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THE PRIMACY OF ETHICS:
KANT, DELEUZE, LEVINAS

By

William Andrew Britton

A Dissertation

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Dedication

For Eulalia

Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with what it means to grant ethics primacy in a way that does not ultimately give way to the primacy of ontology. To this end, I draw on the work of Immanuel Kant, Gilles Deleuze, and Emmanuel Levinas. In Chapter I, I argue that Kant's "primacy of practical reason" gives us a promising framework for understanding primacy, but one that ultimately fails insofar as Kant makes the relation between practical and theoretical reason a relation of *equality* rather than one of primacy. In Chapter II, I argue that although Deleuze recognizes the need to elevate a certain understanding of ethics, a close reading of his comments on ethics (especially in *The Logic of Sense*) reveals that ethics is elevated for ontological purposes, and thus, the primacy of ethics is reducible to the primacy of ontology. In the remainder of the dissertation, I turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In Chapter III, I give close readings of key passages in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* to show how the terms "ethics" and "primacy" function in those texts. Ultimately, I argue that there are two operative notions of primacy in Levinas' work, which I call "constitutive primacy," and "ethical primacy." In Chapter IV, I suggest that constitutive primacy closely resembles Heidegger's account of priority in *Being and Time*, and thus precludes Levinas from sufficiently departing from the prevailing Heideggerian paradigm he sought to leave. I then argue that the turn from Heidegger was simultaneously a turn towards Kant, as Levinas often cites Kant's account of primacy as inspiration for his later account of meaning. However, unlike Kant, Levinas does not reduce the primacy of ethics *over* ontology to the equality of ethics *and* ontology, but rather treats ontology as subordinate to ethics. This, I argue, counts as a fully ethical understanding of the primacy of ethics. That is, the notion of primacy associated with the

“primacy of ethics” *is itself* an ethical concept, and thus, unlike Kant and Deleuze, Levinas (especially in his later work) elevates ethics *for ethical reasons*.

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Abbreviations

Works by Kant:

- KrV* *Critique of Pure Reason*. trans. Paul Guyer & Allen Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- KpV* *Critique of Practical Reason*. trans. Mary Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- RGV* *Religion with the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. trans. Allen Wood & George Di Giovanni. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Works by Deleuze:

- DR* *Difference and Repetition*. trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ECC* *Essays Critical and Clinical*. trans. Daniel Smith & Michael Grecco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- EP* *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Zone Books.
- LS* *The Logic of Sense*. trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. New York: Columbia University Press.
- N* *Negotiations*. trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.
- NP* *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. trans. Hugh Tomlinson. New York: Columbia University Press.
- SPP* *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. trans. Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- WP* *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.

Works by Levinas:

- DF* *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. trans. Sean Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- EI* *Ethics and Infinity*. trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- EFP* "Ethics as First Philosophy". In Sean Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader*, (Cambridge: Blackwell, Inc.), pp. 75-87.

- GCM* *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- GDT* *God, Death, and Time*. trans. Bettina Bergo Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- IR* *Is It Righteous to Be?*, ed. Jill Robbins. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- OF* “Is Ontology Fundamental?”. In Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, & Robert Bernasconi (eds.) *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), pp. 1-10.
- OB* *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- PPR* “The Primacy of Pure Practical Reason”. trans. Blake Billings. *Man and World*, Vol. 27, pp. 445-453.
- TI* *Totality and Infinity*. trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press

Introduction

In antiquity the dignity and recognition of science were diminished by the fact that even her most zealous disciples placed the striving for *virtue* first, and one felt that knowledge had received the highest praise when one celebrated it as the best means to virtue. It is something new in history that knowledge wants to be more than a mere means.

- Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §123

If Nietzsche's words cut us to the quick, it is because we have fallen prey to the temptation to treat the life of the "mind" as life itself. Who but the naïve image of the academic – shut up in their office after hours, scouring through old journals so as to add one more reference to a footnote no one will read – does not recognize that knowledge is simply a means, that thinking is motivated by something other than knowledge? Our task is to examine how we must think about these motivations. Of course, philosophers have long recognized that thinking is motivated. Sometimes this recognition is paired with a certain resentment. For the resentful, we simply must admit that thinking is motivated, but only because of a prior allegiance to unmotivated, pure thought. It is necessary, in other words, to know what tends to motivate our thinking so as to distance ourselves from the thoughts that such lowly, impure motivations produce. These thinkers are easy targets for those who recognize that this allegiance itself is impure. To continue along Nietzschean lines, he argued that behind theoretical disciplines as seemingly pure and disinterested as logic, there are values, *moral* values, which amount to desires for preserving certain types of life.¹ He did not call attention to the motivating forces behind logic in hopes of establishing the legitimacy of the discipline, but rather as a way to humble it, and to paint a fairly pathetic psychological portrait of the philosopher – as an advocate

¹ Nietzsche, *BGE* I:2, 3.

for certain moral values who resents the name, as one who has neither the courage nor the honesty to admit what really stands behind their thought.²

Although there will always be those who hold that pure, disinterested thought can (and should) be saved, many feel the need to seek out alternative accounts of thinking – accounts that seem to embrace rather than shun the practical considerations that motivate theoretical thought. We might think here of Edmund Husserl, who showed that even the most technical, abstract conclusions that the sciences provide have their ground in everyday life, in the *Lebenswelt*. Or we might be tempted to cite Martin Heidegger, who in a similar vein argued that all positive sciences presuppose something more basic – a fundamental ontology which must necessarily unfold as an existential analytic of Dasein. The positive sciences, in other words, are grounded in Dasein’s way of Being, which is constituted by anxiety, care, relations with others, guilt, conscience, and so forth. But have these accounts of thinking gone far enough? Have they made thought *practical enough*? In what does their “practicality” consist?

One way we might summarize what these sorts of positions have in common is that they give “practical” considerations “theoretical” import. But one of the most basic contentions of the present investigation is that many ways of making this philosophical move threaten to reduce the insight they seem to contain, and even the very notion of “importing” makes this threat evident. To import is to bring in, to introduce something as from a different place. To give practical considerations theoretical import, then, is to bring them in from a foreign context to a place they did not originally inhabit and where they are not at home. What this talk of “importing” threatens to do is to make “the practical” find a way to function in an already constructed theoretical context. The philosophical emphasis remains on theory, and whatever insights that

² Ibid., I:5. I discuss these points from Nietzsche in further detail in Chapter III.

practice offers are treated as valuable only because of their role in constructing a “better” theory. In other words, when we think that giving practical considerations theoretical import is enough, we risk treating practical considerations as valuable *because* they promise to give us theoretical insight. In these cases, we have treated “the practical” as a mere means.

Now, this observation is not restricted to outdated distinctions between theory and practice. We can apply the same assessment to a plethora of similar distinctions that philosophers tend to make – between facts and values, between what is and what ought to be, between what is “true” and what is good. Our focus, however, will be on ontology and ethics. It is both easy and tempting to think about the philosophical importance of ethics in ontological terms. We might think, for example, that appreciating ethics is important because without such an appreciation, we miss something fundamental about the ways in which we construct ontological systems. It is certainly true that ethics has something to do with the ways in which we do ontology. Note, however, the emphasis: ethics is important for its *explanatory* power, for what it can contribute to our *ontological* understanding. Simply put, if this is what constitutes the importance of ethics, then whatever philosophical importance ethics has is reducible to the importance of ontology. But is there a way to avoid this reduction? Is there a way to prioritize ethics *for its own sake*? Is there, in other words, any sense to be made of the *ethicality of ethics*?

In recent years, some – most notably Simon Critchley and François Raffoul – have posed the question of the “ethicality of ethics.”³ In *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Critchley takes the ethicality of ethics – “what makes ethics ethical,” or

³ Of course, the phrase itself goes back further, and specifically, to Derrida. He uses the phrase the “ethicity of ethics” in *Passions*, but as one of many examples of issues that remain “questionable beyond the question,” as examples of something “urgent” but ultimately unanswerable (p. 16). He mentions the “Ethics of Ethics” as a way of describing Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*. While we will not provide a full treatment of Derrida’s relation to Levinas, we will closely look at the relevant portions of *Totality and Infinity* so as to determine whether or not it deserves this description.

“what makes ethics the thing that it is” – to be the essential issue of meta-ethics, which for him is a philosophical discipline which must unfold as an inquiry into ethical experience.⁴ Any account of ethical experience, he argues, presupposes an account of ethical subjectivity, and so the inquiry into the ethicality of ethics necessarily becomes an inquiry into ethical subjectivity. Or take Raffoul’s *The Origins of Responsibility*. There, he argues that part of what continental thought provides us is a new way of thinking about ethics. He writes,

...ethics has not only been a constant concern of recent continental thought but has in fact been problematized anew; ethics is approached less as a normative body of moral rules and even less as an applied discipline, and more in terms of a philosophical reflection on the meaning of ethics as such, on the ethicality of ethics.⁵

For Raffoul, the essence of this new problem – the problem of the ethicality of ethics – is inextricably tied to discussions of responsibility, and discussions of responsibility, in turn, are inseparable from the *subject* of responsibility. The real force of his analysis, then, lies in showing how subjectivity is understood anew by the thinkers he invokes, specifically, as unburdened by traditional notions like free will and power. But *must* the inquiry into the ethicality of ethics prioritize the notion of subjectivity? Of course, I am not saying that thinking about the ethicality of ethics *cannot* invoke subjectivity; but must it take pride of place as *the* most relevant concept? If the task is to provide a philosophical reflection on the meaning of ethics as such, must we not inquire into what difference ethics makes *to our very conception of philosophy*? My contention is that we must, and that a helpful way to think about the philosophical meaning of ethics is to think about the notion of *primacy* or *priority*.

⁴ Critchley 2007, p. 9.

⁵ Raffoul 2010, p. 1.

Why primacy? If our task is to think about the philosophical meaning of ethics, then we must think about how ethics is related to other “branches” of philosophy, and most notably, to ontology. One might think about this relation in several different ways. For instance, and most importantly for our purposes, one might think of ethics as *subordinate* to ontology. To take an ancient example, some Stoics compared the “branches” of philosophy to the parts of a living being. They compared logic to the bones, ethics to the “fleshier parts,” and physics to the soul.⁶ Logic, according to this metaphor, is what supports philosophy, what gives it form. Physics, as the soul, is what animates philosophy, what makes it “move,” and therefore what comprises the most important object of inquiry. Ethics is somewhere in between. As it is not likened to bones, but what is connected to bones – the fleshier parts – it is not basic but supported. Nor is ethics the animating element of the philosophy, as it is not likened to the soul, but is relegated to being what the soul moves, and indeed, what is most *vulnerable*. For many, the general form of this metaphor is still operative, and if we do a bit of translating, we can see that the dignity awarded to logic and physics is analogous to the modern and contemporary allegiance to the issues that comprise metaphysics or ontology.⁷ That is, it is common to think that the issues that comprise ontology are simply more philosophically fundamental, more akin to philosophical bones, than the issues that comprise ethics. On this line of thinking, once we are done discovering structures of Being, then, and *only* then, can we give an account of the best way to be. That is to say, what this line of thinking assumes is that ontology is *primary* in relation to ethics.

⁶ For this example, see Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1, p. 158.

⁷ For the most part, I will speak of ontology rather than metaphysics. In the abstract, I do not think that the distinction between these terms is clear, but since, as we will see in Chapter III, Levinas uses “metaphysics” in a very particular way, it will be easier to use “ontology” rather than metaphysics to denote the inquiry into what is.

But there is a minor tradition in philosophy that demands that we grant ethics primacy in relation to ontology. Here we must be careful, for as we have already begun to see, there are certain ways of understanding the importance of ethics that are reducible to the importance of ontology, and the character of this reduction is even clearer when understood in terms of primacy. “Primacy” is the name of a relation or a principle of connection between two terms. And crucially, one can reverse the terms of a relation while leaving the relation itself untouched. If the *reason* one wishes to prioritize ethics lies in the conviction that ethics is simply a more fundamental structure of Being, for example, then ethics is primary in a certain sense, but the operative notion of primacy is inescapably ontological. In this case, ethics is prioritized for ontological purposes, and therefore this particular claim to the primacy of ethics is reducible to the primacy of ontology. Thinking about the ethicality of ethics in terms of the notion of primacy will therefore require that the principle of connection between ethics and ontology be thought of *as itself* ethical; or, to make a rigorous claim about the primacy of ethics is to treat *primacy itself* as an ethical concept. With this framework in mind, we will examine three thinkers who, each in their own way, make claims about the primacy of ethics: Immanuel Kant, Gilles Deleuze, and Emmanuel Levinas.

In Chapter I, we will examine Kant’s (in)famous doctrine of the primacy of the practical. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that practical reason must be considered primary in relation to theoretical reason. For him, primacy consists in one part, aspect, or perspective of reason having the right or prerogative to determine another, to be “the first determining ground of the connection with all the rest” (*KpV*, 5:119). In the section in which this concept is introduced, Kant argues that there are three options for considering the relationship between theoretical and practical reason: either theoretical reason can determine

practical reason, theoretical and practical reason can be juxtaposed or equal, or practical reason can determine theoretical reason. Kant claims that the first option is impossible because even theoretical interests are ultimately practical; the second is impossible because were theoretical and practical reason to be on an equal footing, they would each follow their own separate interest at the expense of the other's, and therefore, any unity between theoretical and practical reason would be impossible. Since juxtaposition is impossible, we must admit that one perspective of reason is subordinated to the other, and since practical reason cannot be subordinated to theoretical reason, we must say that theoretical reason is subordinated to practical reason.

It would seem as if the conclusion to this account of primacy is that practical reason can “extend” theoretical reason's use. But Kant's endorsement of this conclusion is merely conditional, and the nature of the condition is crucial for our purposes. In the remainder of the second *Critique*, Kant argues that practical extension must always be paired with theoretical restriction such that practical and theoretical reason stand in a “relation of equality” (*KpV*, 5:141). The simultaneous stress on both primacy and equality is, I suggest, a fundamental tension in Kant's account of the relation between practical and theoretical reason, and ultimately, the second *Critique* as a whole. If practical reason is primary, and primacy precludes relations of juxtaposition, then relations of equality are also precluded. Or in other words, if practical reason has the right to determine theoretical reason, then we have no conceptual resources to make sense of the need for theoretical restrictions. In sum, while Kant rightly recognizes the need to make practical reason primary in relation to theoretical reason, he ultimately fails to follow his own insight.

In Chapter II, we turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze. Famously, Deleuze's work is focused on ontology. But when we examine his comments regarding some of his most formative

ontological influences (namely, Spinoza and the Stoics), we find him first praising their *ethical* insights. Spinoza, for example, is cited for his recognition that his theoretical or speculative positions can only be judged on the ethics that they imply. Or take Nietzsche – another formative influence – whose fundamental philosophical insight is, according to Deleuze, that evaluation is the force that forms all thought, that the “element” of thought is value, not truth. These claims make one suspect that Deleuzian thinking itself is an inescapably ethical undertaking and so we might not be surprised to find that Deleuze often appeals to *ethical* concepts in ontological discussions. To take the most important example, in *The Logic of Sense* – a text that is devoted to the notion of the “event” – Deleuze discusses the meaning of ethics in the only section whose title is entirely devoted to the concept of the event (Twenty-First Series of the Event). There, we find a series of striking claims not just about the nature of events, but about what we *deserve*, about the *only* meaning that ethics has: “not to be unworthy of what happens to us” (*LS*, 149).

However, a close reading of *The Logic of Sense* shows that his comments on ethics are dependent on his underlying ontology – particularly, his ontology of events and the temporality that such an ontology requires. Moreover, by paying close attention to what Deleuze means by “ethics” (as opposed to morality), it becomes clear that the real sense of ethics lies in its ontological importance – as a typology of immanent modes of existence, or as an ethology. Indeed, ethics *simply is* ontology for Deleuze, and thus any claim he makes that might resemble the primacy of ethics will really be a claim about the primacy of ontology.

In Chapter III, we come to the person whose name is virtually synonymous with the primacy of ethics: Emmanuel Levinas. While the primacy of ethics is often associated with Levinas – largely because of his claim that ethics is “first philosophy” – it is rarely given

sufficient attention, as most simply assume that the concepts the claim employs – “ethics,” “primacy,” or “firstness” – are clear enough without further explication. Thus, Chapter III is devoted to investigating how the terms “ethics” and “primacy” function in Levinas’ two major works: *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. For Levinas, ethics is not an account of the classical virtues, not a matter of identifying and applying some abstract moral law, and certainly not an impetus to promote pleasure and reduce pain. Ethics is the name of a relation. In *Totality and Infinity*, ethics is a way to describe the relation to the Other, and more specifically, a relation in which my spontaneity is called into question. The bulk of *Totality and Infinity* is devoted to showing that the ethical relation is *the* relation par excellence, or “the ultimate relation in Being” (*TI*, 48). But in his later work, Levinas describes this relation in somewhat different terms – ethics is not simply the ultimate relation in Being, but is rather associated with the *beyond* Being; ethics is what accomplishes the “breakup of essence” or Being (*OB*, 14). For the later Levinas, it is ethics that forces us to think of a meaning that signifies beyond Being.

In both of these works, ethics is almost always discussed in relation to ontology, and the relation invoked here is characterized in terms of primacy and priority. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas’ account of primacy centers around a particular understanding of irreducibility and fundamentality. Ethics is primary because it is an original, irreducible structure on which all posterior structures rest.⁸ In *Otherwise than Being*, however, the very notion of an origin is called into question, and with it, a new account of primacy is presented. With Levinas’ intensified interest in the “otherwise” and the “beyond” comes the conviction that it is no longer

⁸ “The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching, and justice – a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest...is one of the objectives of the present work.” (*TI*, 79)

enough to speak of originary or fundamental structures of Being, for the notion of an “origin” is superseded by the necessity of speaking of the *pre*-originary, wholly otherwise than Being and essence. Whatever will be left of a Levinasian understanding of primacy will therefore need to be transformed in order to put it in the proper register, as far removed as possible from any understanding of fundamental ontology.

Building on the exegetical case presented in Chapter III, Chapter IV examines in more detail the two different senses of primacy that one finds in Levinas’ corpus. I argue that Levinas’ early work (exemplified in *Totality and Infinity* and other essays) gives us an example of “constitutive primacy.” A structure (to take Levinas’ favorite example) is primary if it constitutes all posterior structures. So, the claim regarding ethics’ primacy is a claim about the constitutive power of ethics. I argue that this understanding of primacy, though presented as a way of *breaking* with the prevailing Heideggerian paradigm, actually retains one of the most basic claims *Being and Time* makes. This is especially evident in Levinas’ 1951 essay “Is Ontology Fundamental.” There, Levinas’ argument for the primacy of ethics has two main components: first, he argues that Heidegger misses a more fundamental structure of Being – the ethical relation; and second, Levinas attempts to identify the distinctive element of that relation – the Other. I argue that these claims are variations of Heidegger’s claims about ontological and ontical priority – notions which are introduced in the first pages of *Being and Time* and animate that work. While Levinas indeed reverses the terms of the philosophical relation between ethics and ontology, he leaves the principle of connection between these terms untouched, and therefore implicitly retains ontology’s priority.

As I have already mentioned, reversing the terms of a system of thought is not enough to overturn that system itself. This realization, I suggest, is part of the reason why the later Levinas

puts such stress on the notion of the “otherwise” than Being, and thus, why his later account of primacy looks different than his earlier account. This is especially evident in his 1984 essay “Ethics as First Philosophy.” Though it deals with the same general topic as the 1951 essay – the primacy of ethics in relation to ontology – the points of emphasis are markedly different. The primacy of ethics is no longer concerned with the identification of a fundamental structure in Being, but with the identification of a meaning *beyond* Being – a meaning that Levinas will often associate with Kant’s doctrine of primacy. No longer does Levinas’ argument turn on an understanding of primacy that emphasizes the constitutive power of the ethical relation; rather, we see Levinas emphasize a particular type of *fear*: fear for the Other’s death, the fear of committing injustice, and ultimately, the preference for that which *justifies* Being over that which assures it. In short, Levinas’ later understanding of primacy is not designed to simply weigh in on what structure of Being is more ontologically fundamental; rather, it is designed to ask whether Being is *justified*. With this shift in emphasis comes a new account of *ethical* primacy. That is, the very concept of primacy, firstness as such, is transformed into a fully ethical term, a summons to responsibility for the Other. Thus, unlike Deleuze and using Kant to go beyond what Kant himself accomplished, Levinas provides us a promising framework for a rigorous understanding of the primacy of ethics, of the ethicality of ethics. That is, what Levinas’ work ultimately provides is not an ontology of ethics, but rather an ethics of ontology.

Chapter 2:

A Kantian Problem

The Primacy of Practical Reason

In 1796, approximately eight years after Kant published the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Friedrich Hölderlin made the following prediction:

Since in the future all of metaphysics will be part of *moral* theory (Kant, in his two practical postulates, has only given an *example* of this, and has not exhausted the field), this ethics will be nothing less than a complete system of all ideas or, what come to the same, of all practical postulates.¹

Now, this chapter is not concerned with the accuracy of Hölderlin's prediction. Rather, we are concerned with what he saw in Kant's work that prompted such a prediction. What did Kant's work make possible for all future metaphysics, and what warrant is there for saying that his doctrine of *postulates* is where we should look for an example (albeit an incomplete one) for what is to come? To answer these questions, we must turn to the *Critique of Practical Reason*.²

In a short and dense section of the second *Critique*, Kant turns to a focused examination of the relationship between theoretical and practical reason. His topic is simple enough to grasp, and is signaled in the section's title: "On the Primacy of Pure Practical Reason in its Connection with Speculative Reason" (hereafter, "the primacy section"). Kant will address the "primacy" of practical reason in relation to theoretical or speculative reason. Our task in this chapter is also simple enough: by closely and carefully examining the argument of the primacy section and then

¹ Hölderlin, "Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism," p. 185.

² While the second *Critique* is not the only text that discusses postulates, it is the most important. Practical postulates are addressed in every *Critique*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and *Religion with the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. I pass them over here (although I do return to the *Religion* in Chapter IV) not because they are undeserving of attention, but because the relevant arguments are either more clearly stated in the second *Critique*, or they are most plausibly read as applications of a principle that the second *Critique* establishes.

comparing it with what Kant says about “practical extension” later in the second *Critique*, we should see that Kant’s account of primacy is threatened by his account of extension.

