (that we are not fused by a common identity or assimilated around a homogenous communion) is what relates us, to each other and to that which we share. As such, difference between singularities is that which we share. The singular is plural, as the plural is the interrelation of singularities. What we are then as Being-with is ours to decide and to make-sense of, a project without end and a community which is always to-come; where we (I myself, us together) take up responsibility for sense each time, right at existence. With this thinking of being-with in mind, we can now reconsider Heidegger’s exposition of being-with-others in the mode of the “They.”

But Do “They” Still Not Get It?

The everyday has emerged as a prominent site of philosophical inquiry over the past century, opening numerous lines of inquiry into how we engage each other and make meaning in our world. Some schools of everyday life studies have approached the everyday to be a fertile site of possibilities and perhaps the site of radical political renewal. Others have taken to a pessimistic assessment of the everyday as a sort of fallenness from the authentic. Yet the everyday has also been articulated as the real that resists and escapes meta-political theorization, as well as a site of fertile reappropriation and repositioning of dominant messages. The everyday has been conceptualized as the field in which creative reappropriation of hegemonic discourse takes place, as much as it has been taken as the domain of idle talk and assimilationist tendencies. It is perhaps within this push and pull of how the everyday is conceptualized that much of the rupture
between Heidegger’s thought and Nancy’s thought comes to a head. Nancy argues that
Heidegger’s dominant conception of the everyday being in the mode of the “They” gives
an insufficient understanding of “everydayness,” asserting that:

“Heidegger confuses the everyday with the undifferentiated, the anonymous, and the
statistical. These are no less important, but they can only constitute themselves in
relation to the differentiated singularity that the everyday already is by itself: each day,
each time, day to day. One cannot affirm that the meaning of Being must express itself
starting from everydayness and then begin by neglecting the general differentiation of the
everyday, its constantly renewed rupture, its intimate discord, its polymorphy and its
polyphony, its relief and its variety.”80

Nancy finds that Heidegger’s conception of the “they” gives the sense of holding
out for a yearning for something more grand, some purer state which has been lost. Of
course Heidegger even talks of everyday being as an existence in fallenness. Nancy
asserts to the contrary of Heidegger’s heroic yearnings that “meaning can only be right at
existence and nowhere else.”81 To think existence is to engage being where it takes
place, which is in the world with others.

There is a double edge to the mundane everyday emerges within Heidegger’s
analytic, as it is the site where Dasein takes up its existence authentically, just as it is also
described as a site of collective homogeneity, of unthinking and largely meaningless
discourse. The everyday constitutes the situation of Dasein, such that it is the there of its
being-there, but Heidegger also largely sees escape from the confines of the everyday as
the only means of “authentic” appropriation. “In Heidegger the self of the everyday is
mechanically dispersed into the ‘they,’ the term Heidegger uses to denote the structures
of modern public disclosure, interpretation and communication.”82 It can thus be difficult
to formally draw a line between what for Heidegger would be the ontico-ontological
effects of thrown being, such that unthinkingness, idle talk and assimilationism would be
unavoidable existential facts of existence, and what is the specific and deliberate result of historically determined technological input, social control and the forceful engineering of the everyday landscape. It would seem that Heidegger’s primary thrust is to ascribe such characteristics to the realm of ontico-ontological fact, making a sharp break with the materialist philosophies that would read such forms of co-existence as historically specific and situated. This interpretative decision on Heidegger’s part, which seems to move against his uncovering of the everyday as the primordial site of existence, is indicative of a general pessimism about the prospects of human collectivity.

Perhaps the most prominent of the philosophers of the everyday, Henri Lefebvre notes the lingering denigration of being-with in *Being and Time*, remarking “As for Heidegger, the characteristic distanitiation of being-with-others also implies that, in its Alltäglichkeit⁹, Dasein finds itself in the grip of those others. It is not itself: others have divested it of its being. Moreover, the other is not someone defined. Anyone can represent it. It is neither this one nor that one; neither some nor all. It is neuter: the ‘they,’ das Man.”⁸³ So, when it comes to being-with-others, Heidegger’s thought differs sharply from Nancy’s rethinking of a Being-Singular-Plural ontology, slipping into a thinking which posits others as a homogenized and homogenizing lumpenmass, rather than as the sharing of singularities in an openness of possibilities.

Jonathan Rée comments on the negative disposition within Heidegger’s writing on everyday co-existence in his analysis of the “they,” asserting that Heidegger’s work on this subject carries “a shrill tone of moralistic indignation.” ⁸⁴ But Heidegger is insistent that these analyses do not have to do with “a ‘fall’ from a purer and higher ‘primal status’. Our inherent ‘capacity for delusion,’ Heidegger says, has an ‘existentially

⁹ That is, in its ordinariness.
We are constantly in a state of ‘falling’ because as long as we live we can never achieve stable equilibrium.” It is here taken as the necessary effect of the incommensurable contradictions of thrown existence, that people have a basic desire to speak and act with some certainty about matters in the world, there is a desire to feel as though things make sense and are in some general way understandable; thus people are likely on an everyday basis to correlate with “that which everyone knows,” taking recognition in the given order of things. It is perhaps the simplest path to attain a feeling of assuredness and communicability, with the corollary benefit of instilling some basic feeling of belonging and a sense of identity with others. Yet, it is impossible for one to maintain a genuine sense of equilibrium because insofar as common everyday forms of representation and collectivism are based upon impossible identifications and an all too easy explaining away of the complexity of things, the existent will be caught in a circle of self-deception and delusion.

Heidegger’s thinking of the thrownness of existence, with the radical inessentiality of existence that it entails, comes into conflict with a pull towards heroic and authentic appropriation, a pull which imprints a division between “true” being and a lacking co-existence. It is as if Heidegger avers before his own discovery here, taking historically situated phenomenological observations to be the mark of ontological necessity. It also seems as though Heidegger is uncomfortable with the openness of the fundamental ontology that he himself has elucidated, turning in his tracks toward the

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10 See Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition*, particularly The Image of Thought chapter, for further insight on how recognition and representation align thinking and communication within a certain domain of the thinkable. Deleuze discusses how things become “understood” or “recognized” in being related to institutions of the dominant social order, instilling a particular regime of sense and presupposition to discourse.
allure of the theme of authenticity. This inclination toward a purer sense of being has certainly been drawn into discussions of Heidegger’s own disastrous political judgment.

Francois Raffoul is somewhat more forgiving on this matter, as his rereading of Heidegger is developed in the wake of Nancy’s rethinking and radicalization of being-with. Raffoul approaches the issue of Heidegger’s denigration of the “They” of everyday being-in-the-world with others, through a reading in which Heidegger is only specifically countering a particular mode of being-together.

“Of course, Heidegger’s harsh criticism of Being-together, or of the “They,” is well-known, as is his emphasis on the existent’s solitary individuation… But upon closer examination, we see that Heidegger takes issue with only one particular form of Being-with, namely, the absorption of singularities into a homogenous Being-together, which Jean Luc Nancy (in The Inoperative Community) calls an ‘immanentist’ model of Being-in-common. Indeed, Heidegger explains that Being-together cannot be understood on the basis of some identification, substitution, ‘incorporation,’ communion, etc. (though all of these forms are made possible, after all, by Dasein’s ontological constitituion as Being-with-others.)”

Under Raffoul’s reading, then, Heidegger’s concern with Being-with is restricted to a condemnation of models of collectivist identity, under which individuals defer thought and decision in order to stand in the collectivist identity of the group. Here Heidegger’s concern would be with models of co-existence which would order Being under an essentialist construct and he would be working to guard freedom against totalitarian impulses. Yet, I find that Raffoul is reading Heidegger after Nancy’s rethinking. I think this is as Heidegger should have approached these problems, but Heidegger goes farther in his designation of the “fallenness” of the everyday. Yet, Raffoul gives a strong account of how Heidegger’s thought should have proceeded, to keep open the space of decision and the experience of freedom against totalizing
enclosures. But there is more in Heidegger’s thought of Being-with which remains to be rethought.

In one sense, certainly Heidegger is averse to a being-with-others that becomes fused in an identity, yet he is compelled on the other hand to posit a conception of “The people” as a higher possibility of being. It is perhaps most pointedly in this regard that a charge of “archi-fascism” in Heidegger’s text can be levelled. Yet, such instances of a pull toward a Romantic sense of authenticity and national identity do not hold up against the thinking of freedom which this fundamental ontology calls for. There is a lingering conservatism of thought that interrupts the text, contradictory impulses that arise right within the work itself, not altogether unlike those impulses which Heidegger describes as being among the They in a desire for common-being and certainty.

11 On the charge of fascism in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, “Nancy affirms Heidegger’s dismantling of the logic of the subject together with the project of thinking being and being-in-the-world beyond or outside of any logic of subjectivity. Yet, when it comes to the question of community and specifically of political community, Nancy sees the reemergence of a thinking of the subject in Heidegger… For Nancy, it is not the overall project of ontology that is compromised by Heidegger’s politics or by the crimes associated with that politics. Rather, Nancy’s view is that Heidegger’s unthought lapses into a traditional metaphysics of the subject allow his thinking and his philosophical language to slip into a thought and language approvable by National Socialism.” (James. The Fragmentary Demand, 99)

It has been a fairly common charge against Heidegger, particularly in light of his actual National Socialist involvement, to seek within the very roots of his thinking a tendency toward fascism. Lacoue-Labarthe approaches this issue in response to a charge by Theodor Adorno that Heidegger’s “philosophy is fascist right down to its most intimate components.” (Lacoue-Labarthe. Heidegger, Art and Politics, 105) The remark was issued by Adorno defensively, in response to questioning about his own writing in praise of National Socialism in 1934. Adorno invoked the charge against Heidegger as a means of arguing that his own professed allegiance (in the search for a ‘new romanticism’) was an aberration which bore no relation to his work as a whole.

Nonetheless, such charges have lingered against Heidegger up to the present, particularly amongst circles at odds with the thinking of Heideggerian thought, including Levinasian supporters. The charge is given further credence by Heidegger’s noted “silence” on the issue after the affair.

Lacoue-Labarthe addresses what he considers to be the “real question” that remains: “did fundamental ontology and the analytics of Dasein harbour within them the possibility of a commitment to fascism? And if so, to what sort of fascism?” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 108) While noting a continual appeal to national historical identity and an ideal of the “people” in Heidegger’s work, a sort of populist thinking (which Lacoue-Labarthe relates to the secondary treatment given to the analytic of being-with in Being and Time), it is Heidegger’s affinity for the tragic-heroic figure of an “authentic” overcoming of the everyday that might be interpreted as engendering a temporary fascination with early Nazism. But Lacoue-Labarthe contests that Heidegger’s philosophy could not be considered an “archi-fascism” outside of his time as Rector. Contrariwise, Lacoue-Labarthe asserts “we could not speak of ‘archi-fascism’ if Heidegger himself had not taught us to think philosophically, what fascism, plain and simple, is about.” It seems then, without pardoning Heidegger in the least, nor looking away from the conservative and reactionary elements of his thought, Lacoue-Labarthe can yet contest that the work of fundamental ontology itself is not inherently fascist, and that in fact it may give to thinking the means to identify and retreat the fascist domination of the political.
Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that there is a certain amount of regressiveness on Heidegger’s part. In a sense this inclination is reflective of the general response to inessentialist thinking of free existence: a discomforted and uneasy response. Post-Nietzschean thought has continually been criticized as a form of nihilism, a disordered, anarchic and chaotic brand of thinking which has no values. And, in a sense, all of those remarks would have some truth, though the meaning of those charges remains to be determined. Nietzsche opened traditional metaphysical thought, particularly Platonic and Christian thought, to the charge of nihilism (in that they carried out a devaluing of this world in honor of a “Beyond” a realm of ideas, a heaven above with an omnipotent god) which was “truer” and more valued than our “lowly” finite existence. These modes of ordering the world were, and are life denying philosophies in this strict sense. But, for all of that, they do provide certainties. They give order and systemization to the things of this world, largely by being placed beyond the world which they order and judge. Plato was cynically aware of this, as he openly promoted the propagation of “golden lies” in his Republic, myths to keep the members of society in their place. He also saw performance and storytelling as tools for social control, and mimetic performance as something to be tightly controlled. These lessons have been used and praised throughout Western history, and the cynical managers enrolled in political science programs of today are certainly informed by Platonists and neo-Platonists. Indeed these are life denying philosophies, but they give definitive answers, and thus they carry authority. The disruption of such authority can be frightening. To be open to the risk of evil as being a constant possibility of this world, rather than the deviation of an underworld, can be a daunting prospect. To recognize that we are
responsible, each time, for decision, and that we are responsible for our own responsibility, can be paralyzing to people accustomed to thought being decided for them. It can be especially disconcerting when one thinks of the masses of other people, for we all know how much other people can mess things up, right? It is one thing to trust one’s own ability for judgment, but quite another to want to trust others with such freedom over decision. No wonder then that Sartre said that we are “condemned” to freedom. Abandonment from certainty isn’t something which many accustomed to the ordering functions of metaphysics in the Western tradition are going to take lightly.

Perhaps there being some regressiveness and conservative traditionalism on Heidegger’s part may stem from some yearning for a sense of belonging and propriety in the face of his discovery. It would be of little surprise on a basic level. Though, to truly understand the radical implications of Heidegger’s thought, it is necessary to deconstruct these divisions and to demonstrate how a focus on the heroic authenticity of Dasein misses the radical implications of thrown existence.

The radicality of Nancy’s approach allows us to go back to Being and Time in order to break apart this conflation (which never sat well in the first place), between a thinking of the “authentic” and the “inauthentic,” between a the call towards the world as being-with and a simultaneous pull toward collective identity constructs and heroic individuation. It is interesting in this regard to think back to how Heidegger was indignant that Sartre took the theme of authenticity from his own work and infused it with a humanist element. Heidegger was insistent that Sartre did not comprehend the radicality of his ontology, while perhaps missing how much he himself had missed it. With his own divergence into aggrandizing a sort of mythology of “the people,” in his
affinity for German Romanticism and in a conflicted quest to assert the striving for authenticity (even as he insisted in his very text that authenticity was not an “attainable” end, but always fleeting), as an overcoming of the common lot of the everyday. In these ways, Heidegger had perhaps already betrayed his own thought in a rather more dangerous manner that would Sartre.

So though Heidegger uncovers the mundane everyday as the radical ontological site of finite co-existence, he partly remains stuck before his own discovery, instead holding to a pessimistic determinism of the everyday while holding out the hope of a heroic-authentic rising above this inauthentic mire. It is right here then that Nancy stresses the importance of “rewriting” Being and Time from the vantage point of the improper. Nancy retraces the originary abandonment of co-existence on the side of a sharing in (and sharing out) the openness of being. Nancy recasts being-with outside of the romantic and idealist pull within Heidegger’s thinking, inflecting co-existence with a materialist and embodied context. Co-existence situated right at the world, as the sharing of finitude, cannot be inscribed with an ideal or definitive sense, but rather co-existence as finitude is the ex-scribing of sense. The essence of existence is nothing other than existence’s ex-scription of itself. That existence precedes essence had all along been a fundamental tenet of the project of fundamental ontology, which Nancy’s radicalization and focus upon being-with as the condition of existence has brought into the open.

On the whole, Heidegger’s thinking of being-with others is much more radical and open than a strict attention to his more conservative moments would indicate. The originary ontological condition of being-with undermines the sort of messianic fused-class subject sought by a Marxist left as much as the rightist pull towards a thinking of
“the people” in Heidegger’s own thought. Nancy takes from the thinking of being as co-existence in his work on inoperative community and a retreat of the political. Moving away from the dreams of a heroic accomplishment of freedom or identity, Nancy retreats the thinking of community and the political, recasting each as that which cannot be finished, as the situation of co-existence in which sense exscribes itself in a futural becoming. If there is a work of freedom, it is to keep freedom free, to guard the opening for freedom against the push and pull of totalitarian enclosure.