○ *Offerings from Another Source: The Argument of the Primacy Section*

The primacy section begins with a twofold definition of “primacy” (*Primat*): “[b]y primacy among two or more things connected by reason I understand the prerogative (*Vorzug*) of one to be the first determining ground of the connection with all the rest” (*KpV*, 5:119). The essence of Kantian primacy, then, lies in its status as a principle of connection between two terms. To say that one thing is primary in relation to another is to say that it has the right or prerogative not just to determine the other term, but to determine the *principle of connection* between the terms: to be “the first determining ground of the connection with all the rest.” But in a narrower “practical sense,” to say something is primary is to say that its *interest* should be thought as superior instead of subordinate. For Kant, every mental faculty has an interest, or a “principle that contains the condition under which alone its exercise is promoted” (*KpV*, 5:119). For Kant, reason is the faculty *of* principles, and therefore determines not only the interest of all other mental faculties, but also its own. Reason is also distinctive in that it has two interests that each correspond to a certain “perspective” (*Absicht*) or “use” (*Gebrauchs*). On the one hand, reason’s interest in its speculative or theoretical use consists in cognition of an object according to a priori principles. For Kant, an object is cognized when it is grasped or subsumed under the categories of the understanding.³ On the other hand, reason’s interest in its practical perspective or use consists in the determination of the will.⁴ As we will see, Kant is insistent that practical reason has its own a priori principles for the determination of the will, or principles of action that

³ Following Kant, I use “speculative” and “theoretical” interchangeably.

⁴ The will, Kant says in the *Groundwork*, is “a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational...” (*GMS*, 4:446).

are secured apart from theoretical reason's activity. The *prima facie* problem here is that it is possible that the interest of one perspective of reason might conflict with that of the other's, and since Kant claims that consistency is the condition of *any* use of reason, he must find a way to make practical and theoretical interests consistent with each other.⁵

The first possibility Kant considers for making theoretical and practical interests consistent is as follows: "If practical reason may not assume and think as given anything further than what *speculative* reason of itself could offer it from its insight, the latter has primacy" (*KpV*, 5:120). In other words, if practical reason can only legitimately speak about what theoretical reason offers it, then practical reason is subordinated to theoretical reason, and we must say that theoretical reason is primary. But as we have already mentioned, Kant claims that practical reason has *its own* a priori principles, and crucially, these a priori practical principles are such that they are "inseparably connected" with some theoretical positions. One such principle is the "fundamental law of pure practical reason," or as it is more commonly known, the categorical imperative. This law states: "[s]o act that that maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in the giving of a universal law" (*KpV*, 5:30-31). Kant famously claims that consciousness of this law, which is what he calls a "fact of reason" (*Faktum der Vernunft*), discloses our freedom, a freedom which is – at least in part – a theoretical position.⁶ Despite the fact that these practical principles are inseparably connected to theoretical positions, theoretical reason still has no right to pronounce any judgment about these positions. Since freedom, for example, cannot be exhibited in any possible experience, it is beyond the bounds of what

⁵ Consistency, Kant claims, does not constitute reason's interest, as it is a condition of any use of reason whatsoever. Rather, reason's interest as a whole is "extension." Kant does not define extension here, but we will see his treatment of extension when we turn to the later sections of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

⁶ For the heart of this argument, see *KpV*, 5:28-31. As we will later see, this is also likely a reference to the postulates of practical reason, namely, the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

theoretical reason can legitimately make claims about. Kant is careful to say here that this does not count as a contradiction, but is simply evidence of the difference between the dual interests of reason. Theoretical reason's inability to pronounce any final judgment about the question of freedom does not mean that it knows that we are *not* free, and so practical reason's access to freedom is not quite a contradiction of theoretical reason's lack of access, but rather a difference in interest. Thus, Kant claims that because of this difference in interest, the question then concerns which interest is *supreme* (*oberste*). He asks,

Whether speculative reason, which knows nothing about all that which practical reason offers for its acceptance, must accept these propositions and, although they are transcendent for it, try to unite them, as a foreign possession handed over to it, with its own concepts, or whether it is justified in obstinately following its own separate interest and, in accordance with the canon of Epicurus, rejecting as empty subtle reasoning everything that cannot accredit its objective reality by manifest examples to be shown in experience, however much it might be interwoven with the interest of the practical (pure) use of reason and in itself not contradict the theoretical, merely because it actually infringes upon the interest of speculative reason to the extent that it removes the bounds which the latter has set itself and hands it over to every nonsense or delusion of imagination? (*KpV*, 5:120)

What Kant explaining here is, if we may speak anthropomorphically, what options are available to theoretical reason in light of the fact that practical reason has its own concepts or principles that are inseparably tied to certain theoretical positions. Must theoretical reason accept these concepts, despite the fact that they are "foreign possessions" and try to unite them with its own concepts? Can it simply dismiss practical reason's concepts on the grounds that they cannot be exhibited in intuition, and therefore cannot be theoretically cognized?

If practical reason did not have original a priori principles, Kant thinks that the choice would be clear. If, for example, practical reason were merely a *prudential* faculty, one whose entire function consisted in informing us how to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, then it would

have no necessary a priori principles, and would therefore have nothing to say to theoretical reason. Theoretical reason would therefore (rightly) close off its boundaries, and were some particular theoretical position to be more conducive to pleasure than another, all the better for that first position, but it would not, for that reason, be rationally justified. In this case, these principles would be a “foreign possession handed over to theoretical reason” quite like a religious tract is a foreign possession handed over to the nonbeliever. She might be thankful or annoyed by the gesture, but in either case, she is under no obligation to accept the principles it contains.

If, however, pure reason can be practical, then the story is much different. If, in other words, practical reason has its own a priori principles, then we know that it is actually worthy of the second half of its name. In that case, Kant says, it is still part of the faculty of reason, and it is therefore distinguished from theoretical reason only in virtue of its “perspective” or “use.” Thus, *even if* reason in its theoretical perspective cannot affirm or deny a particular position, as soon as that same position “*belong[s] inseparably to the practical interest,*” theoretical reason *must* accept it; indeed, it must accept it as “as something offered to it from another source, which has not grown on its own land but yet is sufficiently authenticated” (*KpV*, 5:121). To say that theoretical reason must accept what belongs inseparably to practical interest is to say that it must connect them with its own insights, all the while recognizing that they are not original to theoretical reason, but rather “extensions of its use from...a practical perspective” (*KpV*, 5:121).⁷ Moreover, Kant does not think this is an infringement on theoretical reason’s interest, because that interest consists in purifying reason, or in keeping it from affirming anything that is transcendent for it, or what he calls “speculative mischief.” But if theoretical and practical

⁷ As we will later see, the wording here is crucial.

reason are two perspectives of one and the same reason, then practical propositions would not be transcendent for reason as such, only reason in its theoretical perspective. So, the real force behind saying that pure practical propositions are offerings from another source *and yet sufficiently authenticated*, is that although they are not original to theoretical reason, they *are nonetheless reasonable*.

So, where does this leave our discussion of primacy? Recall that if practical reason cannot think anything but what it receives from theoretical reason, then the latter has primacy. But since practical reason has its own a priori principles, principles that it in turn offers to theoretical reason, this option is precluded. Theoretical reason is, therefore, not primary in relation to practical reason. Another option would be that practical and theoretical reason are *juxtaposed*. If this were the case, then we would be left with the problem of how they, as two perspectives of one and the same reason, interact. But for Kant, this will not do. He writes,

For without this subordination [i.e., of one perspective of reason to the other] a conflict of reason with itself would arise, since if they were merely juxtaposed (coordinate), the first would of itself close its boundaries strictly and admit nothing from the latter into its domain, while the latter would extend its boundaries over everything and, when its need required, would try to include the former within them. (*KpV*, 5:121)

In other words, practical and theoretical reason cannot be juxtaposed, since they would each follow their own interest *separately*, and therefore, a conflict in reason would arise. From the start of the primacy section, Kant precludes any genuine conflict in reason from being possible by making consistency a condition of any use of reason whatsoever. That is, if reason was in conflict with itself, then we would not be able to use reason at all. Of course, he thinks it obvious that we *do* use reason, and thus have good grounds to suppose that reason is unified rather than in conflict. So, practical and theoretical reason cannot simply be juxtaposed, but one must be *subordinated* to the other. Practical reason cannot be subordinated to theoretical reason,

both because it has its own a priori principles, and, Kant now adds, because “all interest is ultimately practical, and speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone” (*KpV*, 5:121).⁸ There is therefore only one option left, and it is the one Kant endorses: “[b]ut one cannot require pure practical reason to be subordinate to speculative reason and so [we must] reverse the order...” (*KpV*, 5:121). Practical reason, therefore, is primary in relation to theoretical reason.

In sum, there are three possibilities for thinking about the relation between theoretical and practical reason. Either they can be juxtaposed, theoretical reason can be considered primary, or practical reason can be considered primary. They cannot be juxtaposed, because juxtaposition would entail conflict, and there can be no conflict in reason. Theoretical reason cannot be primary because practical reason has its own a priori principles that are transcendent for theoretical reason, and theoretical reason is complete only in its practical use. Therefore, Kant concludes, practical reason is primary in relation to theoretical reason. That is, practical reason’s interest is supreme in relation to theoretical reason’s interest, and practical reason therefore has the right to be the “first determining ground” in its connection with theoretical reason.

○ *Practical Reason, Postulates, and Extension*

In keeping with the spirit of Hölderlin’s prediction, it is important to understand the relationship between Kant’s account of primacy and what that account introduces – the

⁸ Kant does not argue for this position here, but merely asserts it. One might think that by defining interest as the condition under which a faculty’s exercise is promoted, and then asserting that theoretical interest is complete only in practical use, Kant is suggesting that morality is the end of reason, and for the following reason: practical reason *is* the will, and the will is that which is determined by moral laws. Moral laws are laws of autonomy, and autonomy is identified with “the supreme principle of morality” (*GMS*, 4:446-447). If theoretical reason is complete only in practical use, i.e., in the determination of the will, then to see what “completes” theoretical reason, we must look at what principles determine the will – moral principles. Thus, to say that theoretical reason is complete only in practical use is to say that theoretical reason is complete only in its application to morality. This would also help us to see why Kant calls freedom (or, autonomy) the “*keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason” (*KpV*, 5:3). For a much more detailed defense of a view similar to this, see Velkley 1989.

postulates of practical reason. Kant famously argues that the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are morally necessary to presuppose. The heart of this argument centers on Kant's claim that the object of the will is the highest good, and the highest good requires "complete conformity" of the human will with the moral law. Since the human will as it exists in the "sensible world," i.e., the human insofar as she is burdened by sensible inclinations, is incapable of bringing her will into complete conformity with the moral law, one must suppose an "endless progress" toward that conformity, and therefore, the existence of an immortal soul (*KpV*, 5:122). The highest good also allegedly requires thinking that an agent's happiness will be proportionate to her virtue. This proportion, in turn, requires positing a moral cause of the world that could guarantee that such happiness really will correspond to virtue. This moral cause must be a being with the intelligence, will, and power required to assure that our happiness somehow corresponds to our fulfilling our duties, or as he puts it, "it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God" (*KpV*, 5:125). To put it mildly, these are not Kant's strongest arguments. However, that is not necessarily an indictment of his account of primacy. We might, after all, be compelled by Kant's formal claim about the primacy of practical reason, but simply disagree about what postulates necessarily follow from it. What concerns us here has less to do with Kant's suggestions for specific postulates and more with the idea and status of a postulate as such.

Understanding the notion of a postulate in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is important to our investigation here because it is related to whether and how practical reason can be said to *extend* theoretical reason. Recall that the topic of the primacy section concerned what theoretical reason must do with the positions practical reason gives to it, and the result of that section was that theoretical reason must accept whatever proposition is inseparably tied to practical interest.

Indeed, Kant says that these practical propositions represent “extensions of [theoretical reason’s] use,” despite the fact that they are withdrawn from theoretical insight. Later in the second *Critique*, Kant identifies practical reason’s offerings, these propositions inseparably tied to practical interest, as “postulates,” or “*presuppositions* having a necessarily practical reference” (*KpV*, 5:132).⁹ So, in other words, our issue now concerns first, the relation between theoretical reason and practical postulates and second, the extent to which practical postulates constitute extensions of theoretical reason.

With respect to these practical postulates, Kant asks, “is our cognition really extended in this way by pure practical reason, and is what was *transcendent* for speculative reason *immanent* in practical reason?” (*KpV*, 5:133). Are we, in other words, entitled to claim that whatever is necessary for the determination of the will is *real*, despite the fact that we have no purely theoretical grounds to make such a claim? Famously, Kant’s answer is as follows: “Certainly, but *only for practical purposes*.” (*KpV*, 5:133) What could this possibly mean and what implications does this answer have for Kant’s account of primacy?

As its title suggests, Kant addresses the first of these issues in the next section of the *Critique*: “How is it Possible to Think of an Extension of Pure Reason for Practical Purposes without Thereby also Extending its Cognition as Speculative?” There, Kant lays down the following condition for extending cognition:

In order to extend a pure cognition *practically* there must be a *purpose*¹⁰ given a priori, that is, an end as object (of the will) that, independently of all theoretical principles, is represented as practically necessary by an imperative determining the will immediately (a categorical imperative), and in this case that is the *highest good*. (*KpV*, 5:134)

⁹ He uses “presupposition” here as a way of distinguishing postulates from theoretical dogmas.

¹⁰ Gregor translates *Absicht* as “purpose” here. This would not be so confusing if she did not translate *Absicht* as “perspective” in the primacy section.

The only condition under which we may extend a cognition, in other words, is if that cognition is practically necessary for the determination of the will. Kant argues that the highest good is necessary for the determination of the will, and so any theoretical concept that is inseparably connected to the highest good must, in turn, be accepted by theoretical reason.¹¹ The question, though, concerns what “acceptance” here implies, and indeed, what it means to say that this acceptance counts as an “extension.” In understanding that the postulates are inseparably connected to the highest good, Kant claims that theoretical reason receives an “increment” (*Zuwachs*). Despite the fact that it has no insight into the positions practical reason presents it, theoretical reason is now justified in assuming that these positions or concepts have “real objects” (*wirklich Objekte*). Kant then says that this increment does indeed count as an extension, but he now gives us a more specific idea about what the idea of extension entails: “[b]ut this extension of theoretical reason [is no extension of speculation, that is, no positive use can now be made of it for *theoretical purposes*]” (*KpV*, 5:134). To say, then, that theoretical reason is extended by practical reason does not entail the *theoretical* cognition of the objects associated with the postulates. For example, the claim “it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God” is not equivalent to the claim “because it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God, I know (in a theoretical sense) that God exists.” Kant is clear that even after theoretical reason is justified in assuming the postulates, they still are not cognitions, but “transcendent thoughts” – thoughts that are not impossible or contradictory, but also not theoretically determinable. As transcendent, they are beyond the bounds of what theoretical reason (considered by itself) can legitimately make claims about. Indeed, Kant says, since practical postulates include claims about objects that are not objects of a possible experience, it is

¹¹ “The production of the highest good in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law.” (*KpV*, 5:122)

impossible to make synthetic judgments about them, and as theoretical reason's essential activity consists in making synthetic judgments, "one can make no theoretical rational use at all" (*KpV*, 5:135). If no theoretical rational use can be made of the objects to which the postulates refer, then the extension of theoretical reason cannot be an extension of our cognition *of these objects*, but must rather be considered an extension *of reason itself*. He writes,

...theoretical cognition, *not indeed of these objects* but of reason in general, is extended by this insofar as *objects were given* to those ideas by the practical postulates, a merely problematic thought having by this means first received objective reality. There was therefore no extension of the cognition of *given supersensible objects*, but there was nevertheless an extension of theoretical reason and of its cognition with respect to the supersensible in general, inasmuch as reason was forced to grant *that there are such objects*, though it cannot determine them more closely and so cannot itself extend this cognition of the objects (which have now been given to it on practical grounds and, moreover, only for practical use)... (*KpV*, 5:135)

Practical reason "forces" theoretical reason to grant that the objects referred to by the postulates are real, but that does not mean that theoretical insight into those objects is thereby accomplished. That is, the human being has no grounds to say anything about the existence of God, for instance, other than what is practically or morally necessary.¹² Moreover, even those statements that are practically necessary have to be qualified, as they are not cognized theoretically, but only practically. Those ideas become immanent for reason *only* thanks to its practical capacity, and as soon as we are not speaking practically, those same ideas become transcendent, and therefore, off limits.

¹² Later, Kant will say that this restriction means that "God" is neither a physical nor metaphysical concept, but a *moral* one: "The concept of God, then, is one belonging originally not to physics, that is, to speculative reason, but to morals, and the same can be said of the other concepts of reason which we treated above as postulates of reason in its practical use" (*KrV*, 5:140).

What, then, is the role of theoretical reason with respect to the postulates? In this context, is it merely a passive faculty, simply being forced to accept what it receives from practical reason, and thus contributing nothing of its own? Kant claims that theoretical reason does have a role to play here, as once it has received the postulates from practical reason, it then begins to examine the content of those postulates. This examination is essentially negative, as it consists not in amplifying the ideas it receives, but rather in purifying them. As Kant says in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the project of purification consists in keeping reason from overstepping its bounds, and thus, from falling into error.¹³ Of course, the project of purification will look somewhat different in the case of postulates than it does when it attempts to purify metaphysical concepts that are not practically necessary. From the outset, theoretical reason is forced to accept that ideas to which it has no access on its own have real objects. The task of purification of postulates, then, does not have to do with determining their conditions of possibility, as they are given *as* “sufficiently authenticated.” Theoretical reason’s task with respect to the postulates, therefore, consists in guarding against unjustified extension, which Kant regards as the source of anthropomorphism, superstition, and fanaticism. In other words, the role of theoretical reason consists in preventing any extension beyond what is practically necessary. But again, it is important to remember that the concepts theoretical reason works on are that which it has not and cannot cognize. In other words, theoretical reason *alone* cannot make any final judgment about the reality of these concepts, either that they have real objects, or that they do not. Practical reason provides the grounds for assuming that the object of the idea in question is real, but again, that is not sufficient for theoretical cognition. But nevertheless, theoretical reason protects against unjustly extending practical reason’s insights further than is

¹³ Cf. *KrV*, A12/B26.

legitimate. The conclusion of this argument about the role of theoretical reason with respect to the postulates might be summarized as follows: practical *extension* must necessarily be paired with theoretical *restriction*, and crucially, this pairing accomplishes what Kant calls a “*relation of equality*” (*Verhältnis der Gleichheit*) between practical and the theoretical reason (*KpV*, 5:141).

Between Primacy and Equality

How ought we to interpret these claims about the primacy of practical reason, practical extension, and theoretical restriction? The primacy section claims that theoretical reason *must* accept the concepts that it receives from practical reason as offerings from another source, but offerings that are nonetheless sufficiently authenticated. Indeed, this acceptance allegedly requires that theoretical reason be assured that *real objects* belong to the practical concepts in question. Thus, after reading the primacy section, one might be tempted to conclude that practical reason, contrary to what the *Critique of Pure Reason* thought possible, gives us insight into things in themselves. In this vein, Ralph Walker suggests that practical reason’s primacy consists in “its ability to establish firm conclusions...about how things really are.”¹⁴ On his view, practical reason, and *only* practical reason “achieve[s] knowledge about the ultimate reality that underlies the world of our possible experience, the spatiotemporal world of appearances that is the object of our everyday cognition and our science.”¹⁵ Practical reason, in short, delivers “knowledge about reality as it is in itself.”¹⁶ This, it is safe to say, is a rather strong reading of primacy and of the ways in which practical reason can extend our cognition. Moreover, it is also

¹⁴ Walker 2017, p. 191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

one that goes significantly beyond what Kant claims, as is clear from our reading of Kant's account of speculative restriction. Although practical reason does have the right to determine theoretical reason, it is only for practical purposes, and thus what it gives theoretical reason does not count as cognition but is instead restricted to what is practically necessary to assert. Thus, Kant clearly balks at the conclusion that practical reason allows us to cognize things as they are in themselves. We might then say that Walker stresses practical extension at the price of theoretical restriction.

Attempting to avoid problems such as these, Marcus Willaschek suggests that there are conditions on Kant's doctrine of primacy. More specifically, he claims that practical reason can extend theoretical reason *only* under two conditions: first, "[t]here can be no possible empirical evidence nor a conclusive argument a priori for or against the belief in question," and thus the proposition must be "theoretically undecidable;" second, the belief or proposition in question must be practically necessary, i.e., required by the moral law.¹⁷ Both of these conditions are textually warranted. With respect to the first condition, Kant claims that even though some theoretical positions are inseparably connected to a priori practical principles, and despite the fact that they are withdrawn from any possible insight on the part of theoretical reason, practical reason "must not contradict [theoretical reason]" (*KpV*, 5:120). Moreover, it is no accident that the only concepts that Kant allows practical reason to provide are ones which are beyond theoretical reason's bounds, or concepts about which theoretical reason can make no judgment.

¹⁷ Willaschek 2013, p. 169. It is important to note that Willaschek frames this problem in terms of the rational warrant of beliefs "without evidence." It seems to me that it is better to frame the problem in terms of extension since claiming that the beliefs in question here are without evidence threatens to beg the question. That is, if by "evidence" Willaschek means "theoretical evidence," then this already precludes any genuine possibility of practical reason being primary. Kant's point is not that practical reason can furnish *theoretical* evidence, as we have now seen. Rather, Kant attempts to show that practical reason can furnish another type of evidence – *its own* kind of evidence. For Kant, the claim that a belief is practically warranted or necessary is worlds apart from the claim that it is "without evidence."

With respect to the second condition, Kant's entire point in introducing the postulates of practical reason is to show that they are practically necessary to accept, and therefore enjoy a practical justification supposedly independent of their theoretical warrant. Be that as it may, there is a certain temptation in Walker's position that Willaschek does not consider. *If* practical reason is primary – that is, if it is theoretical reason's "first determining ground," and if the latter's interest must be subordinated to the former's – then why insist that what practical reason delivers is theoretically impotent? If practical reason's primacy only makes a difference when something is theoretically undecidable, when theoretical reason has already done its work, then would this not suggest an allegiance to the primacy of *theoretical* reason?

In an effort to make a case for Kant's general doctrine of primacy, Jens Timmermann admits that something like the primacy of theoretical reason must hold for Kant. Although Timmermann calls the primacy of the practical the keystone of the Critical system, he claims that this does not preclude a certain sort of primacy from being awarded to theoretical reason. He writes, "theoretical reason is clearly primary in the sense that Kantian epistemology and metaphysics pave the way for the moral philosophy of the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, which depends on the results of the first."¹⁸ Theoretical reason, therefore, "takes precedence in the sense that it must leave space for practical reason to operate."¹⁹ But, we must ask, what is the ground of this demand, this "must"? It cannot be something internal to theoretical reason, as theoretical reason has no particular reason to "make space" for freedom – the primary concern of practical reason. In fact, quite the opposite! Theoretical reason alone, insofar as it seeks "cognition of the object up to the highest a priori principles" has every reason to *dismiss* claims

¹⁸ Timmermann 2009, p. 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

about freedom since they represent exceptions to the very laws it wants to establish (*KpV*, 5:120). Were theoretical reason left to its own devices, it would attempt to show that everything is unalterably subject to natural necessity.²⁰ *Pace* Timmermann, if theoretical reason *must* “leave space” for practical reason, it must be due to practical reason’s determination, not because of anything having to do with theoretical reason’s primacy.

For Timmermann, although there is a sense in which theoretical reason is primary, there is a different sense in which practical reason is primary. Theoretical reason’s primacy is “metaphysical and methodological,” while practical reason’s primacy consists in its “ability to furnish legitimate answers to questions that lie beyond the scope of speculation.”²¹ But these claims seem to get things backwards. They suggest that theoretical reason furnishes the *questions* while practical reason provides the answers that theoretical reason is not equipped to provide. But if the Kantian story is to be believed, freedom would never be an issue in the first place absent practical reason’s influence on theoretical reason’s investigations, and thus, no question would ever arise for theoretical reason were there not a clear practical consideration motivating the question. Though Timmermann’s reading threatens to miss the determinative practical work that Kant’s definition of primacy seems to require, there is, again, textual warrant for such a reading – the same textual warrant that provides support for Willaschek’s first condition. *And this is precisely the problem.*

If Walker’s account threatened to stress practical extension at the expense of theoretical restriction, Willaschek and Timmermann’s accounts threaten to do the opposite. Let us recall Willaschek’s first condition: what practical reason gives to theoretical reason must be

²⁰ In fact, *even with* practical reason’s determination, theoretical reason retains a version of this conclusion. See *KpV*, 5:99 for a discussion of how natural necessity relates to transcendental freedom.

²¹ Timmermann 2009, p. 196.

theoretically undecidable. Or as Kant says, even though practical reason is primary, it must not contradict theoretical reason. As we mentioned earlier, this seems to award a certain primacy to *theoretical* reason, and thus it should come as no surprise that Timmermann seeks to make room for such an account of primacy in his reading of the second *Critique*. But what neither Willaschek nor Timmermann recognize is that introducing this condition creates a tension with Kant's original account of primacy. In the primacy section, Kant claims that practical reason has the right to determine theoretical reason, but not the reverse. Yet, in the material on postulates and extension, he seems to balk at this conclusion, both because he demands that practical reason not contradict theoretical reason, and because he only allows the former to determine the latter *for practical purposes*. We have already begun to see the problem with the first issue. If practical reason can do the determining work that Kantian primacy required *only when something is theoretically undecidable*, then theoretical reason's interest does not seem to be truly subordinated to practical reason's interest (which is precisely what Kantian primacy requires). As for the second issue, if practical reason *really did* have the right to determine theoretical reason, if theoretical reason's interest *really were* subordinated to practical reason's interest, then why the qualifier? Why claim that the theoretical positions that practical reason provides have *no theoretical import*, that *no theoretical use may be made of them*? Or better, if practical extension is always to be paired with theoretical restriction such that these two uses or perspectives of reason are in a relation of *equality*, what sense is left to be made of practical reason's *primacy*? The problem, in short, is this: if Kant's definition of primacy requires the subordination of theoretical reason to practical reason, then *whence theoretical restrictions* on what practical reason provides?

Because of the problem with accounting for theoretical restrictions in light of Kant's definition of primacy, there is, surprisingly, a good *conceptual* case to be made for Walker's position – that practical reason gives us insight into the world as it is itself. If theoretical reason's interest – cognition according to a priori principles – is subordinated to practical reason's interest – the determination of the will – then anything necessary for the determination of the will seemingly *have* to be cognized. But as we have seen, this position is at odds with Kant's demand that we pair practical extension with speculative restriction. Walker, in other words, cannot account for Kant's claim that what practical reason provides theoretical reason can be of no use *for theoretical purposes*. So perhaps Walker is right if we understand him to be saying that Kant *should*, given his own principles, allow for a more robust account of practical extension, but as it stands, Walker does not make this clarification. Likewise, Willaschek is certainly right to point to the conditions laid on practical reason's primacy in Kant's text, and Timmerman is right to note that these conditions require admitting that theoretical reason is *in some sense* primary. But they do not recognize that these conditions threaten to undermine the account of primacy that they are designed to support. If we take seriously Kant's insistence that practical and theoretical reason cannot be merely juxtaposed, that one must determine the other, and that it cannot be the case that theoretical reason determines practical reason, then we must seriously consider how far the details of Kant's own project fit with this important claim about the structure of reason as such. If practical reason's interest is primary, then by definition, theoretical reason's interest must be subordinated to it. But if speculative or theoretical restriction – which is integral to theoretical reason's interest – is in a *relation of equality* with practical extension, then it seems that Kant has sacrificed practical reason's primacy for its equality. Thus, we may conclude by noting that Hölderlin's assessment of Kant is

simultaneously insightful yet understated: Kant's account of practical postulates certainly did not exhaust the possibilities for the future of moral metaphysics, but this is not simply because he needed more postulates. It is because he resisted the complete subordination of metaphysics to moral theory. Although his definition of primacy requires that theoretical reason be subordinated to practical reason, insofar as Kant only allows practical reason to determine theoretical reason when something is theoretically undecidable, he has reduced the insight on which the primacy section was predicated.

Conclusion

What does this problem in the *Critique of Practical Reason* have to do with our original questions about the ethicality of ethics, and what will Kant's account of primacy mean for the rest of our investigation?²² If, for us, the ethicality of ethics is a way of inquiring into the philosophical status of ethics, then we ought to consider the ways in which ethics is related to the other parts of philosophy. We ought to consider, in other words, whether or not ethics is *primary*. Kant's account of the primacy of practical reason is an important, if ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to show that ethical, or in his case, *moral*, considerations stand above merely theoretical considerations. But as we have seen, the primacy section ultimately makes a promise it does not keep. It promises to grant practical reason pride of place insofar as it has the right to determine theoretical reason, but Kant eventually compromises this vision of primacy by subjecting it to theoretical restrictions, by only allowing practical reason the right to determination when something is theoretically undecidable. As we will see, there are different ways of making this same type of compromise, and they are not confined to technical Kantian

²² In addition to the philosophical reasons cited here, the primacy section was also of great inspiration to Emmanuel Levinas' work. We will discuss how the primacy of practical reason is transformed in Levinas' philosophy in Chapter IV.

discussions of practical and theoretical reason, but rather appear in more recent accounts of the relationship between ethics and ontology. Put simply, if ethics *really is* primary in relation to ontology, then any attempt to understand ethics through an ontological lens, any attempt to put ontological limits on what ethics is allowed to say, threatens to reduce or even destroy the original primacy in question. I suggest we see a particularly good example of this reduction in the work of Gilles Deleuze, to whose work we now turn.

Chapter 3:

The Truths We Deserve: Deleuze's Ethics

If our question stems from Kant's primacy of practical reason, it might seem odd to invoke the work of Gilles Deleuze – the unapologetic metaphysician, the relentless critic of the system of judgment and representation, and quite possibly the true heir of Nietzsche's critique of morality. Deleuze is perhaps best known as a philosopher of difference, and specifically, of the *ontology* of difference. Moreover, for the vast majority of his readers, Deleuze's thought is not just an ontology, but it is *first and foremost* – we might even say *primarily* – an ontology, thus making any ethical insights we might glean from his work ultimately dependent on its underlying ontology. I will argue that a version of this claim is true, but in a complicated sense, and often despite what Deleuze seems to say. The complications arise from Deleuze's (sometimes striking) comments about the role of ethics in thought as such.

For example, take Deleuze's reading of Spinoza. As is well known, Deleuze takes inspiration from Spinoza's thought, but unlike other readers of Spinoza, Deleuze spends a great deal of time praising not just *the Ethics* in general, but Spinoza's *ethics* in a more particular sense. Moreover, Deleuze's praise often seems to award the ethical aspects of Spinoza's thought a determining role in relation to its corresponding ontology. Thus, we find statements like the following: "Spinoza didn't entitle his book *Ontology*, he's too shrewd for that, he entitles it *Ethics*. Which is a way of saying that, whatever the importance of my speculative propositions may be, you can only judge them at the level of the ethics that they envelope or imply."¹ This is not simply praise for Spinoza's ethical thought. It is an approving citation of the philosophical status of ethics as such, the status that awards ethics the final say about speculative or ontological

¹ Deleuze, *Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought*: Lecture 1, 25 November 1980, p. 5.

propositions. Speculative propositions can only be judged or evaluated by the ethics that are implicated in such propositions. This, I submit, is not *simply* an interpretation of Spinoza (although it certainly is *at least* that). If we recognize that Spinoza's status as the "Christ of philosophers" is due not primarily to his account of substance, but to his ethical vision of the world – indeed, to an ethical vision of thought *as such* – then we must seriously consider whether or not the same standard of evaluation that holds for Spinoza's work also holds for Deleuze (*WP*, 60).²

If Spinoza is Deleuze's Christ, Nietzsche might well be his (un)Holy Spirit. Deleuze begins *Nietzsche and Philosophy* by showing that Nietzsche's most "general project is the introduction of sense and value into philosophy" (*NP*, 1). Although we will look at this passage carefully later, it is worth noting at the outset that the Nietzschean conception of "value" (*valeur*) is animated by a "critical reversal" which prioritizes a certain *evaluative* perspective rather than abstract values as such. On this reading of Nietzsche, it is not merely the case that evaluation implies values, it is values that imply evaluations, or certain "perspectives of appraisal" that serve as genetic elements for all particular values.³ In this context, values are the creations of these specific modes of existence, and so the problem of values is the problem of their *creation*: since values are the products of specific modes of existence, the problem concerns the conditions of their creations, or what modes of existence particular values imply. That is, our best

² Deleuze says that Spinoza must be held in such high regard because "he showed, drew up, and thought the 'best' plane of immanence." But it is important to pay close attention to what makes this plane of immanence "best." Spinoza's plane is "the purest, the one that does not hand itself over to the transcendent or restore any transcendent, the one that inspires the fewest illusions, bad feelings, and erroneous perceptions" (*WP*, 60). This, I think, maps nearly perfectly onto the claim from the lectures: the value of Spinoza's speculative propositions are confirmed by the fact that they inspire the fewest illusions, bad feelings, and erroneous perceptions. What makes Spinoza's plane of immanence best consists in its purity – it is the *most* immanent, and in this context, purity is directly related to the fact that the plane in question inspires the fewest illusions.

³ As we will later see, "genetic" here does not just mean "simple" or "basic constituent bits."

ontological descriptions of the world do not come from nowhere, but are rather produced by certain perspectives that are themselves inescapably evaluative. So, if ontological description cannot pretend that it is not animated by an evaluative perspective, then the problem at issue concerns what sort of evaluative perspective a given ontological description implies.

Of course, it is no secret that Spinoza and Nietzsche are two of the most important influences for Deleuze. And if we pay attention to what aspects of their work Deleuze cites as formative, this should affect how we read Deleuze's own work. In other words, if we understand the Spinozistic claim that speculative propositions can only be judged at the level of the ethics they imply, what does that tell us about the status of *Deleuze's* speculative propositions? Likewise, if we appreciate how important evaluation is for Nietzsche, then we ought to keep a keen eye on the status of evaluation *for Deleuze*. If we take these points seriously, we should see that the notion that Deleuze is a "pure metaphysician" is, to put it lightly, complicated. That is, Deleuze's status as a pure metaphysician must include two elements that seem antithetical to the common picture of metaphysics as a detached, disinterested speculative discipline: first, it will be unavoidably produced by an evaluative perspective, and second, it must be evaluated or judged not simply on its metaphysical merits, but on its *ethical* implications.

With these general points in mind, I attempt to show how Deleuze transforms the Kantian problem with which we started. For Deleuze, the primacy of the practical is no longer the primacy of *morality*, but the primacy of *ethics*. But as we will see, despite his claims that seem to suggest otherwise, Deleuze reduces the primacy of ethics to the primacy of ontology. Make no mistake: a *version* of ethics is indeed primary for Deleuze, but after we understand what ethics means in this context, we will see that whatever primacy ethics enjoys must ultimately be reducible to ontology. So here, I propose to do four things: first, I examine Deleuze's critique of

morality with a special emphasis on his claim that the “dogmatic image of thought” is, at bottom, a *moral* one. Second, I discuss Deleuze’s readings of Nietzsche – especially his account of “evaluation” – and Spinoza – especially his conception of “ethics” in order to obtain a general grasp of how Deleuze thinks that ethics is opposed to morality. Third, I turn to *The Logic of Sense* to see how Deleuze talks about ethics in a more systematic manner, and fourth, I argue that whatever primacy ethics might enjoy is ultimately reducible to an ontological primacy.

To Have Done with Morality: Deleuze, Nietzsche, and the Critique of Morality

Often, when we think and speak of ethics, it is tempting to conflate what is spoken of with some set of principles guiding all possible actions. Against this tendency, and capitalizing on a rich history of distinguishing ethics from morality, Deleuze argues for an ethics fully independent of what he calls “morality.” Morality, for Deleuze, “presents us with a set of constraining rules of a special sort, ones that judge actions and intentions by considering them in relation to transcendent values (this is good, that’s bad...)” (*N*, 100). While many forms of moral thinking might fit this description, the form of moral thinking that Deleuze most often has in mind is exemplified in Kant’s philosophy. Unlike some other forms of moral philosophy – those which treat these ideally constraining rules in terms of divine command, for example – Deleuze does not merely reject Kant’s moral thought out of hand. Indeed, Deleuze often sees himself as *fulfilling* a quasi-Kantian project.⁴ For instance, it was Kant who recognized that critique had to be immanent. The Kantian conception of a critique did not seek to blame errors on the exterior or the outside, but rather focused on illusions that arise from within reason itself, and this reorientation was obviously formative for Deleuze.⁵ But however obvious Deleuze’s

⁴ See, for example, Patton 2009 and Smith 2012, specifically the end of Chapter 11. The former stresses Deleuze’s debt to Kant’s practical philosophy while the latter stresses his debt to the theoretical philosophy.

⁵ Cf. *DR*, 150 and Smith 2006.

positive Kantian influence may be, his dissatisfaction with Kant's system as a whole is equally obvious. Even a rough sketch of Kantian thinking helps to highlight Deleuze's worry.

Early on, Kant introduces us to a transcendental method, one that takes as its task identifying the conditions under which certain experiences are possible. However, in restricting our knowledge to objects of possible experience, we are automatically barred from having any knowledge of transcendent Ideas – namely, of God, freedom, and immortality. Yet, in the second and third *Critiques*, we find that we can and do, in fact, have a certain type of access to all three of these Ideas: God as a moral cause of the universe, immortality as a postulate of practical reason, and most importantly, human freedom, given as a “fact of reason” (*Faktum der Vernunft*). For Deleuze, this does not show that Kant was simply wrong on all counts, but rather that his project failed to make good on its own methodological promises. That is, Kantian critique aims to critique *claims* to knowledge, the *faculty* of understanding, but “knowledge, morality, reflection and faith are supposed to correspond to natural interests of reason and are never themselves called into question” (*DR*, 137). Or, to pervert an all too often cited sentence, Kant never actually considered knowledge to be destroyed from the inside, only faith to be possible.⁶ Far from providing a “total critique,” Kant merely “pushed a very old conception of critique to the limit, a conception which saw critique as a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to knowledge and truth, but not on knowledge and truth themselves” (*NP*, 89). And by failing to provide a total critique, Kantian thinking became a “politics of compromise.” Instead of actually critiquing knowledge as such, morality as such, or religion as such, Kantian

⁶ Cf. *KrV* Bxxx.

thinking merely presupposes “true knowledge,” “true morality,” and “true religion,” and thus begins by “believing in what it criticizes” (*NP*, 89-90).⁷

But importantly, the essence of Deleuze’s dissatisfaction with what Kant did is simultaneously an admiration of what Kant’s thought was capable of doing. “Kant’s genius,” Daniel Smith explains, “was precisely to have conceived of a purely *immanent* critique of reason, a critique that did not seek, within reason, errors that come from an external cause (the body, the senses, the passions) but illusions that arise from within reason itself through the illegitimate (transcendent) use of the syntheses of consciousness.”⁸ Or as Smith writes elsewhere, “[t]ranscendental philosophy is a philosophy of immanence, and implies a ruthless critique of transcendence (which is why Deleuze does not hesitate to align himself with Kant’s critical philosophy, despite their obvious differences).”⁹ Although there are technical issues with saying that Deleuze approved of Kant’s “method,” there is clearly something about Kant’s style of thinking, his focus on what arises from *within* reason as such rather than an obsession with what is external to it, that contributes to Deleuze’s positive project.¹⁰ But given that Kant was so insightful about the immanent nature of philosophy, what, exactly, is the source of Kant’s lapse into *transcendent* (rather than *transcendental*) thinking? What does the fact that Kant failed to accomplish a total critique tell us about Kantian thinking *as such*? Or in more familiar Deleuzian terms, what does it tell us about Kant’s image of thought?

⁷ Although this reading of Kant is inspired by a single quote from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, it seems clear that Deleuze is not simply channeling Nietzsche, but also approving of this criticism of Kant’s work. Since he repeats the core of this criticism in *Difference and Repetition* absent an explicit reference to Nietzsche, it would be surprising if he took this to be merely exegetical. See *DR*, 137.

⁸ Smith 2012, p. 148. Cf. *NP*, 91.

⁹ Smith 2006, p. 47.

¹⁰ These technical issues have to do with Deleuze’s skepticism about certain conceptions of “method” in general. We will return to these issues when we discuss the image of thought in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

Throughout his corpus, Deleuze famously criticizes what he calls the “dogmatic image of thought,” and there are good reasons to think that Deleuze departs from Kant at the precise moments when Kant succumbs to this dogmatic image. Although the “image of thought” (*l’image de la pensée*) appears in almost all of Deleuze’s books, his first focused treatment of this concept occurs in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. There, Deleuze provides three theses that summarize the dogmatic image of thought. First, there is the assumption of an essential link between truth and thought. The thinker always wants, loves, and is aimed at “the truth” *when she thinks rightly*, and “it is therefore sufficient to think ‘truly’ or ‘really’ in order to think with truth” (*NP*, 103). Second, the dogmatic image assumes that certain conditions are most conducive to attaining the truth – namely, conditions in which the thinker is not distracted by external forces such as the body and its passions. Error, therefore, is “merely the effect, in thought as such, of external forces which are opposed to thought,” and coping with these forces is simply the burden of being less than perfectly rational beings (*NP*, 103). Lastly, insofar as these idealistic conditions that would guarantee truth to our thinking are not always in place, we require a fixed mode of thinking, a method, through which we can circumvent the influence of external forces and retain the desired access to truth. Or, to put it succinctly, “[t]hrough method we ward off error” (*NP*, 103). For Deleuze, the main problem that plagues this dogmatic image consists in its naïve conception of both thinking and truth, which is demonstrated in the dogmatist’s refusal to pay attention to “the real forces that *form* thought,” to the “real forces that [thought itself] presupposes as *thought*,” and hence to the relation between truth and what it presupposes (*NP*, 103-104). Crucially, “truth,” for the dogmatist, is essentially undetermined and empty. For Deleuze, what the dogmatist misunderstands is that truth must seek its determination in something else, that is, in *sense*: “there is no truth that, before being a truth, is

not the bringing into effect of a sense or the realization of a value” (*NP*, 104). Because of the determining role of sense, Deleuze concludes that truth is not the element of thought. Rather, “[t]he element of thought is sense (*sens*) and value (*valeur*)” (*NP*, 104).

Does Kant actually succumb to this image, as it is described here? Although the Kantian looms large as a target in *Nietzsche in Philosophy*, another target emerges in Deleuze’s later discussions of the image of thought. For example, in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze constantly invokes the *Cartesian*, not Kantian, themes of doubt, of the equal distribution of “good sense,” and of the thinking self in order to demonstrate the dogmatism implied in this classical image.¹¹ We might wonder, therefore, whether or not Kant escapes many of the criticisms that seem to have Descartes and his ilk as their target. In fact, Deleuze claims that Kant seems especially “equipped to overturn the Image of thought” (*DR*, 136). As we saw, Kant famously restricts our knowledge to appearances, and thus makes no pretense to discover the truth about things in themselves. In fact, from the first lines of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant admits that our thinking is, in an important sense, *not* naturally suited to approximate the “truth.” Unlike Descartes, Kant’s focus does not center on the concept of error, but on a unique type of illusion internal to reason itself. The faculty of reason is such that it seeks the unconditioned, that which cannot be the object of any possible experience, and must therefore be subjected to a critique, a demarcation of the *limits* under which it can legitimately operate. Kantian illusion does not, therefore, seek to blame the outside or the exterior, but rather retains an immanent focus, a focus on reason as such. It is for this reason that Deleuze claims that Kant’s genius consists in his conception of “an immanent critique” (*NP*, 91).

¹¹ Here, I refer to Descartes’ famous claim that of all things, good sense is the most equally distributed, not necessarily to Deleuze’s more particular reading of “good sense.” See Descartes, *Discourse*, AT VI: 2-3.