**An Opening of Possibilities: Responding To Existence**

Francois Raffoul lays out his aims in showing how Heidegger’s thought reveals the contradictory nature of a thinking of ethics that would seek to root relationality and the origins of responsibility in a transcendent “beyond” to this world. Raffoul was seeking to demonstrate “that ethics pervades through and through our factical existence and therefore does not need to be founded in some problematic ‘beyond,’ after having been first taken out of existence: on the contrary, facticity reveals the responsibility of the existent and the finitude and alterity of such responsibility.”

So, while Heidegger sought to articulate the dignity most proper to Dasein, that dignity of being-there lies essentially in the inessentiality of being, as the being whose existence precedes essence. As such, the dignity of being is most properly thought from the perspective of the finitude of Dasein. As Nancy articulates, “Dignity is possible only if it measures up to finitude, and finitude… means the condition of a mode of being whose sense makes-sense as a ground and a truth. (Infinitude, by contrast, would be the condition of a mode of being that results in a sense being produced, acquired, and related back to itself.) Schematically
The sense of the dignity of Dasein as such lies in Dasein’s very ownmost responsibility for being a ground, in taking up its being as finite.\(^{12}\)

Nancy’s appraisal of infinitude, that an infinite sense would be its own circulation reflected back upon itself, is also prescient in regards to our appraisal of the Levinasian ethical subject. As the Levinasian subject is formed by the Infinite, it acquires its sense from the infinite, as something given, something which is both not its own and which it cannot appropriate in its ownness. So, too, this sense is related back to the Infinite, as the subject’s obligation is to the Infinite as it is met in the face of the Other. The anonymous mimesis carried out by the Levinasian subject is a circular play of a produced sense which circulates from the Infinite and back to the Infinite via the substitution of the subject. What Nancy says about finitude makes the case that sense can only be exscribed in finite existence. Existence does not have sense as a product or an arborescent obelisk around which meaning is rallied, but existence is the making of sense. In finite existence, sense is both always already and always to-come. It is between-us, it is in the sharing out of the world that we make sense (a “we” which is the sharing of the singular-plural of existence, never the fused and operative sense of the people as subject).

Nothing else makes sense. In this way, the ethical is always already present in factical existence, as it is always incumbent upon us to decide.

\(^{12}\) These concerns about the dignity of Dasein are taken up by Heidegger particularly in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics.*
Being-In-Decision: The Risk and Responsibility of Freedom

“The decision of existence does not aim at an ‘empty ideal of existence’ but rather ‘calls us forth into the Situation.’ The situation is the existent’s Being-there, right in the world and the community. Right in the situation, decisiveness does not ‘stem from ‘idealistic’ exactions soaring above existence and its possibilities; it springs from a sober understanding of what are factually the basic possibilities for Dasein.’ Not the intoxication, the enthusiasm of floating ideals, but the simple fact of existence.” – Jean Luc Nancy

In “The Decision of Existence,” Nancy proposes a “partial study of ‘decision’ in Being and Time” by studying the intertwining of Erschlossenheit, Entschlossenheit and Entscheidung, rendered into English as “disclosedness,” “decisiveness” and “decision” respectively. The aspect of this system which Nancy traces through Being and Time is what he calls the “mundanity of decision.” He explains, “By this we mean to say that decision is not open to, or decided by anything other than, the world of existence itself, to which the existent is thrown, given up, and exposed.”

This reading of the terms is already significant for a rethinking of Heidegger’s text. In particular, a thinking of “decision” and “decisiveness” give us a much different sense than the common renderings of “resolution” and “resoluteness” which connote a moralizing and heroic tenor to the thinking of appropriating one’s facticity. It is a rendering that indicates a need to rise above one’s everyday existence to attain authenticity and thus colors our everyday being-with-others as a constraint upon Dasein’s true dignity. This matter of interpretation is a matter of thinking decision and responsibility in the here and now, right at existence. Nancy attests that such

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13 The “right at” is an English translation of Nancy’s à même, which means at the same, or to the same. As such, to say that sense takes place right at the sharing of existence is to indicate that in co-existence there is a share in the same spacing and exposure of existence. I have stayed away from using the French term in the thesis so as not to confuse with the Levinasian usage of “the Same.” For Nancy, this sharing of the same or the in-common is not a sharing in an identity or and enclosed genre of being. Rather, the share
“modifications have been required to convey the author’s sense of the original.” That “‘Decision’ in Heidegger, is not a choice between distinct alternatives but an existentiell operation that precedes any possible agency. ‘Resoluteness,’ like ‘authenticity’ carries an air of the exceptional, the great, the heroic; ‘decision’ seeks to convey something more everyday, more open and opened.” But this is not just a matter in which translation of certain terms have influenced our reading of Heidegger, it is also a case of how some of Heidegger’s presumptions and dispositions have influenced the understanding of concepts in his work. There is a discordance within Heidegger’s own text, in which his own demonstrations of the fundamental place of Dasein as being-with-others is put at odds with his own aversions to the modern world.

Nancy enters into the terrain of Heidegger’s thought in Being and Time in order to rethink the authentic / inauthentic distinction which operates in Heidegger’s text in a manner that undermines the essentiality of the Mitsein-analytic by placing the deciding and authentic Dasein in a position of contradistinction to the non-deciding “they-self” of everyday being-with-others. Heidegger explicitly conceives of this “inauthentic” mode of the everyday as the essential situation of Dasein. Dasein is thrown into-the-world and is primordially a being-with-others. The insistence on a qualitative and determining difference between the two possibilities for Dasein (toward taking up its responsibility, or abdicating to the general unthinking acceptance of the “they), relies upon Dasein’s Entschlossenheit, (traditionally translated into English as “resoluteness”) in order to take

(partage in the French) is a sharing-in and sharing-out of co-existence’s spacing of the between, the each-time of in which we as singularities make sense, in which we are responsible for decision. It is a sharing in this same condition of the open of existence, that which cannot be finished or enclosed. There is thus a certain paradox of the à même, one which may warrant its own exposition in a thesis length study. For my purposes I have chosen to keep to the translation as the “right at” indicating that which is shared-in and shared-out in existence, which we share in our abandonment. The right at places sense in the context of existence in which we share, in finitude itself as opposed to some location outside of existence.
up its own being-towards-death (it’s own finitude) and act decisively with regard to its facticity. Though the being-with-others in the everyday banal mode of the “they” is portrayed by Heidegger as a lacking mode of being, a mode of indecision and acquiescence, it is yet there wherein Dasein is called upon to take its place, to make sense of itself. Heidegger too sharply divides the thinking of being-with into a battle between the pull of the negative and a heroic resoluteness which might overcome it. This is the consequence of a heroic pathos in Heidegger’s text, one which denigrates the everyday existence of Mitsein and reveals some of Heidegger’s own presumptions and disdain for the being-with-others.

Nancy moves back into this terrain of Heidegger’s text in the following excerpt in order to bring the thinking away from this overdrawn division in *Being and Time*. He says:

“The truth of finitude: what is to be made our own (to be decided) is nothing but Being-thrown-to-the-world, and therefore to the world of the ‘they.’ But there is neither impoverishment nor derision in this. Disclosedness does not have to disclose itself or resign itself to the mediocre insignificance, or all-significance, of a world of banality. The very idea of banality, the idea of mediocrity, and the idea of the ‘average’ (as in the ‘average understanding’) are already (whatever Heidegger, on his part, might attempt to do to neutralize the disdainful character of these terms, unsuccessfully bridling his own disdain for the banality of the world…) meanings superimposed on the world of everyday experience. The opening opens itself to the ‘they,’ or decides in favor of the ‘they,’ to the full extent that the ‘they’ is abandonment to the ownlessness of Being, which existence must make its own. The ‘they’ is, in the first instance, nothing but this opening because it is itself, as such, as thrown ‘they,’ the ontico-ontological undecidability in which, and by reason of which, existence must reach its decision as existence. It is because it is without essence that existence is delivered over to ontico-ontological undecidability.”