Despite his promising conception of an immanent critique, Kant ultimately does succumb to the very dogmatic image of thought he seemed so equipped to overturn, and for Deleuze, the primary culprit for this mistake is found in Kant's moral philosophy. We might say that it is because Kant's image of thought is ultimately a *moral* one that Deleuze departs from it.¹² Despite the fact that the system of thought presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason* seemed capable of enacting the "speculative death" of transcendent gods and immortal souls, Kant's refusal to renounce what Deleuze calls "implicit presuppositions" compromised what his novel conception of critique promised to deliver. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze's paradigm examples of implicit presuppositions have to do with claims that take the form "everybody knows." Everybody knows what it means to think, and thus "when the philosopher says 'I think therefore I am', he can assume that the universality of his premises...will be implicitly understood, and that no one can deny that to doubt is to think, and to think is to be" (*DR*, 130). The philosopher's desire is to remove all presuppositions in thought, and thus, she purports to preserve only objects of universal recognition. This amounts to a merely formal claim: "not a particular this or that but the form of representation or recognition in general" (*DR*, 131). Despite the philosopher's promises, the form in question necessarily contains a matter, or as Deleuze calls it, "an element." The element here "consists only of the supposition that thought is the natural exercise of a faculty," that "there is a natural capacity for thought endowed with a talent for truth or an affinity with the true" (*DR*, 131). In other words, the philosopher illegitimately presupposes a claim about the legitimacy and efficacy of "natural" thought. While Deleuze argued for something very similar in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, it is his summary of this position, unique to *Difference and Repetition*, that concerns us here. This description of the

¹² It is, of course, moral in Deleuze's sense, but if the primacy of practical reason is to be believed, it is also moral in Kant's own sense.

element of dogmatic thought contains a “double aspect:” “*good will on the part of the thinker* and an *upright nature on the part of thought*” (DR, 131). For Deleuze, dogmatic philosophy begins with these presuppositions or “postulates.” Postulates, here, are not simply unstated premises in a standardized, logical argument, but rather “propositional themes which remain implicit and are understood in a pre-philosophical manner” (DR, 131). Were their implicit character to be compromised, their force would be deadened. The power of these postulates depends on the fact that they go unrecognized, implicitly assumed. Since these themes depend on implicit acceptance, on the fact that “everybody knows” them, and since philosophy begins with this presupposition, the dogmatic philosophical image of thought rests upon a “pre-philosophical and natural image of thought, borrowed from the pure element of common sense” (DR, 131).¹³ Philosophy, on this account, can only begin by presupposing what it borrows from common sense, which includes presupposing the upright or noble character of thought itself and the good will of the thinker.

If we begin to understand how philosophy begins from a certain presupposition given to it from common sense, it should come as no surprise to find that Deleuze names this image “dogmatic”: “[w]e may call this image of thought a dogmatic, orthodox or moral image” (DR, 131). The image in question is clearly dogmatic, as it relies on implicit, uncritical acceptance of the natural image of thought on which it relies. Likewise, it is clearly orthodox, as it is the image of thought according to which the majority of classical and modern philosophy operates. But why does Deleuze call it *moral*? As we have seen, there is a reference to the “good” and the “upright” features associated with thought and the thinker, but absent a further reason to think of these as explicitly *moral* attributes – rather than pragmatic or epistemic attributes, for example –

¹³ “Common sense” here refers precisely to the alleged good and upright nature of thought.

we are left puzzled. The most explicit argument we find in *Difference and Repetition* is contained in one short passage with two components:

When Nietzsche questions the most general presuppositions of philosophy, he says that they are essentially moral, since Morality alone is capable of persuading us that thought has a good nature and the thinker a good will, and that only the good can ground the supposed affinity between thought and the True. Who else, in effect, but morality, and this Good which gives thought to the true, and the true to thought? (*DR*, 132)

Here we have both a claim and a reference. The claim: only morality can guarantee the affinity between thought and truth; the reference: Nietzsche. As we have already noted, Deleuze is heavily influenced by Nietzsche's thought, but what is less than clear in this reference is which aspect of Nietzsche's thought Deleuze is invoking here. If Nietzsche has diagnosed the problem of the dogmatic image of thought, and this problem has to do with the status of its presuppositions, then, I suggest, we would do well to turn to a careful reading of Nietzsche's notion of *prejudice* (*Vorurteil*) in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Nietzsche, Prejudice, and the Image of the Philosopher

If one was asked, "Who was Nietzsche's foe?" they would be hard pressed to find an answer that *wasn't* correct. If we think of the foes of *Beyond Good and Evil* in particular, we might think first of Platonists, Christians, or even philosophers. While these are all surely targets Nietzsche has in mind, it is helpful to remember the object of his *first* statement of dissent – against *dogmatists*. True, it is "all philosophers" who are regarded as suspicious. But it not the philosopher as such, rather it is philosophers "insofar as they [are] dogmatists" (*BGE*, Preface).¹⁴ For Nietzsche, dogmatic philosophizing, despite its rigorous aspirations and earnest tone,

¹⁴ There is a question here of whether or not Nietzsche really thinks that *any* philosophers could escape dogmatism. For more on this position, see Berry 2018.

requires no more for its construction than common sense, or as Nietzsche puts it, “any old popular superstition,” “some play on words perhaps, a seduction by grammar, or an audacious generalization of very narrow, very personal, very human, all too human facts” (*BGE*, Preface). The dogmatist’s error (*Dogmatiker-Irrtum*) is not simply a theoretical mistake, not some misstep in reasoning or a failure to draw the “right” conclusion, as we will later see. The paradigm example of such an error can be seen in Plato, and specifically in his “invention of the pure spirit and the good as such” (*BGE*, Preface). Nietzsche’s first question about Plato’s invention is emphatically *not* the question of the philosopher, “What is wrong with Plato’s argument?” but rather the question of the physician: “How could the most beautiful growth of antiquity, Plato, contract such a disease?” (*BGE*, Preface).¹⁵ This is not simply rhetoric, but part and parcel of Nietzsche’s “method” in *Beyond Good and Evil* and elsewhere.¹⁶ This method – if we may call it that – consists in a *diagnosis*, where this might be read as opposed to something like an internal critique. That is, Nietzsche is not trying to show that Plato was inconsistent, that his work contains one or more contradictions, or even that his conclusions are false. Nietzsche is less interested in what Plato said, for example, than discovering what goes *unsaid* in his work, with what his work *implies*.¹⁷ In other words, what Nietzsche is concerned with is not simply the structure of the arguments that philosophers make, with whether or not those arguments cohere with one another, or approximate the truth as it is itself; he is more interested in what those

¹⁵ For another famous example of the relationship between philosophy and physiology, see the final paragraphs of the First Treatise of the *Genealogy*.

¹⁶ I am certainly not suggesting that this is the only method Nietzsche employs in his work. Nor am I suggesting that this is the only method in *Beyond Good and Evil*. I am only suggesting that this is one way he tends to think and write, or one way he tends to assess philosophers and their systems.

¹⁷ “...my ambition is to say in ten sentences what other people say in a book, - what other people do *not* say in a book...” (*TI*, Skirmishes, §51).

arguments imply *about the philosopher*. Because of Nietzsche's interest in philosophers themselves, rather than simply their arguments,¹⁸ he begins the first part of *Beyond Good and Evil* not with a discussion of which view *is* true, but by raising a host of issues concerning the philosopher's relation to truth: "What in us really wants 'truth'? [...] Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth?" (*BGE*, I:1). For our purposes, we should focus both on how philosophers see their own activity and Nietzsche's account of this self-assessment.

Philosophers have often claimed that their work is produced primarily by an unadulterated desire for the truth, and part of Nietzsche's task in *BGE* I is to investigate the source of this dogmatic claim. Part of his answer is that such a claim is motivated by a peculiar *prejudice* or *prejudgment* (*Vorurteil*) on the part of the philosopher. It should come as no surprise, then, that Nietzsche names Part One of *Beyond Good and Evil* "On the Prejudices of the Philosophers." We have already seen that the paradigmatic example of the dogmatist's error is found in Plato's invention of pure spirit and the form of the good. But since many of the philosophers with whom Nietzsche is concerned in *BGE* I are not Platonists in any obvious way, we must ask how Plato's invention (and Nietzsche's assessment of it) applies to these philosophers.

"What in us really wants 'truth'?" Why do we tend to prefer – in word, at least – truth to untruth, falsity, or error? In order to clearly understand what is at stake here, we must think about what the dogmatist has to say in favor of the will to truth, and to this end, Nietzsche gives a dramatic speech on behalf of the dogmatist:

How *could* anything originate out of its opposite? for example, truth out of error? or the will to truth out of the will to deception? or selfless deeds out of selfishness? or the pure

¹⁸ Cf. "These English psychologists...they themselves are no small riddle for us; I confess, in fact, that precisely as riddles in the flesh they have something substantial over their books – *they themselves are interesting!*" (*GM*, I:1)

and sunlike gaze of the sage out of lust? Such origins are impossible; whoever dreams of them is a fool, indeed worse; the things of the highest value must have another, *peculiar* origin – they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the ‘thing-in-itself’ – there must be their basis, and nowhere else. (*BGE*, I:2).

The things of the highest value must have a peculiar origin. Objective ‘truth,’ that to which the dogmatist purports to strive, could not originate out of error, out of subjective desire, or from anything short of the lap of Being itself. For Nietzsche, this demand for a special, pure, origin is the “typical *Vorurteil* which give away the metaphysicians of all ages” (*BGE*, I:2). Just as the implicit presuppositions Deleuze mentions in *Difference and Repetition* are not simply unstated premises in an argument, Nietzsche’s *Vorurteilen* are not detached or objective theoretical propositions, but are rather fundamental modes of *valuing*. Nietzsche thus claims, “this kind of valuation (*Wertschätzungen*) looms in the background of all their logical procedures; it is on account of this ‘faith’ (*Glauben*) that they trouble themselves about ‘knowledge,’ (*Wissen*) about something that is finally baptized solemnly as ‘the truth’” (*BGE*, I:2). Nietzsche names this mode of valuing “*the faith in opposite values*,” and it is here that we can see the Platonic inspiration in the metaphysician’s faith (*BGE*, I:2). The good and the true, on this line of thinking, must originate from somewhere else, somewhere pure, somewhere not of this world. Our most fundamental moral concepts could not possibly originate from low, worldly sources, but must be located in some transcendent beyond. If moral concepts originated from immoral ones, then they would not truly be opposed to them, their claim to a pure origin would not be secured, and thus the metaphysician’s faith would be undermined.

Nietzsche offers the reader two thoughts on the metaphysician’s faith in opposite values – thoughts, I suggest, that give us an important clue to how we ought to read the passages that follow in *Beyond Good and Evil*. First, in an ontological register, he says that one may doubt the

existence of opposites in general. No further explanation is given. Second, and more importantly, Nietzsche calls into question the *value* of this faith. One may doubt that the values presupposed by the metaphysician *really* ought to be considered as of the highest value. With respect to these values whose value is never called into question – “the true, the truthful, [and] the selfless” for example – it is possible that a higher and more fundamental value might be awarded to their alleged opposites – “to deception, selfishness, and lust” (*BGE*, I:2). Indeed, “[i]t might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things – maybe even one with them in essence” (*BGE*, I:2). On the one hand, it is possible that there are *better values* than the ones we hold dear, and on the other, it is equally possible that the values we hold dear are inextricably tied to the values we abhor. When we are too convinced by the metaphysician’s faith in opposite values, we fail to consider these possibilities. That is, we fail to critically assess the value and origin of the values we hold dear, and instead simply assume that values like truth, selflessness, and compassion are of a higher origin, entirely opposed to falsehood and selfishness.

What is the explanation for the metaphysician’s faith in opposite values? Far from being a product of a disinterested will to truth, Nietzsche suggests that such a faith is produced by a will to value.¹⁹ If we recognize that philosophical activity is not produced by some abstract will to truth, then we are able to read it differently, as of a different inspiration, an inspiration which is inseparable from a desire – “a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract” (*BGE*, I:5). It is important to note that “desire,” in this context, refers to something very specific. A desire is equated with an inspiration, and specifically an inspiration for philosophical thinking.

¹⁹ I borrow the phrase “will to value” from Clark and Dudrick 2012.

And as Nietzsche makes clear in the next section, the content of this inspiration is both personal and moral. He writes,

Gradually it is clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown. (*BGE*, I:6)

If the force behind every great philosophy is a personal hunch or moral intention, then to understand the specific character of each philosophy, we must not only look to the work itself, but to the author. More specifically, when attempting to understand a particular philosopher's work, "it is always well (and wise) to ask first: at what morality does all this (does *he*) aim?" (*BGE*, I:6). The origin of philosophical activity, then, has much more to do with the will to value, with moral prejudices, than a will to truth.²⁰ So, any honest reading of the great systems of philosophy must make reference to the moral prejudices that are ultimately responsible for the specific systems in question. If philosophers are most often advocates who resent the name, and what they defend are merely the moral hunches or assumptions that they hold independently of the arguments and systems they produce, then philosophy is – in an important sense – a system of foregone (moral) conclusions.

Recall our reason for turning to Nietzsche in the first place. Deleuze claims that Nietzsche shows us that the most general presuppositions of philosophy are moral in character. Only morality, on this line of thinking, can secure the connection that the dogmatist needs between truth and thought. While Deleuze only briefly mentions Nietzsche's position, we now have more resources to make sense of that claim, and thus to understand why the dogmatic

²⁰ Of course, there are many different kinds of value. One might think that, given some tendencies in Nietzsche's other texts, he might talk about aesthetic values. But in Part One of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he is focused on critiquing a traditional conception of philosophy, and he is insistent that the values that produce the philosophies in question are inescapably moral.

image of thought is necessarily a moral image. Dogmatic philosophy is not produced by some disinterested logical procedure, but by a will to value. More specifically, this will to value is inseparable from a certain sort of faith – the faith in opposite values. According to the faith in opposite values, certain value sets really are opposed, both in content and in origin: selflessness is opposed to selfishness, compassion is opposed to hate; the former has divine, pure, other-worldly origins, while the latter originates from lowly, human, this-worldly sources. But the value Nietzsche is most concerned with is more fundamental in character and concerns the allegiance to *truth*. Truth has a peculiar origin, a necessary connection to the lap of Being itself, as opposed to the lowly, human origin of error and falsehood. What Nietzsche shows is that this faith in opposite values is not the conclusion of good thinking about truth, but is simply the product of a prephilosophical, *moral* prejudice. Moreover, if this faith in opposite values is the most fundamental inspiration of dogmatic philosophy, and Nietzsche is right about the inescapably moral character of such a faith, then we understand why Deleuze appeals to Nietzsche in *Difference and Repetition*. The dogmatic image of thought is a moral image because in appealing to truth as the element of thought, the dogmatist betrays a moral prejudice about the necessary relation between truth and thinking. But of course, that prejudice is not beyond question. Deleuze follows Nietzsche in questioning both the value of truth and the dogmatic story about truth's other-worldly origin. But while knowing the Nietzschean inspiration for Deleuze's resistance to the dogmatic image of thought is helpful, it is not enough. How, then, does Deleuze propose to avoid this moral image of thought?

Ethics, *the Ethics*, and Evaluation

We were drawn to Nietzsche's work because of Deleuze's claim in *Difference and Repetition* that only morality had the power to guarantee the correlation between truth and

thought. What Nietzsche gives us is an account of thinking whose productive ground is a moral prejudice about the value of truth, thus rendering this sort of thinking inescapably moral.

Although Deleuze certainly adopts this basic Nietzschean diagnosis, he also co-opts and extends it for his own purposes. Recall Deleuze's conception of morality: morality involves a set of ideally constraining rules that judges actions by comparing them to transcendent values. The emphasis on transcendence here must not be overlooked or mitigated. Morality, with its corresponding notion of judgment, has an unavoidably transcendent connotation insofar as it makes judgments about the value of things on the basis of absolute, unalterable, and constraining rules – rules that are decided in advance, and are universal in scope. It is therefore no surprise that Deleuze refers to morality in theological terms: “[m]orality is the judgment of God, the *system* of judgment” (*SPP*, 23). As he will say elsewhere, the judgment of God is “nothing other than the power to organize to infinity” (*ECC*, 130). Judgment here implies the power to organize the world into pre-determined moral categories, to conclude that one thing is “good” and another is “evil” in advance, regardless of circumstance, and therefore absolutely. Ethics is opposed to this system. For Deleuze,

...ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved. We say this, do that: what way of existing does it involve?

There are things one can only do or say through mean-spiritedness, a life based on hatred, or bitterness toward life. Sometimes it takes just one gesture or word. It's the styles of life involved in everything that make us this or that. (*N*, 100)

While morality relates actions and intentions to a transcendent principle – the moral law, for example – ethics has to do with what ways of existing or styles of life are implied by the actions we perform, the beliefs we profess, and the statements we utter. Just as Nietzsche famously sought the value of a philosophy in the extent to which it was life-promoting, Deleuze seeks the ethical status of an action, belief, philosophy, and so forth in terms of the style of life it

implies.²¹ But for Deleuze, this thought is as much Spinozistic as it is Nietzschean.²² In fact, some of Deleuze's most focused material on ethics occurs in his works on Spinoza.²³ In other words, while he appeals to Nietzsche for his critique of morality, Deleuze appeals to Spinoza for a way to replace morality with an ethics, or what he calls an "ethical vision of the world" (*EP*, 255).

To some, especially those who restrict their understanding of Spinoza to the first two books of the *Ethics*, it might seem odd for Deleuze to appeal to Spinoza – the champion of the geometrical method, seemingly the theoretical philosopher *par excellence* – for an ethics.²⁴ But as Deleuze takes great pains to stress, there is another Spinoza, the author of a twice-written *Ethics*:

The *Ethics* is a book written twice simultaneously: once in the continuous stream of definitions, propositions, demonstrations, and corollaries, which develop the great speculative themes with all the rigors of the mind; another time in the broken chain of scholia, a discontinuous volcanic line, a second version underneath the first, expressing all the angers of the heart and setting forth the practical theses of denunciation and liberation. (*SPP*, 28)

For Deleuze, Spinoza's (in)famous theoretical positions – the speculative doctrines of substance, attributes, modes, parallelism, and so forth – cannot be treated apart from the practical

²¹ Cf. *BGE* I:4. There Nietzsche makes clear that the falseness of a judgment is not an objection to that judgment. "The question," rather, "is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating" (*BGE*, I:4).

²² Of course, there is an interpretative question about the extent to which Deleuze's reading of Spinoza is not already fueled by Nietzschean concerns. For example, one might think it telling that the first word of *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* is "Nietzsche." This raises a host of interesting questions, but these are not our questions here, so I do not pursue it further.

²³ Not only is the title of his second Spinoza book "Practical Philosophy," he there devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of ethics and morality. See *SPP*, pp. 17-29. For his remarks on Spinoza's "ethical vision of the world," see *EP*, pp. 255-272.

²⁴ Of course, Deleuze is also heavily influenced by Spinoza's ontology. But it is striking how, in Deleuze's reading, Spinoza's ontology often seems subordinated to his ethical vision of the world.

theses that animate the *Ethics*: the devaluation of consciousness, values, and the sad passions in favor of thought, ethics, and joy. In other words, the *Ethics* cannot but be seen as the work of a materialist, “immoralist,” and atheist.²⁵ For Deleuze, part and parcel of Spinoza’s practical project consists in a reorientation of the *subject* of practical life. In refusing to privilege the mind over the body (and vice versa), Spinoza also refused to take as his model for practical life any conception according to which the domination of the passions was an implicit or explicit goal. The body becomes an object of ethical concern in its own right, that is, not merely insofar as it is a possible object of mastery by consciousness. But with this renewed importance of the body comes a shift in terms of values – a shift away from “Good” and “Evil” towards a particular understanding of good and bad. As Spinoza famously argues, the source of a certain belief in good and evil is an ignorance based on the belief that all things were made for the sake of the believer. “[T]hey call the nature of a thing good or evil, sound or rotten and corrupt, as they are affected by it,” thus rendering this belief a mere mode of imagining rather than an insight into the nature of things.²⁶ Against this moral account of good and evil, Spinoza proposes an alternative, ethical account. The good takes the body as its referent, and in particular, it treats the good in compositional terms: “[t]he good is when a body directly compounds its relation with ours, and, with all or part of its power, increases ours” (*SPP*, 22). Since we (when we are being good Spinozists) determine what a body is by determining what it can do, by its capacity to affect and be affected, we determine what is good for it only by reference to its power.

On Deleuze’s reading, what Spinoza accomplishes is nothing less than a replacement of morality with an ethics, where ethics is a “typology of immanent modes of existence” (*SPP*, 23).

²⁵ Cf. *SPP*, 22. This is a good example of where Nietzschean terms like “immoralism” show up in Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza.

²⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, P1, Appendix.

To take a simplistic yet important example, when I have a bad meal, my power of acting diminishes. The food, in other words, does not agree with my nature, and as a result, decreases my power to act. But of course, it is not just food that can decrease or increase my power. My occupation, my friendships, my seemingly meaningless habits, and my hobbies, all have the power to increase or decrease my power of acting in the same way that my having a good or bad meal does. Some enter in composition with “my nature,” and some do not. Since virtue *is* power, the model of a good or virtuous individual is one “who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby to increase his power” (*SPP*, 22-23).²⁷ This typology or ethics avoids the fly in the moral ointment by focusing its attention solely on these immanent modes of existence, that is, on degrees of power, whereas morality is unintelligible without reference to transcendent values, without reference to the “judgment of God.” There is no pre-set degree of power that an individual is obliged to work towards, as if there were a *moral* injunction to work toward a specific status. Degrees of power are understood in terms of what the thing in question can do, which is a standard which refers only to the thing in question – in particular, its power – not some transcendent, pre-established proportion that an individual ought to work towards, and then rest easy once it is met. By understanding a thing in terms of its power, indeed *as* a degree of power, it is considered on its own terms rather than as an individual member of a species, for example. In fact, the urge to classify individuals primarily in terms of species and genera, as particular members organized under a general, predetermined class, is, at bottom, a *moral* urge. An *ethical* way of thinking, on the other hand, defines the individual in terms of its capacity to be affected:

²⁷ Cf. *Ethics*, III d8.

Thus, animals are defined less by the abstract notions of genus and species than by a capacity for being affected, by the affections of which they are “capable,” by the excitations to which they react within the limits of their capability. Consideration of genera and species still implies a “morality,” whereas the *Ethics* is an *ethology* which, with regard to men and animals, in each case only considers their capacity for being affected. (*SPP*, 27).

Treating ethics as both a typology of immanent modes of existence and an ethology, a science of behavior, introduces a fundamental ethical distinction for both Spinoza and Deleuze: the distinction between passions and actions. As Spinoza taught us, actions proceed from the essence of the individual. That is, we act when “something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is...when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone.”²⁸ Passions refer to what happens *to us*, to what happens when we are only the partial cause of what occurs through us. As we will later see, Deleuze’s ethics award pride of place to action, but this does not mean that passions are always bad. Of course, there are passions that separate us from our power of acting. A bad meal, an illness, or an unhealthy relationship, for example, prevent me from extending my power of acting. This passage from a greater to a lesser power of acting is called sadness, but all passions are not sad ones. When a body agrees with mine, when it enters into composition with mine, it increases my power of acting; and when my power of acting increases due to an external influence, this is a passion called joy. When we experience joy, “we ‘approach’ the point of conversion, the point of transmutation that will establish our dominion, that will make us worthy of action, of active joys” (*SPP*, 28).

By orienting ethics around actions and passions, Deleuze effectively removes a traditional concept that moral philosophers tend to prioritize: obligation. Deleuze provocatively

²⁸ Cf. *Ethics*, III d2.

writes, “all that one needs in order to moralize is to fail to understand. It is clear that we have only to misunderstand a law for it to appear to us in the form of a moral ‘You must.’” (*SPP*, 23). For example, consider Spinoza’s reading of the fall of Adam. God commands, so the story goes, Adam not to eat the fruit. While a theologian might focus on the divine side of the command, Deleuze (following Spinoza) highlights Adam’s interpretation of this command. Adam interprets it as a moral prohibition – “You must not eat of the tree” – such that an infringement of the command counts as “evil.” Yet, the referent of the prohibition is a specific relation between the fruit and Adam’s body: “the fruit will act as a poison; that is, *it will determine the parts of Adam’s body...to enter into new relations that no longer accord with his own essence*” (*SPP*, 22). Adam interprets God’s prohibition as a *moral* injunction precisely because he fails to understand the (de)compositional effect that the fruit would have on his body.²⁹ Adam’s action was bad, but its badness is fully explicable in compositional terms that refer to power, not moral terms that refer to evil. Hence, Deleuze declares, “[t]he *Ethics* presents itself as a theory of power, in opposition to morality as a theory of obligation” (*SPP*, 104).

As an ethicist of power rather than a moralist, Spinoza reveals himself as a philosopher of life, or more specifically, a philosopher whose work “consists precisely in denouncing all that separates us from life, all these transcendent values that are turned against life, these values that are tied to the conditions and illusions of consciousness” (*SPP*, 26). In this particularly Nietzschean moment, Deleuze argues that the essence of Spinoza’s practical project consists in a denunciation of sad passions, passions that claim to be life affirming but are, at bottom, life denying. The point, it would seem, is not simply to call attention to sad passions, but at the same time to show the value of joyful passions, of that which turns us towards life and action instead

²⁹ Spinoza, *TPP*, p. 62.

of away from it. The ethics *of the Ethics*, then, is “necessarily an ethics of joy: only joy is worthwhile, joy remains, bringing us near to action, and to the bliss of action” (*SPP*, 28).

We now approach a difficulty in Deleuze’s Spinozistic conception of ethics. While Deleuze makes much of the ethological character of ethics, the stress on the *value* of action – the fact that *only* joy, that which increases our power and brings us closer to action, is worthwhile – does not seem easily reducible to simply describing features of behavior. Deleuze argues that the practical problem that animates the *Ethics* has to do with how one arrives at a maximum of joyful passions, but the way he approaches this question would remain unintelligible if it were not for the clear force probing it: the fact that “only joy is worthwhile.” This suggests that a Deleuzian ethics is not simply an ethology, not simply a descriptive enterprise, but has something to say about the value of certain modes of existence.³⁰ In order to do this, we must examine Deleuze’s Nietzschean doctrine of evaluation before turning to his positive account of ethics in his own systematic work.

Value, Evaluation, and What We Deserve

Thus far, we have seen Deleuze’s Nietzschean critique of morality and the image of thought to which it corresponds, and we have seen his call for a replacement of morality with a Spinozistic conception of ethics. Ethics, again, has to do with optional rules that assess our actions, utterances, and thoughts based on the styles of life they imply. As noted in the last section, although Deleuze often speaks of ethics as an ethology and a typology of modes of existence, he also complements these descriptive elements with *evaluative* ones: namely, ones that praise action and life and denounce all that separate us from action and life. That is, Deleuze certainly approves of some styles of life while he denounces others, but what must be made clear

³⁰ As we will later see, though there are normative claims in Deleuze, he will ultimately insist that the most important thing about normative claims lies their *ontological* significance.

is how he does this without falling back into the moral thinking he is so eager to move past. In other words, what could it mean to evaluate, for Deleuze? Recall that part of what distinguishes morality from ethics consists in the former's appeal to transcendent laws that serve as immutable standards for judgment. Thus, whatever account of evaluation is available to Deleuze will need to resist these transcendent temptations. Moreover, since we are concerned not just with Deleuze's ethics in a narrow sense, but rather with what his ethics tells us about his philosophy more generally, we must understand what the role of evaluation is in Deleuze's thought along with what the notion of evaluation implies for Deleuze's thought in a wider sense.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Deleuze's most focused comments on evaluation occur at the beginning of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. For Deleuze, Nietzsche's most basic insight is the introduction of the concepts of sense and value into philosophical language. This is importantly not to say that sense and value are accepted at face value; on the contrary, what Nietzsche offers us (that the Kantian moralist could not) is a *critique* of values. In fact, as we saw, the very concept of value that Nietzsche is concerned to introduce implies a "*critical reversal*:"

On the one hand, values appear or are given as principles: and evaluation presupposes values on the basis of which phenomena are appraised. But, on the other hand and more profoundly, it is values which presuppose evaluations, "perspectives of appraisal," from which their own value arises, thus the problem of their *creation*." (NP, 1)

It is not simply that our perspectives of appraisal presuppose certain values or principles as background standards for judgment. In a more profound sense, Deleuze suggests, our values presuppose those very perspectives of appraisal. We must think about our values as *produced* or *created*, not given. So the issue at stake here does not simply concern the need to call into question the particular values that are normally taken for granted. Part and parcel of any

satisfactory account of values consists in recognizing the *conditions* of their creation – namely, these perspectives of appraisal that create the particular values in question. Recall that part of the problem with the dogmatic or moral image of thought is its reliance on universal acceptance, the fact that “everybody knows” something. Or to put it in the terms Deleuze uses in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, the dogmatic image of thought refuses to examine what it presupposes *as* thought, and the real advantage of the new image of thought consists in the fact that it takes seriously the forces that form or create it. Just as the “new” image of thought takes seriously the forces that form it, Nietzsche’s critique of values takes seriously the perspectives of appraisal that produce particular values. And importantly, these perspectives, these modes of existence, are what Deleuze calls evaluations.

Evaluation is defined as the differential element of corresponding values, an element which is both critical and creative. Evaluations, in essence, are not values but ways of being, modes of existence of those who judge and evaluate, serving as principles for the values on the basis of which they judge. (*NP*, 1)

So, it is not simply the case that values are presupposed by evaluations, but evaluations are presupposed by values, and are not themselves reducible to values. That is, it is not just the case that when we judge something good or bad, we do so on the basis of a pre-established value; the insight here is that all particular values imply ways of being that serve as the genetic elements for the values in question. As we have already seen, “[t]here are things one can only do or say through mean-spiritedness, a life based on hatred, or bitterness toward life” (*N*, 100). Deleuze calls the problem of value the problem of creation precisely because all values imply something about the ways of being, the forces, that are responsible for their existence. To understand the sense or value of anything, it is necessary to understand the force that is responsible for that value’s existence, and this force will always be a way of being, a style of life.

And crucially, it is in this context that we are presented with one of the claims for which Deleuze is particularly famous. It is because beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and even truths, are correlates of evaluative perspectives of appraisal that “we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts we deserve” (*NP*, 1).

Claims about what we deserve occur often in Deleuze’s work, and many of these claims are inextricably bound up with his comments on ethics.³¹ And we already have the resources to make some basic sense of this claim. At their core, Deleuze’s claims about what we deserve are claims about implication, about what styles of life are implied in or correlate to our thoughts, beliefs, or feelings. We always have the thoughts we deserve because those thoughts are correlates of our evaluations, or ways of being. There are beliefs that are possible *only* on the basis of a noble style of life, actions that are possible *only* on the basis of a base style of life, and thus a significant part of philosophical ethics consists in understanding what styles of life or ways of being are implied in what one says, does, or believes. At this point, one might be tempted to think that Deleuze is making a fairly traditional point about desert. That is, if one has a base way of being *they are to blame* for the base thoughts that follow from it. But nothing could be further from Deleuze’s point. To make good sense of the ethical import of Deleuze’s insight about what we deserve (as it pertains to ethics, at least), we have to seriously examine a closely related claim. He famously writes in *The Logic of Sense*, “[e]ither ethics (*la morale*) makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy (*indigne*) of what happens to us” (*LS*, 149).³² But again, just like desert has nothing to do with

³¹ E.g., *NP*, 1, 61, 104-105, 110; *DR*, 63, 154, 159, 186.

³² Although I think it is interesting that Deleuze phrases this in the negative, I am not attaching any extra weight to this passage *because* it is phrased as a negative claim. I cite this passage because it is the place where Deleuze claims that being worthy constitutes the *only* meaning that ethics has.

praise and blame, being “worthy” has nothing to do with a system of merit. I am not worthy of what happens to me because I have “earned” or merited a satisfactory state of affairs, and I am not at fault if I undergo an unfortunate state of affairs. In fact, Deleuze insists that “[w]hat is really immoral is the use of moral notions like just or unjust, merit or fault” (*LS*, 149). If ethics is about – indeed, *only* about – being worthy of what happens to us, but it is somehow wrongheaded to think about worthiness or desert in terms of merit and fault, what could it possibly mean to deserve anything, to be worthy of anything? In order to answer this question, we must turn from Deleuze’s focused readings of Nietzsche and Spinoza to his more systematic work, *The Logic of Sense*.³³ First, we must understand some of the underlying ontological concepts associated with worthiness before examining how Deleuze applies those concepts into a positive account of ethics. It is to these issues that we now turn.

Worthiness: Deleuze’s Positive Ethical Project

Being Worthy, or The Ontology of Worthiness

Let us focus on this passage from twenty-first series of *The Logic of Sense*. Ethics either makes no sense at all, or its only demand is that we be worthy of what happens to us. As is clear to any reader of Deleuze, “what happens to us” is a crucial phrase. It makes it clear that what is at stake here is a certain understanding of the event – that is, not simply what occurs, but something *in* what occurs. Deleuze’s challenging philosophy of the event is heavily influenced by the Stoics, especially as it is presented in *The Logic of Sense*. Thus, his description of Stoic ethics is important here. Stoic ethics consists in “willing the event as such, that is, of willing that which occurs insofar as it does occur” (*LS*, 143). Early in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze gives us a

³³ As will become clear, this text certainly has a strong historical element, since it contains a reading of the Stoics. But it is undoubtedly more systematic in nature than *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, as Deleuze is trying to use concepts from the Stoics and others to frame his own project.

basic understanding of his Stoic notion of the event. On Deleuze's reading of the Stoics, there are two kinds of "things": bodies and states of affairs. Bodies have physical attributes, they produce actions, undergo passions, and states of affairs are determined by these bodies.

Crucially, all bodies are causes in relation to other bodies, but the *effects* of these causes are different in nature and are therefore not themselves bodies. Effects are *incorporeal* entities while bodies are corporeal, and thus these incorporeal effects are not physical qualities, but "logical or dialectical attributes," or *events* (*LS*, 5). Strictly speaking, events do not exist, but subsist or inhere; that is, they "have a minimum of being which is appropriate to that which is not a thing, a nonexisting entity" (*LS*, 5). Events here are not substantives, but closer to verbs. To take the famous Stoic example, "when the scalpel cuts through the flesh, the first body produces upon the second not a new property but a new attribute, that of being cut" (*LS*, 5). "Being cut" is, for Deleuze and the Stoics, not reducible to a mere thing or a fact.³⁴ As an event, it is caused by bodies – by the scalpel cutting the skin – but the infinitive "being cut" is an incorporeal event, irreducible to the bodies that cause it.

Incorporeal events are not only irreducible to the bodies that cause them; they are also irreducible to states of affairs. States of affairs are *actualizations* of pure events, but they are not identical to those events. Or, as he later claims, the distinction between events and states of affairs is best thought of in terms of the distinction between ideal and accident:

Events are ideal. Novalis sometimes says that there are two courses of events, one of them ideal and the other real and imperfect – for example, ideal Protestantism and real Lutheranism. The distinction however is not between two sorts of events; rather it is

³⁴ Although Deleuze is here explaining a famous Stoic example, I do not think that his claims here are merely exegetical. That is, though he is obviously trying to explain a Stoic concept, it is clear that he adopts the basic features of the Stoic "event" – e.g., its incorporeal nature, its irreducibility to a state of affairs – even if he will later transform it into something unrecognizable to the Stoics.

between the event, which is ideal by nature, and its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs. The distinction is between *event* and *accident*. (LS, 53)

Deleuzian events are incorporeal and ideal, and therefore distinct from actual states of affairs and the bodies that constitute those states. As we said, events are *in* what occurs, but they are not, for that reason, identical with what actually occurs. “Being-cut” is an ideal event that is not reducible to a particular state of affairs such as “Ruth was cut,” or “Calvin will be cut.” Real Lutheranism – the particular and actual forms of theological and ecclesial organization – is a spatio-temporal actualization of an incorporeal event, ideal Protestantism – a pure event that encompasses, but is not reducible to its Lutheran realization.

On this basic sketch of events, what can we say about being worthy of the event? For Deleuze, the claim about worthiness is sometimes (especially in the Twentieth Series) spoken of as *willing* the event. For instance, he claims that the Stoic ethics he seeks to adopt consists in “willing the event as such, that is, of willing that which occurs insofar as it does occur” (LS, 143). In the very next sentence, however, he says that we cannot yet appreciate the importance of this claim, and this is because we have yet to understand the relevant ontological features involved in Deleuze’s reading of Stoic ethics. Or more specifically, we have yet to understand how one can will the event without simply willing *exactly* what occurs. The ontological issue at hand is one we have already touched on: the relationship between events and bodies. Deleuze asks, “how could the event be grasped and willed without its being referred to the corporeal cause from which it results and, through this cause, to the unity of causes as *Physics*?” (LS, 143). Remember, causes and effects are different in nature, so understanding the relation between them seems as difficult as the modern problem concerning the relation between corporeal bodies and incorporeal minds. Because of the difficulty of this task, there is a distinctive *divinatory* element

to Stoic ethics.³⁵ The sage, for example, has a privileged epistemic (and ethical) position and therefore grasps the relation between pure events and corporeal causes. Deleuze is clear that divination here is not merely physical (though there are physical elements involved), and ultimately has little to do “divining” what states of affairs will actually come to pass. Drawing on Victor Goldschmidt’s work on the Stoics, Deleuze identifies two “poles” of Stoic ethics that are relevant to this claim about divination.³⁶ On the one hand, Stoic ethics has to do with “participating to the greatest possible extent in a divine vision which gathers in depth all the physical causes in the unity of a cosmic present, in order to elicit the divination of events which ensue” (*LS*, 144). But this emphasis (peculiar to the first pole of Stoic ethics) is precisely what Deleuze finds insufficient, and while this insufficiency can be understood in many ways, I will here focus on the two most obvious mistakes it makes. Both are ontological in character and related: first, this pole of Stoic ethics misunderstands the ontology of events, and second, because understanding the ontology of events requires a particular account of temporality, it also misunderstands temporality.

First, it is insufficient to simply deduce or infer something about events from the cosmic present because such an inference ignores the crucial difference between corporeal causes (bodies) and incorporeal effects (events). As he says, “events, being incorporeal effects, differ in nature from the corporeal causes from which they result” (*LS*, 144). Again, “being cut” differs from “Ruth was cut.” Thus, understanding ideal events on the basis of a present state of affairs

³⁵ “Here, *divination* grounds ethics.” (*LS*, 143)

³⁶ It is easy to overlook how this talk of “poles” functions in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze speaks about these two poles of Stoic ethics primarily (indeed, almost exclusively) in terms of divination. But that is not the only way to think about them. For instance, the distinction between these two poles in Goldschmidt is not always (or even primarily) a distinction particularly about divination, but rather a more general division between the “physical pole” and the “logical pole” of Stoic thought. Although I think he under-appreciates the stress that Deleuze puts on divination, see Sellars 2006 for a helpful discussion of these two poles in Goldschmidt’s reading of the Stoics.

will be doomed to failure. The emphasis of the second pole, then, will turn out to be crucial for Deleuze's interpretation of Stoic ethics. Far from attempting to deduce incorporeal events from corporeal bodies, i.e., from bodily causation, the second pole links the event to "its incorporeal quasi-cause" (*LS*, 144). Given Deleuze's insistence that corporeal causation operates according to different laws than incorporeal effects, any understanding of the relation between bodies and events cannot, strictly speaking, rely on an empirical notion of causation. That is, if causes (bodies) and effects (events) differ in nature, then the notion of causation that we need for an ontology of events cannot be thought of in *exclusively* bodily terms, in terms of one body causing a reaction in another body. What we are trying to grasp is not how one billiard ball moves another, but how "being-cut" is both an incorporeal effect of corporeal bodies and simultaneously irreducible to those bodies. If we appreciate the claim that effects are entirely different than the bodies that cause them, then we will see that empirical accounts of causation are insufficient for any ontology that wishes to include events. If we, with Deleuze, wish to award a certain pride of place to events in our ontology, we will therefore need to invoke what Deleuze calls "quasi-causation." But what is this strange relation?

Early in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze has the following to say about the relation in question:

Events are never causes of one another, but rather enter the relations of quasi-causality, an unreal and ghostly causality, endlessly reappearing in the two senses. It is neither at the same time, nor in relation to the same thing, that I *am* younger and older, but it is at the same time and by the same relation that I *become* so. (*LS*, 33, emphasis mine)

Part of what it means to say that relations of quasi-causality "endlessly reappear" is that the relation extends in both directions. I become older than I was and younger than I will be *not* in reference to the same thing, but by virtue of the same relation. To take another of Deleuze's

favorite examples, Lewis Carroll's Alice becomes both larger and smaller at the same time – larger than she was, but smaller than she will be. My becoming older than I was is not quite in a *causal* relation to my becoming younger than I will be, as Alice's becoming larger than she was is not quite a cause of her becoming smaller than she will be. However, becoming younger and older, or larger and smaller, are clearly related, and the name of this relation is quasi-causation. As Jon Roffe helpfully explains, this relation is neither causal nor logical, but nonetheless “these events belong together, each making (a) sense of the other, providing a point of view from which the other is able to be expressed. No matter how old I become, I continue to become younger insofar as that this event has a quasi-causal relationship to growing old, giving it a particular compatriot sense.”³⁷ Although Alice's becoming larger than she was is not in a causal relation to her becoming smaller than she will be, these events belong together. The comparative “smaller” makes no sense absent a gesture to Alice's future point of view, her being larger. But the sense that these events have, their belonging together, is not reducible to an analytic, logical connection. That is, Deleuze's claims about quasi-causality are not trivial claims about the definition of words, or about what is entailed in a strict logical sense when we say that someone grows. Quasi-causality is designed to give a name to this bi-directional connection between events and clearly, it is a relation that goes far beyond an empirical notion of causation. Thus, insofar as the first pole attempts to divine future events from considering the physical causes, it relies on a naïve, empirical notion of both events and causation and therefore misses the *quasi-causal*, bi-directional nature of the relation between events.

With this rough sketch of quasi-causation in mind, let us turn to the second pole's understanding of the event. The second pole does not attempt to divine future states of affairs

³⁷ Roffe 2017, p. 284.

from the present, but rather tries to link the event to its incorporeal quasi-cause. And to foreshadow the ethical result of this pole, what characterizes the sage is precisely that she “‘identifies’ with the quasi-cause” (*LS*, 146). As should now be clear, this is emphatically *not* to claim that the sage causes or wishes to cause certain states of affairs. Rather, in identifying with the quasi-cause, the sage somehow identifies with an incorporeal link between events. Deleuze characterizes this identification in a number of different ways, as waiting, understanding, and willing, all in relation to the event. He writes,

The sage waits for the event, that is to say, *understands the pure event* in its eternal truth, independently of its spatio-temporal actualization, as something eternally yet-to-come and always already passed according to the line of the Aion. But, at the same time, the sage also *wills the embodiment* and the actualization of the pure incorporeal event in a state of affairs and in his or her own body and flesh. Identifying with the quasi-cause, the sage wishes to “give a body” to the incorporeal effect, since the effect inherits the cause... (*LS*, 146-147)

With this passage in mind, we are now in a prime position to understand the other ontological mistake the first pole of Stoic ethics makes: its naïve understanding of cause and event betrays an insufficient understanding of *temporality*, of the time of the event. As we can see in the above passage, part of what undergirds Deleuze’s positive ethical model – the sage – is that she demonstrates an understanding of the time of the event. But what is this time of the event, and how does it differ from this insufficient account of time upon which the first pole relies?