To decide responsibly, to decide for existence, is to be the there, to take responsibility for the there of one’s being. It is an openness for that which is both undecidable and inappropriable, but is for that reason ours to decide and to make sense
of, as our own. The responsibility to be a ground for decision, as a free existent thrown into its situatedness amongst others takes place in-the-world which is not of Dasein’s mastery and possession, but which constitute its world and its facticity. Yet, as Nancy notes, “in Heidegger there is an *existentiell* prejudice (quite *banal* itself, moreover, and typical of an attachment to the representations and values of the exceptional, greatness, heroism, even the originary and ownness themselves), which the text does not acknowledge, and whose mediocre character it does not perceive.”93 But while Heidegger disparages the very fact of thrown existence in the mode of the everyday, “we must not forget that the same text is what allows us to bring this prejudice to light, nor must we forget that the same text designates its own relation to the originary as undecidable for the (‘average’) understanding, and therefore puts us on guard against belief in a sort of philosophical performativity that would make ownness exist by naming it. Despite this prejudice, there is perhaps no other philosophical text that refers us more forcefully than this one does to the exteriority of the experience that it attempts to analyze.”94

As such, Nancy follows this path within Heidegger’s work, as a sort of immanent critique, such that “we will try to extract ourselves from all gestures of valorization and from their prejudices or presuppositions, not to flaunt a space of indifference or nihilism, but rather to let decision open even more to existence, from which can and should proceed all affirmations of ‘values’…” to affirm “the *dignity* of existence as such. *Being and Time* should be read as a book of this dignity…”95 It is a sense of dignity which lies in the very fact of our abandonment, in an appreciation of our responsibility for making sense of our own world.

In this regard, the *dignity* of existence lies within the decision of existence, right at the in-essentiality that constitutes the experience of freedom in which we share. The dignity of existence then lies right at existence, and not in some ideal floating above, nor
in any hidden or mysterious heroic possibility which would enact a rising out of our thrown existence. As such, the thinking of the very un-decidability of decision, and the responsibility for decision that takes place each-time (a responsibility that cannot be finished, or determined in advance, just as freedom cannot be finished as a completed accomplishment) opens thinking to an appreciation of the dignity of existence, which takes place right at the mundanity of the everyday. That is, the proper dignity of human existence takes place right within and alongside the improper. It is a thinking of exteriority, inappropriability and dis-enclosure; not privation, but the very openness and potentiality of shared existence.

As Nancy asserts, “It is existence that we must make, or exist – that is, decide, since existence has no essence decided for it and outside it, in some ideally floating ontological region.”96 The proper of existence lies in its abandonment to the improper of thrown being-with. The ownness of the existent lies in its exteriority, that being is always already shared, a being-with.

The centrality of the theme of decision in Nancy’s thought is stressed by Jeffrey Librett, who finds in the “Decision of Existence” a fundamental break with any traditional thinking of determination and essentiality. “More than anywhere else in his work, it is in decision, in Nancy’s decision on decision, that the transmutation or interruption of all traditional determinations of necessity occurs.”97 Librett makes the case that this thinking of decision, while breaking up the traditional determinations of necessity and constitution of identity, opens up existence as a spacing of undecidability, in which we are responsible for decision, for making sense each time. “While these traditional determinations of necessity always decisively situate the identity of necessity
in either reality (existence) or possibility (essence), Nancy does not decide the issue, but everywhere insists on its undecidability. However, this non-decision on Nancy’s part must be seen, he argues, as a decision precisely for decision. By comparison with Nancy’s decision (i.e. also with his decision to adopt such a notion of decision), the traditional decision of necessity as either reality or possibility appears to be an attempt to deny or avoid decision by moving beyond or transcending it as quickly as possible and hence to be a decision against decision.”\(^98\) In Nancy’s thinking then, decision takes place in our responsibility for responsibility, to keep open the space for decision.

Libbrett illustrates how Nancy’s rendering of ‘decision’ disrupts and unsettles traditional approaches to orienting decision within the bounds of an autonomous subject or will operating upon a given “object.” Grasping a clear divide between the objective and subjective is not simple in either the work of Heidegger or Nancy, for the thinking of being-with as the singular-plural of being has already moved thinking away from the autonomous subject of Cartesian philosophy. Without the transcendental ego as legislator of decision, “Decision becomes a name precisely for necessity as undecidable.”\(^99\) While this aporia of decision may trouble those seeking stable grounds and rallying posts for proper action, the withdrawl of grounds opens up a thinking which engages existence’s own inessentiality. As such, responsibility for decision necessarily involves responsibility for responsibility. Decision remains to be decided. Ontology can give no recourse to a proper course for decision to take, but retreats the traditional and totalizing notions of what is deemed to be the proper place and bounds of responsibility. Sense is not given, but ex-scribes itself in existence. I should emphasize that by moving the thinking of decision and judgment away from normative criteria Nancy is not
endorsing relativism nor elevating the particular above the universal. Rather, Nancy places the event of decision and judgment as emergent in our making sense right at the shared spacing of the world. The universal is neither presupposed nor given over to existence by a sovereign legislator, but is for us to make.

For Nancy, as I have made explicit, there are no universals given to existence. This however does not mean they should be sought in myth, as something created and placed above, as if beyond this world. Universals remain for us to make, to decide. We are responsible for the universals we invoke in our acts and our engagement with the world; we make sense of our situation and decide as we see fit. The experience of freedom is one of absolute responsibility; existence presents itself as an imperative.

The abandonment, or the thrownness and inessentiality of existence itself, is presented as an imperative in Nancy’s thought. He writes, “Being is thus abandoned to the being-there of man, as to an order. This is a categorical imperative…”100 Existence, the experience of freedom, is responsibility for decision. This is a categorical imperative, a demand upon being, that it must decide for existence. As Heidegger’s fundamental ontology has shown, even non-decision is itself a decision. I can decide to abdicate decision, to assimilate or follow others, but these are in fact already forms of decision.

Heidegger differentiated in this regard between “authentic” appropriation of one’s being, and “inauthentic” denial of responsibility in the mode of the “they” self. But the fact of existence is that this being in the everyday, even in the “inauthentic” mode of the “they” is a form of decision. The measure of one’s acts lies right at existence, right in our abandonment to the there. The imperative is unavoidable. Yet, it is necessarily an undetermined imperative, while nonetheless an unavoidable demand to make sense of the
world, to decide for existence, each time. In the absence of floating ideals or values from the heavens, there is yet the imperative, to be-the-there.

James Gilbert-Walsh traces the ethical implications of Nancy’s thought by following the rethinking of “categorical imperative” in an essay entitled “Broken Imperatives” which can be seen as pointing to the very dislocation and ungroundedness of the imperative. He addresses the non-prescriptive manner of Nancy’s use of the imperative as such, “Though he never abandons his affirmation of the moral imperative, he seems to modulate the sense of ‘imperative’ to the point where one might well ask: what force could this ‘command’ possibly exert?” It is the same sort of question posed by Librett in his posing the issue of the undecidability of decision, the question of what force such a thinking could possibly exert upon responsibility. I think it is important to consider here how we began our entry into Nancy’s thinking of responsibility through a consideration of Heidegger’s notion of the “call of conscience.” The “call” is heard as a silence, a call which in fact prescribes nothing. We are again faced with an ethical imperative which leaves existence to its own devices, and this is essential to the sort of understanding of “responsibility” that I have attempted to bring out in Nancy’s work. So, when faced with the question of “what sort of force could this ‘command’ assert?” I would have to respond that it is a most inescapable command, for it is the command of existence itself, the opening of thought onto its very ungroundedness. We are entering upon an opening in thinking, to the fact of existence’s very responsibility for existence. Nancy’s thought opens upon our responsibility for making sense of existence and thus of deciding for existence. The imperative is one of taking responsibility for freedom, in the face of the spectacular, the totalitarian and all forms of enclosure.
So, Gilbert-Walsh finds Nancy affirming an imperative, but one devoid of concrete prescriptive content. In the absence of concrete content along a normative guideline, what we have in Nancy’s work is an imperative to “hold open” the question of duty. There is a retreat here that calls us back to rethink how thinking (or philosophy) relates itself to action. The imperative is non-determinitive, but not without force.