If the first pole of Stoic ethics attempts to divine future states of affairs from the cosmic present, then it awards a certain priority to that present. That is, the first pole generally prioritizes the present insofar as it treats the present as that on the basis of which the past and

future are understood.³⁸ The second pole, Deleuze insists, makes no such mistake. Instead of moving from the cosmic present to some not-yet-actualized event, the second pole *starts* with the pure event and moves, so to speak, to a singular actualization of that event. As is well known, this description of the two poles maps onto Deleuze's temporal distinction between Chronos and Aion. Deleuze writes,

Chronos is the present which alone exists. It makes of the past and future its two oriented dimensions, so that one goes always from the past to the future – but only to the degree that presents follow one another inside partial worlds or partial systems. Aion is the past-future, which in an infinite subdivision of the abstract moment endlessly decomposes itself in both directions at once and forever sidesteps the present. (*LS*, 77)

With this characterization of in mind, it is easy to see why Deleuze relates the first pole of Stoic ethics to Chronos. Obviously, the mere reference to the cosmic present is enough for us to suspect an allegiance to the time of Chronos. But what is at issue is not simply a reference. Because of the stress put on this present, there is also a strict linear orientation for this first pole and the account of divination which follows from it: one always moves from the cosmic present to the not-yet actualized event.³⁹ We have already seen that moving from a present state of affairs in order to deduce or predict a future event is wrongheaded because of the difference between states of affairs and events. But we now see that this temporal orientation associated with Chronos involves granting an ontological priority to the present. *Only* the present exists, and thus, any talk of the past or future is reducible to past *presents* or future *presents*. Thus, it is no wonder that this account of temporality misunderstands the events that it seeks to predict –

³⁸ As will become clear at the end of the chapter, I consider this as a form of ontological priority. In the block quote below, there is a stronger claim to ontological priority associated with Chronos in play as well.

³⁹ I use “event” here from the perspective of this first pole of Stoic ethics. Deleuzian events cannot be fully actualized in a state of affairs, and missing this feature of events is one of the most fundamental errors the first pole makes.

events that are absolutely and necessarily irreducible to the present. In short, if the Stoic ethics that Deleuze adopts is necessarily an ethics of the event, and the event cannot be sufficiently understood on the basis of the present, then any ethics that harbors an allegiance to the line of Chronos is doomed from the start.⁴⁰ A Deleuzian ethics must, therefore, depend on an account of time which prioritizes the “past-future,” a time in which the present has no place.⁴¹

To say that the present has no place in the line of Aion is to say something very specific. Deleuze insists that the present “does not contradict the Aion,” and thus, the line of Aion is not quite the inverse of the line of Chronos (*LS*, 63).⁴² That is, while the time of Chronos holds that only the present exists, the time of Aion does not hold that the present does not exist. Rather, it holds that whatever present exists is amenable to an infinite subdivision. Deleuze writes, “it is the present as being of reason which is subdivided ad infinitum into something that has just happened and something that is going to happen, always flying in both directions at once” (*LS*,

⁴⁰ Deleuze does sometimes claim that Chronos and Aion are “simultaneous readings of time,” and “complementary,” but this is supposed to be understood along with the fact that they are “mutually exclusive” (*LS*, 5). It is clear that Deleuze wants to incorporate both Chronos and Aion for his ontology as a whole, since bodies are obviously an important part of his ontology, and bodies exist in the present. This is why the Chronos “must be grasped entirely as the living present in bodies which act and are acted upon” (*LS*, 5). But since our concern is centered around Deleuze’s ethics, and his ethics is always an ethics of the event, then insofar as events cannot be reduced to any possible present, the time associated with ethics must be understood according to Aion. Alternatively, Ryan Johnson (2017) suggests that the distinction between Chronos and Aion is a version of the Deleuzian distinction between an extensive measurement and an intensive measurement. I take this to support the general point I am trying to make, as Aion is associated with intensity, and Deleuze often speaks of ethics in terms of intensity as *opposed* to extensity. Cf. *WP*, 74.

⁴¹ Cf.: “Whereas Chronos expressed the action of bodies and the creation of corporeal qualities, Aion is the locus of incorporeal events, and of attributes which are distinct from qualities.” (*LS*, 165). Although Williams (2009) will insist on the complementary nature of Aion and Chronos, I think that insofar as we are talking about an ethics of the event, it is important to call attention to the fact that Aion is *more important* than Chronos (cf. Williams (2009), p. 144). Deleuze is clear about the fact that Aion and Chronos are both necessary in a general sense, but insofar as we are talking about an ethics of the event, it is clear that Aion must take precedence over Chronos. It is telling that Deleuze always positively cites those characters he associates with Aion – the sage, the mime, the actor – while only negatively construing the characters he associates with Chronos – the person of *ressentiment*, the fortune-teller, even “God” (cf. *LS*, 150).

⁴² Later in *The Logic of Sense*, he will even claim that there is a present proper to Aion – a present which exists “between” the two presents of Chronos. Cf. *LS*, pp. 162-168.

63). Any present moment is entirely divisible into past and future, and thus, the “past-future” has an ontological priority in relation to the present. Even from this brief explanation, it is clear that the time of the event must be associated with Aion inasmuch as only this time can accommodate the fact that the quasi-causal relation between events extends in both directions.

In sum, the first pole of Stoic ethics (and the account of divination associated with it) makes at least two ontological mistakes that render it insufficient for the ethics that Deleuze attempts to extract from the Stoics. First, since it attempts to deduce future incorporeal events from present corporeal states of affairs, it misunderstands the ontology of events. Events are ideal and absolutely irreducible to real states of affairs, and although events are effects, they are incorporeal and therefore entirely different from their corporeal causes. Events cannot be deduced, inferred, or even predicted from states of affairs. Second, this pole misunderstands the time of the event. By attempting to divine future events from current states of affairs, the first pole incorrectly attributes a strict linear orientation to the time associated with the event. That is, it always awards a priority to the present and it reduces the future and past to future or past *presents*. The time of the event, however, must be understood on the basis of the past-future, not the present.

But - to ask the painfully obvious question – what do all these ontological concepts have to do with *worthiness*? With *ethics*? Let us return to a passage discussed earlier:

The sage waits for the event, that is to say, *understands the pure event* in its eternal truth, independently of its spatio-temporal actualization, as something eternally yet-to-come and always already passed according to the line of the Aion. But, at the same time, the sage also *wills the embodiment* and the actualization of the pure incorporeal event in a state of affairs and in his or her own body and flesh. Identifying with the quasi-cause, the sage wishes to “give a body” to the incorporeal effect, since the effect inherits the cause... (*LS*, 146-147)

To close this section, and with this passage in mind, let us apply the ontological lessons outlined above to Deleuze's positive ethical model – the Stoic sage. As already noted, the sage's understanding of the event is evidenced by the fact that she does not treat the event according to the line of Chronos, but of Aion. That is, she treats the event in terms of the past-future rather than in terms of the present. The sage understands the event as “something eternally yet-to-come and always already passed,” as an incorporeal effect that is not (and cannot be) exhausted by its actualization in any possible state of affairs which would be reducible to the present (*LS*, 146). Thus, despite the fact that she wills the embodiment of the event, she does not treat her body as a bearer of the event as such. Rather, she identifies with the quasi-cause, as an incorporeal link between events. The ethics that Deleuze constructs from these features of the sage is what he calls an ethics of the *mime* (*le mime*), where the mime's role is understood in distinction from that of the fortune-teller. Remember, the two “poles” of Stoic ethics were introduced as ways of understanding the connection between divination and ethics. The ontological mistakes associated with the first pole stem from the account of divination it presents. That account of divination claims that future events are understood or predicted on the basis of the present and is therefore associated with the fortune-teller. But whatever account of divination survives the ontological mistakes of the first pole will be that of the *mime*'s, and it is Deleuze's account of the mime that makes clear what ethical consequences are in play here.

This is the use of representation: the mime, and no longer the fortune-teller. One stops going from the greatest present toward a future and past which are said only of a smaller present; on the contrary, one goes from the future and past as unlimited, all the way to the smallest present of a pure instant which is endlessly subdivided. It is in this way that Stoic sage not only comprehends and wills the event, but also *represents it and, by this, selects it*, and that an ethics of the mime necessarily prolongs the logic of sense. Beginning with a pure event, the mime directs and doubles the actualization, measures

the mixtures with the aid of an instant without mixture, and prevents them from overflowing. (*LS*, 147, translation modified)

Again, we see that the distinction between the ethics of the fortune-teller and that of the mime's turns on an ontological understanding of events and the temporality that such an ontology requires. But the last sentence in this passage is the most instructive. The mime, *selects* the event, *doubles the actualization* of the event, which in turn involves selecting something singular. In these closing lines of the Twentieth Series, Deleuze gives us the answer to one of our driving questions: to will the event, and thus, to be worthy of the event, means to "select" and "double" the event. But even the most generous reader will here repeat our earlier question: *what does this have to do with ethics?* If, as Deleuze seems to suggest, understanding the event is sufficient for *willing* it, is this simply an ethics for the philosopher? To fully understand how this ethics of the mime is really applied, we must see how Deleuze applies these Stoic insights to a contemporary example, and in so doing, constructs a new image of the Stoic sage. That is, we must turn to Deleuze's treatment of Joë Bousquet.

"Joë Bousquet must be considered Stoic," or The Ethics of Worthiness

The popular image of Bousquet is a tragic one. Paralyzed in war at only 21, he was bedridden until his death some thirty years later. We might point to the personal details of Deleuze's life that might explain his attraction to such a figure – his long battle with respiratory illness, for example. But it is Bousquet's *ethics*, the ways of existing implied in what he said and did, that interests us here. The heart of such an ethics is contained in one of Deleuze's favorite references: "My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it." (*LS*, 148)⁴³ Bousquet's status as "Stoic" is built upon this apprehension of his own wound as a pure event. Deleuze

⁴³ In addition to this citation in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze also uses this claim as a way of explaining the virtual in his final essay, "Immanence: A Life."

approvingly cites Bousquet's claim that "[e]verything was in order with the events of my life before I made them mine" (*LS*, 148). Note the seemingly passive language here. I was born to embody something that existed before me, something that was already in order. Despite Deleuze's characteristic praise of action, there is a seemingly passive aspect of my relation to the event that follows directly from his ontology. Recall that this injunction to embody my wound, to make the events of my life *mine*, cannot mean that I wish to become the cause of what happens to me. This would be either to reduce events to states of affairs or to fail to appreciate the importance of the *quasi*-causal link between events. If I wish to have any positive relation to what happens to me, it cannot be one that is reducible to a causal relation. Our events were in order before we made them ours. In order to accomplish any positive relation to those events, in order to attain "this will the event creates in us," it must be by what Deleuze calls "leaping in place" (*saut sur place*) (*LS*, 148-149). But what is it to leap in place, for Bousquet and Deleuze, and what does it have to do with ethics?

One possible (and popular) response to an event like Bousquet's paralysis is *pity*. And pity for another's misfortune is merely a variation of resentment, a *ressentiment* of the event, only applied to another instead of oneself. What Bousquet's case makes clear is that his understanding of the event is not defined by *ressentiment*, and Deleuze's reading of Bousquet is not marked by a trace of pity. The refusal of *ressentiment* is not equivalent to rejoicing in one's sufferings, as if Bousquet and Deleuze were attempting to appropriate and transform an insight from St. Paul.⁴⁴ Far from rejoicing in his suffering, Bousquet admits to having an "inclination for death." But this inclination is classified as a *failure* of the will, which is in turn "substituted for a longing for death" (*LS*, 149). Deleuze writes,

⁴⁴ Cf. Colossians 1.

From this inclination to this longing there is, in a certain respect, no change except a change of the will, a sort of leaping in place of the whole body which exchanges its organic will for a spiritual will. It wills now not exactly what occurs, but something *in* that which occurs, something yet to come which would be consistent with what occurs, in accordance with the laws of an obscure, humorous conformity: the Event. (*LS*, 149)

With this passage in mind, we can see why *only* speaking of the passive aspect of our relation to events is incomplete. To be passively resigned to undergo what happens to us is, for Deleuze, simply another form of *ressentiment*. To be resigned to bear what happens to us is to will *exactly* what occurs – states of affairs – rather than something *in* what occurs, the event. Were Bousquet merely resigned, he would be satisfied with his passive inclination for death – a force from the outside that one endures but does not adopt or will. But note what happens: the inclination for death is substituted for an active *longing* for death. The moment I *long* for death – rather than merely awaiting it, fearing it, or resolutely bearing its inevitability – is the moment where the event of my own death actually becomes mine. Although this substitution has active connotations, it is not reducible to an action in the colloquial sense of that word. It is not simply an effect of which I am the free and spontaneous cause, but rather something that the event creates through me: “[i]t is a question of attaining this will that the event creates in us,” or, “of becoming the quasi-cause of what is produced within us” (*LS*, 148). We now have a succinct statement of how quasi-causes and events are explicitly related to Deleuze’s ethics: to attain the will the event creates in us *just is* to identify with the quasi-cause of the event, to *long* for the event rather than simply endure it, or, if we wish to give it a name: *Amor fati*.⁴⁵ *Amor fati* is therefore the animating element of Deleuze’s ethics of worthiness. Directly after his famous

⁴⁵ Sellars 2006 argues – rightly, in my view – that Deleuze’s emphasis on *amor fati* departs from the popular image of Stoic ethics as centered around *constantia* or steadfastness. Of course, this is also evidence that Nietzsche influences not just Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza, but the Stoics as well.

claim that the sole sense ethics has consists in not being unworthy of what happens to us, Deleuze gives us an example of what it means to be unworthy: “[t]o grasp whatever happens as unjust and unwarranted (it is always someone else’s fault)” (LS, 149). In other words, *ressentiment* is opposed to *amor fati*. On the one hand, to be worthy of what happens to us is to actively will the event, to attain the will that the event creates in us, or “to become the offspring of one’s own events” (LS, 149). It is not to be passively resigned to what happens, and it is not to will exactly what occurs. On the other hand, when we are passively resigned to what happens to us, when we identify what happens as unjust or unmerited, or we seek objects of praise or blame for what occurs, we resent the event and we are unworthy of what happens to us. As Jon Roffe helpfully and succinctly explains,

*There are fundamentally only two responses to an event. Either I respond to events by affirming them, or I resent them for happening to me; I turn from affirmation to resentment and blame. [...] These two alternatives each imply a temporal orientation. The affirmation of the event is oriented towards the future – by affirming the event, I affirm what it will make of me, what it will make possible for me. Resentment towards the event is allied with the immediate past, the time before this was done to me.*⁴⁶

Roffe is obviously right to call attention to the temporal implications of Deleuze’s ethics.⁴⁷ And no sooner does Deleuze make his terse (but famous) comments about being worthy of the event – indeed, being worthy of what happens to us is the *only* meaningful way to think about ethics – than he reads them back onto the framework of his underlying ontology. For instance, we saw him describe Bousquet’s remarkable “leap” in ethical terms by classifying such a leap as an alternative to *ressentiment*. That is, “leaping in place” was another way of talking

⁴⁶ Roffe 2020, p. 306.

⁴⁷ That is, the general point is correct, if a bit overstated. Surely, it is conceivable that one resent something in the future.

about how Bousquet willed the event – something *in* that which occurs – without willing exactly what occurs and without falling prey to *ressentiment*. While this phrase is noticeably absent from the rest of *The Logic of Sense*, that does not mean that the concept isn't still operative. Indeed, Bousquet's leap is translated into an ontological term – counter-actualization.

To counter-actualize the event seems, *prima facie*, to suggest a will that runs *counter to* or *against* the event. But we should already understand that such a will is antithetical to Deleuze's ethics. Willing anything other than the event, or willing against the event is simply another way of resenting it. If counter-actualization is a positive ethical ideal, it must be another way to speak about willing the event, and this is precisely how Deleuze speaks about counter-actualization in the ethical context. For instance, Deleuze equates counter-actualization with "becoming...the actor of one's own events" (*LS*, 150). "Acting," in this context, is less about agency in the abstract sense and more about performance – like a stage actor playing a role – and it is the ontological implications involved in acting that make the actor an attractive figure for Deleuze. The role that the actor plays is not reducible to any present moment involved in the play, but always contains a reference to what has happened and what will happen in the play. A good actor is affected not only by what *has* happened in the role they play, but also by what will happen. In other words, the time of the actor is not characterized by a series of isolated temporal moments, and the actor's past and future are not reducible to past and future *presents*. Again, Jon Roffe is helpful here: "the actor is always anticipating what is yet to come in the play, while carrying forward everything that has already happened, such that the present moment of the performance contains the whole play in folded-up form."⁴⁸ Moreover, when an actor plays a role, there is something wholly singular about that process. No two performances are the same,

⁴⁸ Roffe 2020, p. 308.

and part of what makes performances singular has to do with a process of selection. The actor does not choose what happens in the story, but they do affect how that story is presented, they affect how they *double* the role. For instance, David Thewlis' depiction of Clov in Beckett's *Endgame* differs greatly from other depictions of the same role. The particular character of his limp, the simultaneous joy and despair in his laugh, the peculiar features of his expressions, the way he interacts with Hamm, are all ways in which he – and he alone – plays a role, or actualizes the event. Deleuze claims that when the actor actualizes the event, it is an affirmation, or a “redoubling” of the role, but in a singular manner. He writes, “the actor delimits the original, disengages from it an abstract line, and keeps from the event only its contour and its splendor” (*LS*, 150). Despite Deleuze's puzzling language here, the idea is clear enough: to become the actor of one's own events is to affirm the sense of those events, rather than affirming them *exactly* as they happen.⁴⁹ Just as the actor makes a role their own while simultaneously understanding that the events of the play were already “in order,” that they existed before they were actively adopted, to keep the contour and splendor of an event is to will the events of one's life without resignation or resentment.

We now have a plethora of different phrases and claims that seem to describe the same thing: to identify with the quasi-cause, to be worthy of what happens to us, to will the event, to give a body to the event, to will the actualization of the event in one's own flesh, an ethics of the mime, to leap in place, *amor fati*, to avoid *ressentiment*, to become the actor of one's own events, to counter-actualize the event, to name a few. While these phrases each have different emphases, and are therefore applied in different contexts, the most important elements are contained in two primary components: first, a series of ontological claims about the nature of events and the view

⁴⁹ Cf. “The splendor and the magnificence of the event is sense.” (*LS*, 149)

of temporality that those events require, and second, an ethical claim about the proper attitude towards those events. To become worthy of what happens to us, Deleuze consistently suggests, requires that we have a proper understanding of events, and such an understanding necessarily affects how we think about ourselves in relation to those events.⁵⁰ Counter-actualization happens all the time, but it is worthless when it is produced by *ressentiment*. Or as Deleuze says, “[c]ounter-actualization is nothing, it belongs to a buffoon when it operates alone and pretends to have the value of *what could have happened*” (*LS*, 161). If there is an ethical task for Deleuze, it must consist in affirming the event rather than resenting it – *amor fati* rather than *ressentiment*. Such an affirmation requires that we accept – indeed, *love* and *will* – what happens to us: “to be the mime of *what effectively occurs*, to double the actualization with a counter-actualization, the identification with a distance, like the true actor and dancer, is to give the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with its inevitable actualization” (*LS*, 161).

Immanence: An Ethics?

Thus far, I have attempted to situate and explain some of Deleuze’s terse, but important comments about ethics. We have seen his Nietzschean critique of morality and the corresponding system of judgment, the Spinozistic influence on his general account of ethics, and his more focused claims about ethics and worthiness in *The Logic of Sense*. But now we must turn to a higher-level interpretative question: what is the *philosophical* status of Deleuze’s ethics? Obviously, there are many different ways this question can be approached. For example, we might think that we should evaluate Deleuze’s ethics solely in terms of the ontological concepts it employs. The philosophical status of a Deleuzean ethics would then depend on the intelligibility of the ontological concepts it employs. Or we might think that we should simply

⁵⁰ It should be pointed out though, that this might be the *only* thing understanding effects. Recall that Deleuze says that through leaping in place “there is, in a certain respect, no change except a change of the will...” (*LS*, 149).

think about the “real world” implications that Deleuzean ethics has, which would mean that the question of its philosophical status would depend on its applicability to contemporary ethical or political issues. But in keeping with our general theme here, I suggest that we ought to examine the relationship between ethics and ontology in a general sense. This relationship *almost* goes unsaid in much of the scholarly literature on Deleuze. That is, the perplexing relationship between ethics and ontology is often covered over by noting Deleuze’s obvious preference for the latter. For instance, in his paper on Deleuze and the Stoics, Ryan Johnson suggests in a footnote that Deleuze’s obsession with both Spinoza and Nietzsche is due to the fact that they both – following the Stoics – argue for an ethics that is already entailed by the ontology they propose.⁵¹ Reversing Platonism was primarily, on this reading of Deleuze and the Stoics, an *ontological* achievement that just so happened to entail an entire ethics. Thus, we may infer that the significant achievement here is ontological in character and whatever ethics follows from the ontology in question is strictly dependent on, strictly limited to, what we are allowed to say about ontology. Likewise, Jon Roffe notes that what is primary for Deleuze is an (ontological) understanding of the event: “he takes the doctrine of the incorporeal event as the primary thesis, and then fits what the Stoics have to say about ethics back onto that.”⁵² Ethics, again, is determined by an underlying ontology of the event. Jack Reynolds argues for a more nuanced view, but one that is ultimately reducible to the priority of ontology. Reynolds claims that Deleuze attempts to establish a series of claims about priority – the priority of Aion with respect to Chronos, of surfaces with respect to depths, and ultimately, of the virtual with respect to the actual. Although he does claim that there is an “ethical priority” in Deleuze’s work, this ethical

⁵¹ Johnson 2017, p. 285 n. 21. Obviously, this is a controversial interpretation of Nietzsche.

⁵² Roffe 2020, p. 305.

priority is ultimately reducible to a “transcendental priority.”⁵³ For example, because Aion is associated with the virtual, for Reynolds, it enjoys a transcendental priority with respect to Chronos, which is associated with the actual. Although Reynolds claims that “Aion, surface, and wound, are...directly tied to the possibility of a new ethics,” that new ethics is ultimately dependent on the transcendental or ontological status of Aion, and thus, whatever ethics is available to Deleuze (which, in Reynolds’ view, is not at all clear), turns on the underlying ontology he gets from the Stoics.⁵⁴ And finally, it is because of this ontological emphasis of Deleuze’s ethics that James Williams claims that such an ethics bears no resemblance to orthodox normative ethics. For Williams, Deleuze’s work is not designed to establish some particular view about the goodness or worth of certain moral positions. On the contrary, Deleuze’s comments about ethics are about “the broad metaphysical concepts and system his own moral philosophy must build upon,” or about “what kind of metaphysical context is at work in events leading to moral problems.”⁵⁵ Not only does ontology or metaphysics determine ethics, whatever philosophical value ethics has depends on what it can tell us about the metaphysical context presupposed in the problems it addresses.

It is worth stating the obvious: Deleuze does sometimes speak like this. For example, he writes that the Stoics’ ontological view of surface and depth “presupposes a great deal of wisdom and entails an entire ethic” (*LS*, 10). When he does speak in such a manner, he certainly seems to suggest that there is a clear direction of philosophical importance – from ontology to ethics.