Without a guide to what ought to be done, the imperative exposes existence to its ownmost risk and responsibility of becoming a ground for decision; “the determinate engagement with the imperative voice must itself be a risk, a possibility of absolute failure.” Risk necessarily involves the possibility of evil as well as good, failure as well as accomplishment. As such, existence is its own measure, or as Nancy puts it, “Measuring oneself against the nothing is measuring oneself absolutely, of measuring oneself against the very ‘measure’ of ‘measuring oneself’: placing the ‘self’ in the position of taking the measure of its existence.”

This formulation perhaps as well as any gives us the truly radical sense of responsibility thought in Nancy’s rethinking of ontology. The measure of oneself is entirely of one’s own deciding, one’s actions in the world, one’s own taking up responsibility in response to the world is in measure against the nothing of existence. There is no demand issued from a beyond or outside of existence, no pass/fail marker, no ideal against which one can approximate one’s measure. Responsibility is thus a responsibility for responsibility. We are responsible for decision and judgment, infinitely and absolutely.

In keeping open the space of decision, of thinking responsibility as taking place right at existence, we must also acknowledge the unavoidable fact of risk. While an
absolutizing thinking of infinite sense and imposed order might have the perceived
benefit of externalizing risk to the realm of deviation (such that evil is the result of not
following the rules, of not obeying commands and following the stable order), a finite
thinking of freedom must acknowledge evil as a positive possibility of existence; that
decision might decide against decision, might decide other than the good.

Nancy addresses the question of evil in the context of our shared “coming-to-
presence” as “the free spacing of singularities, of the finite inessentiality of what is
always in relation, always plural, always shared.” The fact remains that risk cannot be
safely overcome once and for all, that the freedom of existence always necessarily
involves the possibility of a “renunciation of freedom” in favor of totalitarian assimilation
and subjection to institutions which “impose an allegiance to essential identity in the
place of the freedom of experience.” Nancy’s thinking moves other than to simply pass
judgment upon these rejections of freedom, to bring us to “recognize the joining together
of freedom with the possibility of its ruin.” 104 It is of the freedom of experience that risk
cannot be done away with and that freedom is not something which can ever be
“accomplished” as an end; this would be the mark of messianic thinking. We are rather
approaching a manner of thinking which opens up the share of existence as essential
inessentiality (essentially inessential), where the experience of freedom is immanently
tied up with responsibility and the decision of existence. That the risk of evil cannot be
judged away or put aside as a mere digression from the true work of freedom illuminates
how our responsibility for decision, each time, holds the utmost importance.

Understanding evil as a positive possibility of freedom, a possibility which is not due to
transcendental causes, but is very much of our shared world may help us to understand
the infinitely demanding sense of responsibility that comes with the experience of
freedom. We make sense, we decide for existence, and nothing else can decide for us.

As Nancy insists, “Deciding for evil is not therefore deciding ‘not to do’ good” as
if there was a discernable image of “the Good” which was thus rejected in one’s
decision. To decide for evil is not to be thought as an act of negation or a privation in
relation to an idealized value. Rather, beyond good and evil in the traditional sense of
competing transcendent values above existence, here “good” and “evil” are relative to
each other in this world, each as positive possibilities of freedom, to be decided right at
existence, each time. It is always a matter of decision. Thus, for the existent it is not a
matter of being a “good” person (as if enough accumulated acts could make a static and
coherent identity), but a matter of being responsible for decision, each time. “If one can
express it thusly, Nancy writes that evil is ‘absolutely relative’ to good in that it is the
ruin of the good as such, not its privation… Evil does not impair the good (it could not be
impaired), nor does it disregard it… but it refuses its coming to life.”

B.C. Hutchens attempts to get a hold of Nancy’s thinking of freedom noting that
for Nancy freedom cannot be understood as a property or right of individuals, but that it
is an ontological fact of abandonment that existence is “given over” to freedom. Not
viewed in relation to an infinite horizon, freedom can be thought as the open of existence,
in which we make sense of our world and decide for existence. Hutchens then writes, “If
existence is a plurality of singular beings, and not any antecedent Being, then freedom is
precisely the incessantly different experience of singularity itself, not any essence of
substance by which this experience is intelligible.” Existence then is not bound by
substance nor derived from a greater Being nor a beyond, but takes place in the here and
now as the plurality of singularities. This is the singular-plural of being. And as Benjamin Pryor articulates, “The freedom of being is being’s infinite inessentiality, the absolute singularity of existence that is not a singularity torn away from something or the final resting place of a process of becoming or a sending; rather, it is a singularity that is the coming to presence of an infinitely divided origin, of finitude.” Freedom here should not be taken as “a mode of access to something else that would ground it,” but as nothing other than existence itself as finitude, the sharing of singularities in which sense ex-scribes itself.

“Nancy’s philosophy [aims at] articulating an ontology that is not beholden to an originary meaning. The central topic in Nancy’s thought is the question of presentation as sense or meaning. Nancy inflects this topic through the frame of Heidegger’s approach to the question of the meaning of being and uses this frame to develop his own ontology.”

Here, ontology cannot be figured as a totalizing gesture that would close off possibilities by defining in advance any forms of identity, normativity or any thinking of the Same in Levinas’s terminology. The sort of ontological thought that Nancy traces from Heidegger is one which radically undercuts any totalizing pretenses of traditional Western metaphysics, instead turning to existence in this world, as finite, free and shared out between singularities. Nancy sets the task of thinking to think the sense of the world as that which we share, and what we share in (that which is shared out) is the responsibility as free, co-existing singularities, is the decision for sense. Existence is not decided, but is for us to decide, each time. It is open ended and unfinishable. Finitude is our infinite demand.
Reapproaching the Originary Ethical Terrain of Fundamental Ontology

To think of finitude as a privation is to be beholden to the idea of truth as a type of infinite and objective presence to which one can strive to attune oneself. But to say that the question of sense is what we share is a manner of articulating that co-existence makes sense not by any shared sense of the world, for sense is perhaps already the least shared thing in the world, as Nancy likes to say, but by the sharing of the spacing of the between-us, by our shared coappearing as presencing in-the-world.

If authenticity can have any sense for us, it is in the manner not of a “truer” or more correct actualization of our self, as if there were some true identity of self to which we might attune ourselves. Rather, authenticity refers to a proper relationship to that which is improper. Inauthenticity is not other to authenticity, but inauthentic being-in-the-world is always authentically inauthentic, just as untruth is closely related to the unconcealing of truth.

Nancy asserts that abandonment “opens a profusion of possibilities.” Understanding our existence as a “thrown project” is not to say that we are thrown or abandoned as if our existence were a privation in relation to some true identity or immanence. “Meaning” is not lost to us, only the static thought of ‘truth’ as Other, as the infinite or transcendent can leave us with this impression. We are abandoned, in that we have no recourse to a stable essence or Idea of being to appeal to, no authority to invoke which will relieve us of our infinite responsibility to respond to existence. We exist in freedom and our freedom is surely a burden in some ways, an unavoidable burden. Even in engaging in some form of “bad faith,” existing in the manner of the everyday “they self” absorbed in idle talk is a matter of decision. Freedom can choose to hide its head in
the sand. In the language of *Being and Time*, to act inauthentically is to be authentically-inauthentic. But, we must admit that there is a certain absurdity to keeping this language which designates a sort of heroism of the supposed *true self*, as if such a thing could be readily demarcated. “Nancy argues that with the collapse of the grand narratives of modern history the world no longer has a sense that can be determined and mapped as a universal structure.”¹¹² So, while we have come to an impasse, in recognition that our coexistence cannot be prefigured by a grand narrative or humanistic teleology; we need not take our abandonment to mean that we have no story to tell. If our being is at issue for us, if it is our existence to make sense of, perhaps it is up to us to make our own stories. Finally, moving away from dreams of authentic heroism, we can write our own fables and stories. If we have broken down the walls between the “true” world and the “real” world, perhaps there is a place once again for mimesis, for making sense in our situations. At home in a world that is always already ours, and always other, it is left to us to make sense. In our final chapter, we will be seeking some modest possibilities for orienting ourselves in the open of our world. The spacing of the between gives us lots to make sense of. How might we go about it?

Nancy counters a reading which would reject the ethical dimension of Heidegger’s thinking because it is not a “moral philosophy” in the traditional sense and does not prescribe norms for judgment by insisting: “It isn’t philosophy’s job to prescribe norms or values: instead, it must think the essence or sense of what makes up action as such; it should think, in other words, the essence or the sense of what puts action in the position of having to choose norms or values.”¹¹³ Here we can also notice how Nancy is locating the place of philosophy in its relation to the ethical as a work located within a
form of ontology. Along the second possibility for ontology which Nancy laid out in *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy’s ontology moves as a thinking to open up and think upon the (un-) ground of the spacing of singularities where decision takes place each time. Nancy’s sense of ontology comes in the form of a (finite) thinking of what gives sense to praxis in the world. In returning to the Heideggerean thinking of *Dasein*, we recall that *Dasein* is the being for whom sense is at issue, for whom its being is a question. There is neither an essence to Dasein which is acted out in existence, nor a given sense of Being in the sense of a genre or determination upon beings. Being, for Heidegger, is the open… as in an open book that remains to be ex-scribed.

That there is no sense left in the world, if what we are looking for is a “supersensuous sense” of given values and transcendent meaning should not leave thinking lost in the sway of nihilism. The sense of our existence is our own responsibility. As I have attempted to articulate at every turn, this supposed lack of any transcendent sense is not a deprivation. Perhaps it might be better thought of as a clearing, the opening of existence to its own possibilities, the disclosedness of its decision, and its responsibility for decision. “Nancy… warns the reader both against the danger of yielding to the temptation to look for a new sense or any ‘security, identity, certainty’ from philosophy conceived as a ‘distributor of values, worldviews, and… beliefs or myths,’ and also against the opposite danger of insisting on ‘a nihilistic nonsense.’”114 Or as Nancy articulates, “The opening of the world is what opens along such things and among them to each other in their coexistence. The open or the ‘nothing’ weaves the co-appearance of existences without referring them to some other originary or foundational unity.”115 Yet we make sense, somehow.
Retracing Heidegger’s thinking of Being as an open and finite spacing of beings, as this world here and now in all of its singular and plural diversity, allows us to think sense in this world and in our time. As Nancy says in so many ways, “We make sense.” Each syllable is of the utmost importance to think here. It is we who share this planet in our various communities who are responsible for making sense, thinking and acting in relation to one another in our world. Being is the open, and there is no separation between Being and being-with. Being is always already being-with others, being-in-the-world. Sense is not conferred on Being from without. We make sense, and nothing else makes sense.

Locating sense right at the world, the world which is shared out in finitude in the singular-plural of being, Nancy’s approach to co-existence is a thinking which uncompromisingly places the responsibility for sense right upon existence. We are not the inheritors of a telos from without, nor bound by a command from the Infinite. But the silent imperative of existence itself may impose the most forceful and infinitely demanding sense of responsibility of all.
Conclusion
The Infinite Demand of Finite Existence

If, as Levinas insists, Heidegger’s ontology left open the possibility of allowing for evil, or left open the possibility for the luring of freedom into the rule of the Same, Levinas then moved to respond by putting forth a thinking which would manage to escape from the world of thrownness and inessentiality (a thinking of the being which Levinas takes as both solipsistic and absorbed in collectivist essence) to respond by placing a binding to the Ethical which would be able to transcend the instability of forces in the world. Perhaps it speaks of a yearning for safety and givingness that in the face of hegemonic forces that reduced the human being to a mere thing that a philosopher would search for grounding in some sort of transcendence, some attachment to a beyond. Even after the removal of grounds and the death of God, Levinas strove to bring “the Beyond” back to the heart of philosophy. In spite of the harsh demands and neuroses inflicted by this manner of thinking the ethical demand, (the overwhelming guilt and burden, the asymmetricality of the demand), there must yet be some psychological comfort in having access to a beyond, to a force which might even be greater than the forces of tyranny in our world.
It is true that Heidegger’s thought could not offer comforting grounds to assure the place of ethical givingness. Care is instead given an ontological rendering by Heidegger. From Levinas’s view, perhaps the thinking of Being is but a thinking of the Same for this very reason. Levinas is hoping and searching for a thinking of transcendence, one which could demand the subject and command him to care for the Other. Levinas searches for a thinking which might reveal the power of God in our actions with others in the world. The other person becomes the asymmetrical demand to the Good, before which we are obligated, as if our obligation to the Infinite took place through the face to face encounter with an other. This of course is radically divergent to Heidegger’s thinking, and one cannot expect to find such recourse to a transcendence from beyond being in the realm of fundamental ontology, a thinking which thinks from the inessentiality of existence and the thrownness of being.

To many, this supposed inability of Heideggerean ontology to give a solid ground to ethics is precisely the problem. One may ask how we can endorse a thinking which cannot forclose against evil. Furthermore, though this ontology primordially and essentially means that we share in existence as being-with-others, this ontological fact cannot guarantee that one will choose to engage others in an ethically responsible manner, does not bind one to another by a demand to do “the Good.” And given the path Heidegger himself would enter into, many like Levinas have been inclined to read into his philosophy the roots of collectivist evil and the politics of collectivist identity (and correllary purging of otherness) which National Socialism brought to Europe with such despicable consequences.
Levinas sought a thinking which would instill a demand and a force upon being so strong that it might pull upon the freedom of the subject to bind him toward “the Good” in spite of the contrary forces at work in existence: from nationalist frenzy, self-serving accumulation and all of what Levinas classifies under the conatus. This yearning for evasion (to appeal to a force beyond and immune to the destructive powers of this world) is an understandable impulse in the face of the horrors of modernity. Even Heidegger himself was prone to a sort of yearning for heroic escapism in his thought, a set of Romantic ideals of supposedly true independence of thought and authenticity of action infused his ontology right alongside the radicality of his rethinking of ontology as the inessentiality of thrownness. Heidegger thought the everyday as the realm of the unthinking, the bastion of assimilationism, the lifeworld inflicted with the inaninity of technology and miscellaneous distractions. Neither Levinas’s appeal to the beyond, nor Heidegger’s Romanticism are surprising responses to the many troubling trends of early 20th Century Europe, but neither are they adequate responses to the demands given to thought by existence. It seems quite human to aver in the face of risk and danger.

Existence always involves risk. In a sense, existence is always risk, absolutely, and cannot be otherwise. Being in the world means we are each time responsible for our decisions in the world. Abandonment: the fact of our co-existence as thrown beings means that we are left to make sense of existence and this always already involves risk. The possibility for evil, just as much as the possibility for good, is a positive possibility of existence. If we wish to take up our responsibility for decision, for making sense of our shared existence, we must face this fact of existence head on. Allowing ourselves the imagined solace of having recourse to a heroic overcoming of our situatedness only
distracts us from the actual conditions we face in the world, at best. Nor can we appeal to a beyond of being which might save us, or reward us for our time done here and now, as if finitude were but a privation and the infinite our real truth. Existence makes sense, nothing else. Responsibility means nowhere else to turn to to defer our decision. Existence itself, though finite and shared out, is already infinitely demanding, a categorical imperative upon existence. Existence gives itself to thinking as a openness and demand, the spacing in which we share responsibility for decision and making sense. This is perhaps what the experience of freedom means for us, what it means to be responsible for sense.

**The Infinite Demand of Finite Existence**

Simon Critchley’s recent work *Infinitely Demanding* encapsulates a radical thinking of ethical subjectivity in a non-theistic setting, with the aim of instilling a persistent demand towards political action. Critchley wants to take a sense of infinitely demanding and unfulfillable responsibility that he finds in theistic thinkers such as Logstrup and Levinas, while moving away from the pathos of tragic-heroism that instills the Levinasian subject with a neurotic disposition. Critchley builds a sense of conscience that forms subjectivity in relation to an ethical demand to be responsible with and for others in the world, while tempering the heroic-authentic inclinations of such a thinking by looking toward Lacanian sublimation and an incorporation of comedy. As such, the subject is posited as being finite and for the good. But it is also a fact of existence that one is necessarily inauthentic, decision takes place right at the mundanity of existence, as Jean Luc Nancy puts it. Ethical subjectivity can thus now be thought as an infinitely
demanding responsibility, but one which is ever present for existents who cannot fulfill the demand and cannot take up the full burden of the world in one heroic act.