⁵³ Reynolds doesn’t define any of these different senses of priority, but presumably, to say that Aion has a transcendental priority with respect to Chronos means that Aion is the condition of possibility for Chronos. In my view, it is uncontroversial to say that this claim about transcendental priority is, most fundamentally, an ontological claim.

⁵⁴ Reynolds 2007, p. 147. See also Williams 2008 for a criticism of Reynolds’ paper, and then Reynolds 2008 for a response to that criticism.

⁵⁵ Williams 2009, p. 147.

The problem, of course, is that Deleuze often seems to speak about the relationship between ethics and ontology in *precisely the opposite* manner. Recall Deleuze's striking claim about Spinoza with which we began this chapter: "Spinoza didn't entitle his book Ontology, he's too shrewd for that, he entitles it Ethics. Which is a way of saying that, whatever the importance of my speculative propositions may be, you can only judge them at the level of the ethics that they envelope or imply." Of course, one might object that this is Deleuze's *reading* of Spinoza, not his own view. But it seems to me that this is too literal a reading. While it is obviously true that Deleuze is here presenting a general introduction to Spinoza's thought, it is telling to pay attention to the precise move that introduces the relation between ontology and ethics: the claim about judging speculative propositions at the level of ethics is presented as a consequence of Spinoza's insistence on a type of *immanence*. Upon Spinoza's arrival, God is no longer a transcendent cause of what comes to pass, operating from the outside in order to accomplish things it lacks, creating things according to final causes, tailoring a world for the benefit of human beings, etc. God is now conceived as an immanent cause, *Deus sive Natura*, as the only infinite substance which contains all particular modes in its attributes. For Deleuze, the consequence of this insight is that there "isn't any hierarchy in the attributes of God, of substance," and thus Spinoza represents "the most fundamental attempt to give a status to the univocity of being."⁵⁶ It is in this context that Deleuze draws attention to the relevance of the title of Spinoza's magnum opus. By arguing for the univocity *of* being, Spinoza effectively removes hierarchies (of being) *in* being: "there is only one cause, and it's immanent, and this influences practice," and it is on the level of practice that speculative propositions are assessed.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Deleuze, *Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought*: Lecture 1, 25 November 1980, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁷ Deleuze, *ibid.*, p. 5.

To risk putting the matter too simply, if Spinoza's status as the "prince" or even Christ of the philosophers is due to his insights about immanence (as Deleuze explicitly claims), and this particular relation between ethics and speculative thought is a consequence of good thinking about immanence, Deleuze is not just saying that Spinoza judged speculative propositions by the ethics they imply, but that we, being good Spinozists, must as well.⁵⁸

That speculative propositions must be judged at the level of ethics is not just a claim that Deleuze makes in relation to Spinoza, it is also suggested by his reading of Nietzsche. Recall that part of what characterizes Deleuze's Nietzschean critique of the dogmatic image of thought is that it doesn't ever refer to what it presupposes, to the forces that form it, or to what dogmatic thinking presupposes *as* thought. What Nietzsche provides us as an alternative – indeed, what his fundamental philosophical contribution consists in – has to do with the introduction of sense and value into philosophy. But lest we read "introduction" in too mild of terms, we should make it clear that Deleuze's Nietzsche did not just introduce value into philosophy in a general sense, he introduced the *priority* of evaluation in philosophical thinking, as evaluation is the force that forms all thought. Recall that it is not just that our evaluations (or perspectives of appraisal) presuppose values, but our values presuppose evaluations. And it is precisely because of this status evaluation enjoys that Deleuze calls philosophical thinking, indeed, "[t]he whole of philosophy" a "symptomatology" (*NP*, 3). When we do philosophy, our driving question is not (or at least ought not to be) "Is this true?" but "*What way of existing does this imply?*" The element of thought is value, not truth. Thus, the way we ought to assess philosophical positions is to treat them as *symptoms* of evaluations, of perspectives of appraisal, and then to think about

⁵⁸ Cf.: "Spinoza was the philosopher who knew full well that immanence was only immanent to itself and therefore that it was a plane traversed by movements of the infinite, filled with intensive ordinates. He is therefore the prince of the philosophers." (*WP*, 48)

the value of those perspectives. And crucially, if this is true of philosophy as a whole, then it is obviously true of ontology. Thus, insofar as ethics has to do with assessing what we do or say by relating such doings or sayings to the ways of existing involved,⁵⁹ then it would seem that ethics guides ontology.

In this spirit, some commentators have claimed that there is a certain priority awarded to ethics in Deleuze's thought (although they do not always use these precise terms). For instance, John Sellars argues that although Deleuze turns to the Stoics largely because of their theory of incorporeals, his Stoic influence extends beyond this basic ontological thesis to a "practical conception of philosophy."⁶⁰ Though Sellars makes broad references to Deleuze's discussion of the three images of philosophers in *The Logic of Sense* and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, his main evidence for Deleuze's practical conception of philosophy comes from a 1972 discussion between Deleuze and Foucault regarding the relationship between theory and practice. It is common, Deleuze claims, to think about practice as merely the application of a theory, but this ought to be resisted. Far from thinking about practice as applied theory, Deleuze (in keeping with the spirit of his Spinoza lectures) suggests that we ought to evaluate theoretical positions in practical terms: "A theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate."⁶¹ For Sellars, this means that "[p]hilosophy proper is not merely

⁵⁹ Recall that Deleuze ties this assessment specifically to ethics in *Negotiations*: "...ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved. We say this, do that: what way of existing does it involve? There are things one can only do or say through mean-spiritedness, a life based on hatred, or bitterness toward life" (N, 100).

⁶⁰ Sellars 2006, p. 158.

⁶¹ Foucault 1996, p. 76.

philosophical theory or discourse; instead, philosophy is a lived practice that is built upon both philosophical theory and practical exercises.”⁶² Although the terms are slightly different here – Deleuze refers to “theory,” not “philosophy” – this amounts to a claim about the priority of ethics. Philosophical claims can be evaluated in a plethora of different ways, but if Sellars is right, Deleuze proposes one particular way that we ought to think about philosophy: in terms of use.⁶³

For those who are acquainted with the secondary literature on Deleuze, it will perhaps come as no surprise that the person who comes closest to our problem is Daniel W. Smith. In the provocative end to his essay comparing Deleuze and Derrida, he asks how one should assess or decide between Derrida’s emphasis on transcendence and Deleuze’s insistence on immanence.⁶⁴ Smith claims that a question this basic might just come down to a preference, or philosophical taste. But preferences and tastes are not always groundless, and thus Smith attempts to provide some reasons for why one might prefer to emphasize immanence in a philosophical context, and why another might want to resist that emphasis. The first reason for preferring immanence instead of transcendence is also the most obvious, for Smith: “the validity of a critique of transcendence above all stems from the theoretical interest to expose its fictional or illusory status.”⁶⁵ Smith claims that this desire to move away from unnecessary fictions and illusions,

⁶² Sellars 2006, p. 159.

⁶³ One might resist the subsumption of “use” under the general term “ethics.” But if we – like Daniel W. Smith – think that the fundamental ethical question is not “What must I do?” but rather, “What *can* I do?” then issues of use fit squarely with the domain of ethics. See the next paragraph for a discussion of Smith’s position.

⁶⁴ Immanence, here, is meant in (at least) three senses: immanence with respect to subjectivity (the traditional emphasis on the transcendence of the subject is relegated to “the conditions of the immanent flux of experience,” which Smith glosses as a “theory of intensity”), ontology (the difference between Being and beings is treated in terms of an underlying “genetic principle of difference”), and epistemology (or, Deleuze’s “immanent theory of Ideas and desire”). See Smith 2012, p. 284.

⁶⁵ Smith 2012, p. 284.

this “demystificatory” urge, is a common theme in Hume and Kant, to take two prominent examples. Put simply, we ought only to make claims that we can legitimately make, and claims associated with transcendence – e.g., traditional claims about the existence of God, or contemporary claims about the “beyond Being” – go well beyond what we are entitled to say in a theoretical register. But although Smith claims that critiques of transcendence stem “above all” from this source, he also says that that the “more important” reason for emphasizing immanence over transcendence has to do with practical philosophy, which he equates with ethics and politics.⁶⁶ As we have seen, one way to summarize Deleuze’s critique of Kant is that while Kant was a champion of immanence with respect to his theoretical philosophy, he assigned transcendence a central regulative role in his practical philosophy by legitimating the use of transcendent concepts like God and immortality. According to Smith, most of the arguments against immanence (and for transcendence) follow Kant’s lead, and are moral in character. Upon banishing all talk of transcendence, we are warned, we will be reduced to a vulgar subjectivism, with no real principles to guide our actions and the lives that those actions constitute.⁶⁷ It is for this reason that Deleuze turns to figures like Spinoza and Nietzsche, who make no apologies about the role of immanence in their thought, and yet resist these ethical critiques. Unlike Kant, who resisted transcendent urges at the level of theory, but embraced them in his practical thought, Spinoza and Nietzsche provide a more complete critique of transcendence by attacking transcendence at the level of theory *and* practice. More specifically, they do not simply reject

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 284.

⁶⁷ Smith claims that this practical threat is why Deleuze and Guattari speak of immanence as dangerous in *What is Philosophy?* Cf. *WP*, 45. See also Deleuze’s terse response to criticisms like these in “To Have Done with Judgment” – *ECC*, pp. 134-135.

ethical critiques out of hand, but attempt to show that we are left with unsavory ethical consequences by emphasizing *transcendence*, not immanence. Smith writes,

The fundamental question of ethics is not “What *must* I do?” (the question of *morality*) but rather “What *can* I do?” Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities? How can I come into active possession of my power? How can I go to the limit of what I “can do”? [...] The ethical themes one finds in transcendent philosophies such as those of Levinas and Derrida – an absolute responsibility for the other that I can never assume, or an infinite call to justice that I can never satisfy – are, from the point of view of immanence, imperatives whose effect is to separate me from my capacity to act. From the viewpoint of immanence, in other words, *transcendence represents my slavery and impotence reduced to its lowest point.*”⁶⁸

Philosophies that emphasize transcendence over immanence are to be resisted, Smith suggests, not simply because they make untenable ontological claims, but because of the ethics they imply – because they separate us from our capacity of acting. By replacing morality with ethics, Deleuze reimagines what values are to be sought in philosophical thinking, or what values define a philosophy that is worthwhile. Thus, the ethical critiques of immanence associated with philosophies of transcendence are turned on their head by showing that transcendence is the *ethical problem*, not the solution that a worthwhile ethics requires. Or, Deleuze exposes the values that undergird philosophies of transcendence by treating those philosophies as symptoms of bad ethical values (and by extension, base evaluations or perspectives of appraisal). Although Smith has already claimed that critiques of transcendence stem *above all* from theoretical interests, he thinks that the “most acute and consequential” difference between philosophies of transcendence and immanence is seen at the level of the ethics they imply.⁶⁹ But we are now left

⁶⁸ Smith 2012, pp. 285-286.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

with a key question on which our entire analysis turns: do we now have an argument for the primacy of ethics? And if so, *what kind of primacy is established?*

We have two related claims here that seem to support a rather strong account of the primacy of ethics. First, evaluative perspectives of appraisal are the real productive forces that are responsible for speculative or ontological propositions. Or what is the same, evaluations precede and condition the ontologies they produce. Second, we ought to judge these ontological propositions at the level of ethics they imply. We thus have a claim about the real source of ontology – evaluation – and a claim about the standards against which ontology ought to be judged – at the level of ethics. It seems, then, that there is an important sense in which ethics is prior to (or primary in relation to) ontology. But one of the most fundamental claims driving our investigation here is that a rigorous understanding of priority of ethics requires a transformation of the *very concept of primacy itself*. In other words, it is not enough *that* “ethics” is granted pride of place *if* it is granted such a position solely because of its ontological merits. Thus, we must ask of Deleuze not just “*Is ethics primary?*” but also “*Is primacy an ethical concept?*” When the issue is framed in this way, we can appreciate the force of Smith’s analysis by noting how his chapter ends – with a comparison of Levinas and Deleuze:

For Levinas, ethics *precedes* ontology because it is derived from an element of transcendence (the Other) that is necessarily “otherwise” than Being (and hence privileges concepts like absolute responsibility and duty). For Deleuze, ethics *is* ontology because it is derived from the immanent relation of beings to Being at the level of their existence (and hence privileges concepts such as *puissance*...and affectivity).⁷⁰

Smith’s point here is crucial. Although there is a sense in which ethics determines what we say about ontology, in the most fundamental sense, ethics *is* ontology. Think again about

⁷⁰ Smith 2012, p. 286.

Deleuze's Nietzschean doctrine of evaluation. All thinking presupposes evaluations, and evaluations are perspectives of appraisal, modes of existence, or ways of being. As we saw above, this does qualify as a *certain* claim to the priority of evaluation, but "priority" here is an inescapably *ontological* term. The view is that evaluations are the productive forces that form thought, and thus the real insight of this claim has to do with the ontological relevance that evaluation has with respect to thought, with its status as a productive force. Likewise, for all of Deleuze's Spinozistic claims about judging ontology at the level of ethics, the way we assess any speculative proposition or mode of existence is by thinking about it in terms of power, in terms of what the thing can do. Remember, for Deleuze, Spinozistic practical philosophy treats ethics as *ethology*, as the science of behavior, and such a science is intelligible only in terms of the power or capacity of affecting or being affected. Establishing an ethical standard for judging speculative propositions, then, is inseparable from an ontological investigation into the capacities or powers of the thing in question, or with determining what something can do. To judge something at the level of ethics it implies simply means to understand how far something's power extends. So on this reading, it's not so much that Spinoza was too shrewd to name his book "Ontology," *he might as well have*. And finally, lest we think that these observations only apply at a general level, recall our analysis of *The Logic of Sense*. The sole sense that ethics has consists in being worthy of what happens to us. But as we saw, any sense that "worthiness" has is entirely dependent on the ontological concepts that undergird *The Logic of Sense*. To be worthy of the event is to identify with the quasi-cause, to will the event, to counter-actualize the event, to take a few examples. The "moral problem" that Deleuze addresses in the twentieth series of *The Logic of Sense* has nothing to do with morality in the colloquial sense of that word, as the problem is concerned with what account of divination is possible given the ontological

concepts already established. Indeed, that problem concerns how to adopt an account of divination without falling prey to the ontological mistakes the fortune-teller makes, e.g., thinking that one can divine future events on the basis of present states of affairs. And in the twenty-first series, the ground of Deleuze's admiration of Bousquet is pitched in terms of the *ontological* wisdom Bousquet's life demonstrates – namely, his understanding of events. Deleuze's critique of other ethical positions like that of the fortune-teller's do indeed make reference to concepts with great ethical flourish, e.g., *ressentiment*, bitterness towards life, worthiness, and so forth. But it is clear that the most important feature of Deleuze's critique of these ethical positions is the fact that they make *ontological* mistakes. They mistake states of affairs for events, or they misunderstand what account of temporality a satisfactory ontology of events requires. All talk of unworthiness, then, seems to be reducible to a lack of *understanding*.⁷¹ What, then, does it mean to be worthy of the event? One would be hard pressed to find any other answer in *The Logic of Sense* than this: to understand the ontological significance of events and the temporality that such an ontology requires. Of course, this isn't to say that time makes no ethical difference. But prioritizing ethics requires more than simply showing that ontological positions have ethical significance. It takes showing that the *relation* between ethics and ontology has a *distinctive ethical character*.

To be clear, our claim that Deleuzian ethics is reducible to and dependent upon its underlying ontology isn't necessarily to say that the Deleuzian project fails on its own terms. It is rather to say that despite how it might seem from quick survey of some of Deleuze's claims about ethics and related concepts, his thought is not the place to turn for a rigorous account of the primacy of ethics. Likewise, to point out that Deleuze's thought does not thoroughly prioritize

⁷¹ See, for instance, where Deleuze equates waiting for the event (which is closely related to both willing the event and being worthy of the event) as “*understand[ing] the pure event in its eternal truth*” (*LS*, 143).

ethics, is not to say that Deleuze's thought does not *have* an ethics. On the contrary, that is precisely the problem: Deleuze's thought *has* an ethics, *contains* an ethics, which is a way of saying that whatever the importance of his ethical propositions, they are ultimately dependent on the ontological concepts that determine those propositions. Again, although there are ways to say that ethics is primary for Deleuze, all those claims to primacy or priority ultimately presuppose an ontological understanding of primacy, and thus, any Deleuzean claim to the primacy of ethics is reducible to the ontological relevance ethics has. In other words, if ethics *is* ontology, then any claim to the priority of ethics is reducible to the priority of ontology. Deleuze didn't call himself a pure ethicist, he's too shrewd for that.

Chapter 4:

Ethics and Primacy in Levinas' Work

“I believe that when Levinas speaks of ethics – I wouldn't say that this has nothing in common with what has been covered over in this word from Greece to the German philosophy of the 19th Century, ethics is wholly other, and yet it is the same word.”

- Derrida, *Altérités*, 71

Let us take stock. Thus far, we have seen that Kant's attempt to establish the primacy of practical reason was compromised by his claim that theoretical reason and practical reason are in a relation of equality. If something's primacy consists in its “prerogative...to be the first determining ground of the connection with all the rest,” then any gesture towards a relation of equality precludes a relation of primacy. We have also seen Deleuze offer us a version of the primacy of ethics. For him, evaluative perspectives are the forces that form thought, and speculative positions can only be judged at the level of ethics they imply. But if ethics *is* ontology, or if ethics is prioritized *for ontological purposes*, then any argument that purports to establish the primacy of ethics implicitly grants primacy to ontology. We now must turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Indeed, there may be no other philosopher whose name is more associated with our problem here. Famous for his view that “ethics is first philosophy,” Levinas attempts to establish a philosophy that is *first and foremost* an ethics. But as should now be clear, the sense that “first” and “foremost” has is a matter of utmost importance. Unlike Deleuze, whose project is not *internally* threatened by the reduction of ethics to ontology, Levinas understands ethics as something related, but nonetheless irreducible to ontology. Thus, our goal is to extract a sense of ethics' primacy (*primat*), priority (*priorité*), or its status as “first” (*première*), and then to determine whether or not such an account can accommodate a thoroughly *ethical* sense of primacy. There is no other way of doing this but by paying close attention to

key passages and terms in Levinas' work. Thus, Chapter III is devoted to providing close readings of key passages from *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (henceforth, *Otherwise than Being*) where Levinas discusses ethics and primacy. By understanding the very specific roles those terms play we will be able to better appreciate what Levinas might mean in claiming that ethics is first philosophy, or primary in relation to ontology. Ultimately, we will see that there are significant changes in emphases from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*, and in Chapter IV, we will see that these shifts provide not only a helpful way of understanding Levinas' development, but also a framework that can accommodate a rigorous interpretation of the primacy of ethics.

Ethics

What is ethics for Levinas? Like all philosophical questions that take this form, the simplicity of the question threatens to suggest that the answer to this question can be equally simple. However, while there is a certain type of simplicity in some of Levinas' explanations of ethics, it also proves to be an elusive term, as Levinas' use of the term departs from traditional use, and even takes on different meanings within his own work. Yet, to come to a proper appreciation of the originality and profundity of Levinas' thought, one must grapple with its central concept, and to begin, we turn to his first *magnum opus*, *Totality and Infinity*.

○ *Ethics in Totality and Infinity*

It is incontestable that Levinas' central concern has to do with ethics. The first lines of the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* testify to the fact that he is concerned to show that ethics is not some high-flown fantasy or something about which we are "duped".¹ However, the meaning

¹ Although Levinas uses *morale* instead of *éthique* in this sentence, and although he later distinguishes these terms (e.g., Cohen 1986, p. 29) it is clear that there is no significant distinction between these terms in *Totality and Infinity*.

of this term is elusive, as Levinas' ethical thought does not easily conform to the more common ways we tend to speak of "ethics." For example, ethics is not about the application of some Kantian moral law, it is not a matter of developing the right habits, and it has nothing to do with the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain. In fact, it is safe to say that Levinas opposes any view that treats ethics as a body of principles capable of guiding all possible actions. There are certainly imperatives for Levinas, but these imperatives are not abstract rational or empirical principles that we can apply to fabricated scenarios in order to deduce the "right" or "wrong" course of action.