We are also people who have to make our lives and relations while living in an imperfect and troubled world. Martyrdom is not a sustainable practice, and tragic-neurotics do not make for healthy members of a community. People need sublimation, and recourse to the mimetic. The demands of authenticity and being a “true self” are inappropriate to an existence which is thrown, and for an existent whose essence is nothing other than existence itself. To be persistently faced with the burden of the real, to carry the weight of the world in a quest for authentic or pure overcoming is to live as if one can rise above the world into which one is thrown. But existence is always already situated and bound up in facticity. Recourse to sublimations and an engagement with our situatedness right at the everyday move a thinking of responsibility away from the allure of a heroic resoluteness and toward a finite thinking of sense, right at the open into which we are abandoned, and for which we are responsible.

Critchley writes, “the experience of conscience is that of an essentially divided self, an originally inauthentic humorous self that can never attain the autarchy of self-mastery.” The subject here is “divided between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, a demand that makes it the subject that it is, but which it cannot entirely fulfill.” Just as freedom cannot be an accomplishment, our responsibility for decision cannot achieve closure. The each-time of existence is our ontological condition, the movement of life, of the world, of us interspersing together encountering new things and events, situations and opportunities. To expect fulfillment and closure in existence leads to a nihilistic view of our finitude as a privation. It is a disposition of thinking which needs to be overcome if
we are to appreciate the radicality of thrown existence and take up responsibility for
decision right at the level of existence in-common, right at the everyday. This is the
supposed mundanity of decision which Nancy has articulated.

**Infinitely Demanding, Infinitely Finite**

In *Critique of Everyday Life Volume III*, Henri Lefebvre restates that the everyday
is the proper place of existence, which, in a certain sense, correlates strongly with
Nancy’s insistence that “what people have gotten into the bad habit of traslating
‘authentic’ but which is, in fact, the ‘proper’, takes place nowhere other than right at the
‘improper,’ right at everyday existence.” Nancy thus insists that the most proper
location of our existence takes place right at the world which is shared out with others, in
a spacing which is precisely not one’s own. In this sense then, Heidegger’s insistence
that authenticity requires Dasein to appropriate its facticity as its own means to be
responsible for that which cannot be “owned” by Dasein. Being-there means to take up
one’s being right at the there of thrown existence, one’s proper ownness is always already
a being-in-common in the everyday. As Lefebvre insists, the everyday is the locus of
freedom and potentiality wherein freedom can transgress the pull of the totalitarian and
the dominance of capitalist hegemony, as much as it is the location where such
unthinking assimilationist tendencies (as Heidegger describes in the They) operate.

Lefebvre holds fast that, “There is no question of abandoning the thesis that the
impossible orientates the possible, in life as in thought, so that during the long wait for
transformation, freedom inevitably takes the form of transgression.” The impossible
here, that which is not yet, or that which is left outside of the dominant order of the
“possible” by the hegemonic order, lies within the potentiality of those who co-exist in the world. As Nancy puts it, “Freedom measures itself against nothing.”¹¹⁹ That is against, the nothing, the impossible itself as Derrida renders it. Derrida considers this nothing, the incommensurable of our shared experience of freedom to be “the impossible as the only possibility and as the condition of possibility.”¹²⁰ It is the always to-come of our co-existence. The everyday resists closure, and is each-time our responsibility. It is infinitely shared and calls upon us to free freedom for itself, to keep open the space of freedom against the encroachments of fused singularity and the pull of the totalitarian. Lefebvre’s insistence on the radical potential of the everyday is I think strongly reflected in Nancy’s radical rethinking of ontology, as well as in Simon Critchley’s hope for a politics of resistance. If we wish to live in a world that is not enclosed within the dominance and order of the Same, as Levinas also professed, then there is no question of abandoning our responsibility for freedom; just as there need not be a question of abandoning thinking right at the world for a thinking which would root itself beyond existence.

The question though continually seems to present itself: What force does such a thinking of responsibility carry? How can one be responsible without being bound by authority or an almighty? What continually needs to be stressed in the face of such questioning is that finitude and the thrownness of existence are in themselves an infinitely demanding force which command responsibility. Thomas Keenan approaches this very concern, asking conversely what responsibility would be if it were not the free assumption of decision, writing:

“To act responsibly: whatever is left of the subject is faced somehow at once with an inalterable necessity and a free choice. Would responsibility have any meaning, or even
any force, were it not to be the object of a free assumption, the voluntary taking on of a charge? Or does this voluntarism strip responsibility of its force, equivocate with the utterly unequivocal call that makes of the response something that has no choice but to happen, no matter what it turns out to be?“

Keenan puts forward this most demanding sense of thinking responsibility which gives a strong sense of the kind of thinking of responsibility that we have been aiming for, that “the only responsibility worthy of the name comes with the removal of grounds, the withdrawal of the rules or the knowledge on which we might rely to make our decisions for us. No grounds means no alibis, no elsewhere to which we might refer the instance of our decision.” He elaborates that it is precisely because of this ungroundedness, this yet-to-be-decided of existence, that we have anything to be called ethics or politics, “We have politics because we have no grounds, no reliable standpoints.” That closure is constitutively impossible for thrown existence is what makes it such that literature, ethics and politics are persistent fields of discourse and contestation. We make sense, each time, yet sense always remains to be made. As Keenan insists, in a manner not dissimilar to Nancy, “Literature, like politics and ethics, is understood here as the experience of risk, chance, the undecidable. Not the decisionist celebration of the pathos of pure resolution, of having to decide once and for all, without reason but with firmness and conviction.” A finite thinking of responsibility means that there is no recourse to an extrinsic “sense” which could be posited to order and render the meaning of the world in advance, to give definitive and determinitive grounds to responsibility. Such ordering of the world under the posited order of the presence of a law or logos above existence is essentially without sense, it operates as its own enclosed circulation of sense. It is a reversion to nihilism which finds the world as given “meaningless,” and as such it is precisely the appeal to floating ideals and the
construction of operative mythologies which is senseless in regard to our responsibility to decide for existence.

As Henri Lefebvre insists, “All thinking that has to do with action has a utopian element.” 125 In deciding for existence, we measure ourselves against the impossible, the not-yet-decided. Without prescription or guidelines, we act in the open, where the future is always yet to-come.

Growing up under the influence of a Western tradition that has long posited notions of the infinite and the beyond of existence as being guarantors and foundations of truth, and that has striven to impose its sense as the truth of the world, there is an inclination for us to think of finitude as a privation, and as lacking in truth, as essentially being a lack that is in need of sense. Here, not only are we faced with a thinking which moves outside of that traditional way of thinking finite existence, but one which represents the very impossibility of closure which is the sense of the tradition in which we have been raised.

Jean Luc Nancy faces this aversion to thinking the truth of finitude by insisting that “Finitude is not privation. There is perhaps no proposition more necessary to articulate today…”126 It must be articulated because this existence is what we have, is what we share. To engage in a thinking of existence as privation is to engage in nihilism, to devalue our existence. It is the sort of destructive or escapist impulse which inclines various destructive forms of thought as well as apathetic or resigned detachment. We must think right at existence, right at the throw of our existence, if we are make sense of our world, and if we are to engage our responsibility in the here and now.
Everything You See Is Real, The Participants Are Not Actors

It may at times seem unclear whether I am slipping between writing about the ethical, the ontological, the political or even diverging into aesthetic concerns, but that is probably as it should be, or as it can only be. For I ask, what are the boundaries of “the ethical”? We have already seen the complications and contradictions encountered by Levinas with the “arrival” of the third person, the appearance of another other which brings the subject and other “ethical relation” into the supposed realm of “politics,” thus breaking the demand of the ethical. We have also seen how the limiting perspective of this thinking of ethics leaves many questions as to whether following through on the level of the one-on-one might not have negative effects upon others outside of the relation.

The fact is that we are always already many, co-existing and sharing out the space and time of our world. We are always already involved in the political, just as we are caught up in so-called ethical matters and interpersonal engagements. Perhaps here it is more clear why Heidegger denied he was doing ethics, and would not offer an ethics. The ontological conditions of thrown existence, which is primordially being-with-others, does not allow for these considerations to be readily separated, as if they were clear and distinct parts of existence. Furthermore, philosophy cannot prescribe nor control the decisions we will make, cannot give sense to us in a package and cannot carry out our responsibility for us in advance. Man has conjured innumerable mythologies of the Beyond and normative orders and constructs of supposedly proper identity, yet none of these have managed to fix political strife, put an end to unethical acts, nor brought all to accept their supposed proper place in world order. None of these has held absolute
binding upon beings, nor resolved the sharp and bitter social divisions we find in the
world. And yet, we resist thinking without such recourses to a supposed higher order.

But even our supposedly mundane everyday concerns and our aesthetic
engagement with things are essentially intertwined with how we take up responsibility for
decision each-time, in how we go about making sense of our world, how we
communicate and share in and experience sense. Responsibility takes place each-time,
right at our everyday decisions in the world. We make sense in the here and now.

Levinas’s aim to take the “ethical” and raise it above the whole of “the rest” of
existence falters for similar reasons that a Marxian elevation of “man as worker” to the
being the “subject of history” over the rest of existence also falters. Many classical
Marxists aimed to distill the “Truth” of human being by identifying a single and absolute
aspect of existence as the defining point of judgment by which to align each subject’s
identity. In doing so they raised a certain mode of human praxis and interaction to take
place as the first order of thinking about the world. It is the case with both the Levinasian
ethical subject and the Marxist subject of history that these are major and in some sense
practical responses to forces in the world which compel thought for a response (the
conditions of genocide, total war and nationalist fervor as well as the conditions of
industrialization, alienation and poverty.) But in each of these very different, but each
very dedicated philosophies, the aim to overcome the negative drives thought to neglect
so much of what is also constitutive of existence. It is as if all of the chips had to be laid
down on a single number, all other bets off. In some shared sense, both Marx and
Levinas saw philosophers as thinking about the world, and each in their way wanted to
“change” the world, perhaps neither appreciating the fundamental relation of thinking to praxis, how thinking about the world engenders praxis each time.

What we must learn to face is that we will not be saved by God, the dialectic force of history, nor any movement which portends to divine a singular truth from beyond or stretching over existence. As we are abandoned to the world, we must learn to abandon recourse to such totalizing gestures and philosophies which locate truth outside of existence. This abandonment is ours, it is our condition, the proper as such takes place right at the improper of thrown existence, which is what we share, where we are responsible for making sense, each time. This existence, infinitely finite, is what we share in and what we share out with each other. Sense is of this world, and it is our world to make sense of as freedom is ours to decide for. There is nothing else that will decide existence for us.

The will to supersede existence, to respond to these threats against existents in our world with appeal to transcendence may make a certain sense psychologically, just as it might make sense for an abused child to dream of being saved or to dissociate from her environment. A thinking of a higher order, the imagined possibility of closure or necessary resolution to conflict may offer a certain comfort (even a thinking as discomforting as that of Levinas) for these escapisms can place an end in sight, give a view of “truth,” utopia, or a beyond which will inevitably conquer the falseness and struggle of this world, the here and now. But can we afford in our philosophies to load up on such opiates while we are responsible for operating this moving train? Surely, certain choices have already been decided, but where we decide to go remains our responsibility, and our decision. There are no directions. It is left to us to make sense of
the terrain. So, are we going to make sense of things or allow others to drive our train to a head on collision? Some decisions are not so mundane, even in our everyday lives.

So while I may share a desire to push back the threats of capitalist alienation and the continual disempowerment of so many masses of people, the destruction of so much of the environment, continual war, racist ideology and so many forms of identity politics and attacks upon difference, horrors of genocide, indiscriminant and official violence… these are all threats and risks which take place right at existence. These threats persist and constitute part of our facticity and our situation. I share a total disgust for these acts and ideologies, but I fear also those who wish to brandish vanguardist dogmas, or aim to rally us around a “purer” vision of nationalism or humanism, those who wish to place another world above our own. I fear reactionary thought and find such recourse to beyondisms and appeals to a supposedly more authentic identity to be the cornerstones of reactionary thought. These threats to freedom operate right at existence, right where we find ourselves as thrown. As such, it is right at existence that we must deal with them, each-time. Some have portrayed this condition as a condemnation, but whether it be that or not may also be our responsibility to decide. There are risks and there are burdens, this is part of our facticity to take up. As Benjamin Pryor asserts, “It is, finally, a question of shifting to a mode of thought that is not systematic, that consequently does not place evil and good into dialectical opposition or see one as emerging necessarily with the other – a mode of thought that would rather give way to freedom.”

What we have been tracing out here, searching for, is such a thinking of freedom that might open thought to its own finitude and to the infinitely demanding responsibility that is explicitly intertwined with this experience of freedom.
Yet, in spite of these obstacles, I feel that I have been able to approach this work while exploring how his work responds to critical discussions about ontology, finitude, freedom, inter-subjectivity and the thinking of an ethics without normative content. I have been further encouraged in my quest by the works of Simon Critchley, Fabio Ciaramelli, David Wood and Francois Raffoul, amongst others, all of whom have, with varying degrees of sympathy and from different perspectives, brought Levinas’s ethical thought into discussions outside of Levinas’s often self-referential logic. Simon Critchley has now long been a prominent voice in regards to Levinasian studies, and his continued work has progressed to distill from Levinas’s ethical thought some important emphases which Critchley takes to exceed the bounds of Levinas’s own metaphysical constructions. Ciaramelli’s essay offers and attempt to distill crucial points of Levinas’s system of ethical subjectivity while seeking to universalize the tenets of that thought, which Levinas himself was unwilling to do due to his insistence upon the radical asymmetricality of the ethical demand. Francois Raffoul as well has taken Levinas to task in the most severe terms for his thin readings and quick characterizations of Heideggerean thought and his largely assimilationist view of the entirety of Western philosophy, but his criticism has also spurred a refinement of how the work of fundamental ontology carries within it a radical and primordial sense of the ethical, such that even here Levinas has spurred a strengthened rethinking of the Heideggerean project by posing important questions. David Wood provides a perspective of those who do not limit the sphere of ethical worth to that with a human face, while both Wood and Critchley take a critical eye to the devastating psychological effects a truly Levinasian subject would have to carry on with.

Notes

10. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, I feel that I have been able to approach this work while exploring how his work responds to critical discussions about ontology, finitude, freedom, inter-subjectivity and the thinking of an ethics without normative content. I have been further encouraged in my quest by the works of Simon Critchley, Fabio Ciaramelli, David Wood and Francois Raffoul, amongst others, all of whom have, with varying degrees of sympathy and from different perspectives, brought Levinas’s ethical thought into discussions outside of Levinas’s often self-referential logic. Simon Critchley has now long been a prominent voice in regards to Levinasian studies, and his continued work has progressed to distill from Levinas’s ethical thought some important emphases which Critchley takes to exceed the bounds of Levinas’s own metaphysical constructions. Ciaramelli’s essay offers and attempt to distill crucial points of Levinas’s system of ethical subjectivity while seeking to universalize the tenets of that thought, which Levinas himself was unwilling to do due to his insistence upon the radical asymmetricality of the ethical demand. Francois Raffoul as well has taken Levinas to task in the most severe terms for his thin readings and quick characterizations of Heideggerean thought and his largely assimilationist view of the entirety of Western philosophy, but his criticism has also spurred a refinement of how the work of fundamental ontology carries within it a radical and primordial sense of the ethical, such that even here Levinas has spurred a strengthened rethinking of the Heideggerean project by posing important questions. David Wood provides a perspective of those who do not limit the sphere of ethical worth to that with a human face, while both Wood and Critchley take a critical eye to the devastating psychological effects a truly Levinasian subject would have to carry on with.
15. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 139.
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22 ibid. 81-2.
28 ibid., 43.
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34 Wall. *Radical Passivity*, 32.
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43 Critchley. *Infinitely Demanding*, 61.
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