Instead, ethics – at its most basic level – has to do with a "desire for the invisible," a metaphysical desire for the "*absolutely other (l'absolument autre)*" (TI, 33). In metaphysical desire, the same tends toward, or "desires," the "elsewhere," the "otherwise," and the "other" (*l'autre*) (TI, 39).² Such a desire is not like the desire involved in wanting food or drink. This more common notion of desire is predicated on the thought that I can satisfy myself by obtaining what I lack. In this sense, the alterity or otherness of the desired object is thought of as something to be overcome or reduced in the act of consumption or satisfaction – an act in which the object is taken in and "reabsorbed" into the desiring being. I satisfy my desire for water, for example, by drinking, my desire for food by eating. When I drink the water or eat the bread, those objects become part of me, and their alterity is thereby absorbed into my identity. Metaphysical desire, however, tends towards something else entirely, something absolutely other, and it is the invocation of the absolutely other that distinguishes metaphysical desire from

² In his translation of *Totality and Infinity* Lingis translates *l'autre, l'Autre, and Autre* as "other" and *autrui* and *Autrui* as "Other." In his translation of *Otherwise than Being*, Lingis translates *l'autre, l'Autre, Autre, and autrui* simply as "other." Since it is important to note when Levinas capitalizes these terms and even more important to know when he uses *Autrui* rather than *l'autre*, for example, I provide the French in parenthesis. When speaking about Levinas, I use "other" for the general, logical other and Other for another person.

more common forms of desire. The absolutely other – that towards which metaphysical desire tends – is not subject to assimilation or reabsorption and thus cannot be thought in terms of lack and satisfaction. Indeed, metaphysical desire cannot be satisfied, as it “desires beyond everything that can simply complete it” (TI, 34). While desire commonly understood consists precisely in the lack that animates its movement, with the consumption of an object, metaphysical desire tends toward that which cannot be consumed. Thus, Levinas claims that desire is *absolute* “if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible” (TI, 34). Despite this invisibility of the desired, and despite the separation of the desiring being, these two terms are in a very specific kind of relation. I desire the absolutely other beyond any possible satisfaction, for the absolutely other is not an object that can satisfy my desire. I desire the other beyond any comprehension, because the other overflows her very idea. I desire the other beyond any vision, because the other is invisible. On this account, metaphysical desire hears (*entend*) the remoteness, the alterity, between its terms and in this remoteness, the “very dimension of height is opened up” (TI, 34). The Other³, therefore, is above me.⁴

By treating the Other as *absolutely* other, Levinas precludes the one and the Other from forming a unit. The relation in question is, in other words, not a reversible one, or one that can be read from the left to the right or from the right to the left, as it were. Were this relation simply reversible, Levinas claims that the Other’s alterity – an *absolute* alterity – would be reabsorbed into some more fundamental unity or identity, and thereby compromised. This rejection of reversibility accomplishes a “breach of totality” because in refusing to treat the one and the other

³ “The absolutely other (*‘L’absolument Autre*) is the Other (*Autru*).” (TI, 39)

⁴ The dimension of “height” is relevant here because of the connotation *metaphysics* has, for Levinas. This is why, for example, Levinas puts the Other on the same level as the “Most-High,” and why the other is associated with terms like transcendence and, borrowing from Wahl, *transascendence* (TI, 34-35).

as reversible terms, in treating the one as separated and the other as transcendent, Levinas precludes the metaphysical relation from being synoptically combined into a system. The one, or the I, is separated from the other, who is absolutely exterior. This refusal of totalization is crucial not just because it is the basis of Levinas' account of metaphysics and desire, but also because it is in this context that Levinas introduces us to "ethics." The first explicit discussion of *éthique* in *Totality and Infinity* occurs within a larger discussion first, of metaphysical desire, and second, of the priority of metaphysics – "[t]he relation between the same and the other (*l'Autre*)" – over ontology, which involves a reduction of the other to the same in the movement of comprehension (*TI*, 39).⁵ Thus, we might say that ethics has to do with a double rupture: first of the rupture of totality, and second, and perhaps more importantly, a rupture in the primacy awarded to a certain type of thinking, or theory (*théorie*). As we will see, the connection between these two ruptures is the precise point with which we are concerned, and thus, we must now turn to a close reading of the section of *Totality and Infinity* ("Metaphysics Precedes Ontology") in which Levinas explains both what he means by "ethics" and what relation it has to ontology. This section will deal with the first rupture, and we will turn to the second in §2a.

Levinas sees his account of the metaphysical relation and the notion of transcendence that it involves as distinct from the vast majority of Western philosophy. On his reading, the greater part of that tradition assumes that philosophy consists in, or must proceed as a particular type of theory, the animating element of which consists in the reduction of the other to the same.⁶ Just

⁵ Levinas does discuss *éthique* in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, but this discussion – added later – clearly presupposes the account of ethics he presents in the body of the text itself. For example, it is of no help to know that "ethics is an optics" without knowing the significance of these terms as they unfold throughout the text (*TI*, 23). In fact, it is of no help precisely because of how complicated this phrase seems considered against Levinas' sustained contest with everything involving vision, the light, and so forth.

⁶ As is the case with any sweeping claim like this, there are too many names to list. In this section of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas cites Socrates, Berkeley, Husserl, and Heidegger. Of course, as his target is anyone who prioritizes ontology in relation to what he calls metaphysics (which will turn out to be very close to ethics), it is clear that his

as the common notion of desire reduces the alterity of the desired object to the identity of the desirer, the common notion of theory reduces the alterity of the known object to the identity of the knower, or to some neutral, mediating term, between or beyond the knower and the known. Or as Levinas says, this type of theory consists in “a way of approaching the known being (*l'être connu*) such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being (*l'être connaissant*) vanishes” (*TI*, 42). For example, Kant thought that cognition required subsuming an intuition under a heterogeneous concept. To say that an object is cognized is simply to say that it is understood as a particular instance of a more general concept, as subsumable under some general category with other objects like it. Or take Heidegger, who argued that the comprehension of beings (*Seiendes*) requires an account of Being as such (*Sein*), i.e., that on the basis of which beings are understood.⁷ What both these approaches have in common is that they argue for the necessity of some general term on the basis of which particulars are comprehended, understood, or grasped – concept for Kant, Being for Heidegger. For Levinas, the name of this type of theory is “ontology.” He initially defines ontology as, “theory as comprehension of beings,” but his later description is instructive here: “. . .the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual (which alone exists) not in its individuality but in its generality (of which alone there is science)” (*TI*, 42, 44). By making the essence of an object dependent on some more general concept, the alterity of that object is reduced, as it is not thought of in terms of its individuality, but as a

most important foe is Heidegger. Since Levinas sees Heidegger as the apex of a certain tendency in Western philosophy, it should not be surprising that Levinas polemically indicts that entire tradition.

⁷ I mention Heideggerian *Sein* as a general term because Levinas does. This is obviously a contentious interpretation of Heidegger because, as he claims in the first pages of *Being and Time*, Being is not a genus. If Being is not a genus, then it is *at least* imprecise to relate Being to a general concept. Nonetheless, if, for Heidegger, Being cannot be understood as *a being* or entity, then Levinas will insist that the move is the same. Being is still a medium through which beings are comprehended or made intelligible and is therefore an example of what Levinas calls a “neutral term.” For a different interpretation of what is at stake in Levinas’ claims about Heidegger here, see Raffoul 2005.

particular instance of a general concept. In other words, “the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought” (TI, 42).

Importantly, the problem is not *that* there is ontology, but that ontology serves as a model for all theory, including our relations with other persons. For Levinas, making ontology the standard of all thinking effectively neutralizes the Other’s alterity, and thus seeks to weaken or deaden the shock of the encounter with her. In other words, theory qua ontology has been thought at the expense of the relation it seeks to describe, at the expense of the alterity responsible for thinking as such. Although theory qua ontology “renounces metaphysical Desire, renounces the marvel of exteriority from which that Desire lives,” ontology does not exhaust the meaning of theory, as there is a different sense that theory can have (TI, 42). Levinas writes,

Knowledge (*Le savoir*) or theory designates first a relation with being (*l’être*) such that the knowing being (*l’être connaissant*) lets the known being (*l’être connu*) manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation (*relation de connaissance*). (TI, 42)

Unlike theory qua ontology, this other type of theory consists in respecting the alterity between the knowing being and the known. For Levinas, “respect for exteriority” names an essential structure for metaphysics, and the key to moving beyond theory qua ontology lies in a certain conception of critique inherent in such respect.

But theory qua respect for exteriority delineates another structure essential for metaphysics. In its comprehension of being (*intelligence de l’être*) (or ontology) it is concerned with critique. It discovers the dogmatism and naïve arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology; it then seeks to exercise this freedom in such a way as to turn back at every moment to the origin of the arbitrary dogmatism of this free exercise. This would lead to an infinite regression if this return itself remained an ontological movement, an exercise of freedom, a theory. Its critical intention then leads it beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the

other (*l'Autre*) to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. (*TI*, 43)

Part of what Levinas is trying to show in this passage is that though theory qua critique is distinguished from theory qua ontology (henceforth, simply “ontology” and “critique”), the latter is not totally removed from the former. Critique *contains* an ontology (“in *its* comprehension of being or ontology...”), or *begins* as ontology which it later discovers to be dogmatic. The difference is that while ontology dogmatically attempts to reduce the alterity of all others – including other people – by invoking general concepts, critique calls into question the possibility of this exercise. For Levinas, this calling into question is accomplished by a backwards movement, as it were, to an origin that exposes the dogmatism ontology demonstrates. If we turn back to the Preface of *Totality and Infinity*, we can see that what Levinas is seeking to describe has to do with the shock of the metaphysical relation. There, he says that we “proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself” (*TI*, 24). The encounter with the Other accomplishes a break-up of totality, and thus shows that there is at least one thing that resists the totalizing comprehension that ontology seeks to achieve.⁸ For Levinas, the encounter with the Other is not like my encounter with everyday objects, as it is not best described by understanding, comprehension, or grasping. The whole reason Levinas insists on speaking of this encounter in terms like “shock,” “breach” (*rupture*), and “overflowing,” is because there is something about the encounter with the Other that is *excessive* – it exceeds what our ideas can contain, what we can understand, grasp, or comprehend. What happens in this encounter is that the same, the I, is *called into*

⁸ It is worth noting that Levinas says that this mode of thinking “resembles what has come to be called the transcendental method,” though he insists that this resemblance does not commit him to all the technical details of transcendental idealism – whether of a Husserlian or Kantian variety (*TI*, 25). We will later return to the relevance of the transcendental method in Levinas’ work.

question. Not only has the questioner found something that cannot be understood according to concepts, not only has she found something that resists the questions she asks about it, in encountering the Other, the questioner encounters something that *pushes back*, as it were.⁹ And crucially, it is in this context that we are introduced to ethics: “A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other (*l’Autre*). We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other (*d’Autrui*) ethics.” (*TI*, 43)

Unlike ontology, which for Levinas, is predicated on the promotion of the freedom of the I, ethics consists in my freedom or spontaneity being called into question by the Other. When I encounter the Other, I encounter something – or better, *someone* – who resists my attempts to know, who resists being reduced to my concepts or thoughts, and therefore calls into question the freedom of the ontological exercise, which consists in precisely this reduction.¹⁰ At the most basic level, this calling into question of my spontaneity or freedom by the presence of the Other simply is what “ethics” means in *Totality and Infinity*. While Levinas never rejects this particular position, he will come to describe ethics in different terms later in his career. Thus, to fully appreciate Levinas’ “ethics,” we must turn to his second *magnum opus*, *Otherwise than Being*.

- *Ethics in Otherwise than Being*

In many important ways, *Otherwise than Being* marks a shift in Levinas’ thought. It is widely thought that the primary shift between the two works has to do with the development of a

⁹ This is why Levinas also speaks of the break up of totality as conversation. Cf. *TI*, 40.

¹⁰ To take a particularly clear example about the relation between ontology and freedom, see the following: “Ontology, which reduces the other (*l’Autre*) to the same, promotes freedom – the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other (*l’Autre*).” (*TI*, 42)

more focused theory of subjectivity, or in the language of *Totality and Infinity*, with a more focused treatment of the same rather than the other.¹¹ Though certainly not incorrect, treating this particular shift as the primary one threatens to downplay an equally important aspect of Levinas' later thought. The Levinas of 1974 displays a renewed and intensified interest in both the conditions and consequences of thinking the "beyond" and the "otherwise" that must occasion any genuine thought of alterity. Though these themes can be found throughout *Totality and Infinity*, they do not find their fullest expression until *Otherwise than Being*.¹² A central theme of the work, as evidenced in its title, has to do with the thought of Being's other. "If transcendence has any meaning," Levinas argues, "it can only signify the fact that the *event of being* (*l'événement d'être*), the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being (*l'autre de l'être*)" (*OB*, 3). Being's other – a difficult thought – is not reducible either to the thought of another being or even to another way of being. The issue at hand is "[n]ot *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*" (*OB*, 3). "Otherwise," here, denotes neither Sartrean nothingness nor a moment in some Hegelian dialectic. The passing over into the "otherwise," the very passing over that constitutes the meaning of transcendence, is not the passing over into death, and does not refer to some other world beyond this one, some world behind the scenes. Rather, "otherwise" denotes a difference – a difference *beyond* the simple difference between Being and nothingness. Again, this is a difficult thought, and understanding the precise ways in which it is difficult is another of Levinas' central themes. To cite the most obvious difficulty, in the phrase

¹¹ For example, see Critchley 2007, p. 62.

¹² Although Levinas himself thinks about his work in these terms (see, for instance, his claims about *Totality and Infinity* in "Signature"), I have not yet sufficiently demonstrated this claim. However, I trust that the reader will see the warrant for this claim by the end of Chapter 4. To preview what I say there, to the extent that Levinas is still content to speak of Being as exteriority (*TI*, 290), to the extent that he speaks of ethics as the ultimate relation *in Being* (*TI*, 48), it seems clear that *Totality and Infinity* seeks to provide an alternative account of Being, not to move *beyond* it.

“otherwise than Being” (*autrement qu’être*), is there not an inevitable reference to Being? Implicit in this question about the inevitability of the reference to the verb “to be,” is the thought that any discourse against Being is, in a certain sense, impossible. Does not any mention of Being’s other, *precisely because it is mentioned*, bring “it” to Being? As we will see, this is not simply some linguistic or abstract issue, as what is at stake is the very transcendence of the Other.

In order to fully appreciate the force of this problem and how Levinas deals with it, we must understand some other terms central to *Otherwise than Being* – the saying (*le Dire*) and the said (*le Dit*). For Levinas, there is a certain hold that the said has over saying. The said is closely related to linguistic systems, semantics, languages, and ultimately, to sentences and the propositional content they contain.¹³ According to Levinas, the said has typically been regarded as the framework in which all legitimate philosophical concepts must fit. The point of philosophy, on this line of thought, is to bring objects, Others, and the relation between the two, into the said – to bring them under a concept, to present them clearly and distinctly in language, and so forth. If this is really the point of philosophy, then there is a higher value placed on what can appear in language, what can be spoken of and analyzed, or what can be reduced to its linguistic or propositional content than what exceeds or cannot be captured by language. Against this tendency, Levinas turns his focus to that which is antecedent to the said, or more specifically, to the condition of possibility for the said.

Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, [saying] is the proximity of one to the

¹³ I take the sentence to be the best illustration of the said since all these other terms – though Levinas uses them to describe the said – are all subjects of a great deal of controversy. Since in the most basic sense, what is said is a sentence, this should suffice for a rough, but helpful understanding of what Levinas is seeking to describe.

other (*de l'un à l'autre*), the commitment of an approach, the one for the other (*l'un pour l'autre*), the very signifyingness of signification. (*OB*, 5)

There would be no said were there not an original (or, as we will soon see, *pre-original*) saying. Before anything can be organized into a linguistic system, into a language, there must be a saying which produces the said. But, as the above quote makes clear, Levinas' point is not simply that the act of speaking precedes and conditions speech. Rather, he is concerned to show what sort of character the saying has, and unsurprisingly, his answer has to do with the relation between the one and the other. The one and the other are in proximity, the one is approached by the other, and it is in this approach that meaning (the "signifyingness of signification") emerges. Crucially, by identifying saying with the approach of the Other, Levinas claims that saying "is" beyond Being. Levinas associates Being with the said, and thus, insofar as the saying precedes the said – goes *beyond* the said – saying must be thought as otherwise than Being. Moreover, in identifying saying with the approach of the Other, Levinas includes the notion of responsibility in the very idea of saying. If, as he argued in *Totality and Infinity*, the first word of the face is an order – "you shall not commit murder" – then there is a responsibility built into the approach of the Other.¹⁴ Thus, the saying "weaves an intrigue of responsibility," in containing an order – an order "more grave than being and antecedent to being" (*OB*, 6). By insisting that the saying is antecedent to Being, Levinas cannot rest content with the claim that saying is original, since origins *are* – it must "be" *pre-original*, antecedent to all origins, beyond Being.

Despite the fact that saying must be thought of as *pre-original* and antecedent to language, Levinas insists that saying does stand in an intimate relationship to language, and ultimately, *must* – in some specific sense – be presented in language.

¹⁴ Cf. *TI*, III.B.2 – "Ethics and the Face," esp. p. 199.

But this pre-original saying does move into a language, in which saying and said are correlative of one another, and the saying is subordinated to its theme. [...] The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands. In language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of betrayal. (*OB*, 6)

Although saying is prior to every origin, although it is beyond Being, it nonetheless stands in correlation to the said, and must be subordinated to language and ontology. Of course, such subordination is always and necessarily incomplete, as the saying cannot be exhausted in the said, and it therefore appears only at the price of a betrayal.¹⁵ It is not as if we can simply dispense with the said, as the said is necessary for communication or for any action in the world. It is for this reason, Levinas insists, that language qua said is “ancillary and thus indispensable” (*OB*, 6). Even though the saying is betrayed when it is presented in language and subordinated to a theme, presentation and subordination are necessary. Take, for example, the very topic with which we are currently concerned – the problem of presenting what “is” otherwise than Being. We have already noticed that in stating the problem, we are involved in a betrayal insofar as we are attempting to thematize that which cannot be contained by any theme. Language does allow us to present this problem, but it simultaneously and necessarily betrays what it manifests or reveals by reducing what “is” beyond Being to a language in Being. Or as Levinas says, “as soon as [the otherwise than Being] is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it” (*OB*, 7). But from a Levinasian perspective, any responsible thinking *must* appreciate this problem, and thus any responsible piece of writing is obliged to reduce to language that which necessarily exceeds it.¹⁶ Of course, there are better and worse ways of

¹⁵ Here, we might note the similarity to what Deleuze says about the relation between events and states of affairs. Just as events cannot be exhausted in states of affairs, the saying cannot be exhausted by the said.

¹⁶ Lest we think this is simply an abstract, linguistic issue, we should note that this problem constitutes what Levinas calls the “great paradox of human existence.” In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas says of this paradox,

doing this, and for Levinas, the very task of philosophy is to *reduce* this betrayal as far as possible (although betrayal will always be inevitable).¹⁷

Now crucially, it is in the context of this new emphasis on the otherwise than Being and the problems that occasion any mention of “it” that Levinas now approaches ethics. Recall his first explanation of saying: “it is the proximity of one to the other (*l’autre*), the commitment of an approach, the one for the other (*l’autre*) the very signifyingness of signification.” And recall that by including the proximity of the other in saying as such, by identifying saying with the one *for* (*pour*) the other, saying “weaves an intrigue of responsibility.” What this explanation – specifically, the identification of saying with the *for* the other – makes the reader suspect is that, from the start, saying is very close to the ethical relation, and three sections later, this suspicion is confirmed. After making a number of striking claims about temporality – more specifically, about the account of the past that any talk of the “pre-original” requires – Levinas returns to a discussion of responsibility. Again, the saying is not just original, not just an origin, but must be thought as antecedent to or “before” every origin. Because of this status, the past of the pre-original is ontologically inaccessible to us, as it is not amenable to representation in the present. But despite its ontological inaccessibility, we nonetheless have a certain sort of access to this past through the everyday encounter with the Other and the responsibility that this encounter reveals. In a characteristic series of excessive sounding claims, Levinas tells us,

[T]he relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and every representable, for not belonging to the order of presence, is included in the extraordinary

“we must use the ontological *for the sake of the other*; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends. This same paradox is also present in our use of language, to return to an earlier point...” (Cohen 1986, p. 28).

¹⁷ Because of the both the indispensability and limits of the said, Levinas will insist that saying must come accompany a “being unsaid” (*dédire*) (*OB*, 7). I take it that, at its most basic level, unsaying consists in (at least) the recognition that anything the said communicates about the saying must be considered necessarily incomplete and insufficient to describe the saying.

and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others (*d'autres*), in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another (*d'autrui*), in the astonishing human fraternity in which fraternity, conceived with Cain's sober coldness, would not by itself explain the responsibility between separated beings it calls for. (*OB*, 10)

Though this responsibility is common or "everyday," it is far from insignificant. I am responsible for the misfortune of others, and even responsible for the Other's freedom. Indeed, as Levinas will later say, I am responsible *for the Other's responsibility*.¹⁸ My responsibility for the Other does not depend on a commitment that I have freely made, it does not refer to any conscious decision of mine, and it is not something for which I may take credit. The consequence of these claims about responsibility is twofold. First, my responsibility is not up to me, and in fact, it is *despite* me.¹⁹ For Levinas, my responsibility runs counter to, or in opposition to my *conatus*, to my striving to persevere in my being, to "Cain's sober coldness." Second, in separating responsibility from some decision or personal freedom on the part of a subject, Levinas relegates it to a different temporality, the time of the pre-originary. Combining both of these points, Levinas claims that responsibility is "from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory,' [and] 'ulterior to every accomplishment'" (*OB*, 10). I am responsible before I am free, and my responsibility is independent of any accomplishment for which I may take credit; it is not something I can have a memory of, as my memories are of past *presents*, and Levinas insists that the past of the pre-originary is a past that was *never* present, an "immemorial" past. Although there is much more we could say here, we should confine our

¹⁸ *EI*, 99.

¹⁹ Levinas often pairs the phrases "despite me" and "for another."

attention to what is immediately relevant to our investigation – the intimate relation between saying, signification, and responsibility.

We have already seen that Levinas' description of saying includes references to both responsibility and signification. Saying *is* the one for the other and the signifyingness of signification. But what we must make explicit here is how all of these terms are designed to expose a *break* in Being and essence, and are therefore thought of as beyond Being.²⁰ Saying, and with it, signification and responsibility, belongs to the *pre*-originary, prior or antecedent to Being. Although traces of responsibility do appear in our everyday relations with other people, the responsibility that those relations reveal are examples of *ruptures* in Being, not experiences that are explicable in ontological terms. And crucially, “the breakup (*rupture*) of essence is ethics” (*OB*, 14). Ethics, in this context, is not *simply* my spontaneity being called into question, but refers to what this call signifies: the breakup of Being, or the rupture of essence.

○ *The Rupture of Totality and Rupture of Primacy*

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Levinas' work can be thought in terms of two ruptures – first, of totality or essence, and second, of a certain conception of primacy. We have now seen that his explanation of “ethics” in both of his major works have to do with the first rupture. Ethics in its simplest form has to do with my spontaneity being called into question by the presence of the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas constantly refers back to a totality which is breached by the ethical relation, and as I have suggested, one central theme of *Otherwise than Being* has to do with what it means to think and speak of this breach. In *Otherwise than Being*, more stress is put on what the approach of the Other entails – the breakup or rupture of essence,

²⁰ See, for example, the following: “...saying sets forth an order more grave than being and antecedent to being” (*OB*, 5-6); “...does not this gravity, where being's *esse* is inverted, refer to this pre-original language, the responsibility of the one for the other (*l'autre*)...” (6); “Signification precedes essence.” (13)

of Being itself. But as significant as the rupture of totality and essence is for Levinas, we have still only addressed the first rupture, and any examination of Levinas' ethics worthy of the name must deal with the second – the rupture of a certain conception of primacy, priority, or precedence. In fact, one of our most basic contentions is that sufficiently appreciating the rupture of totality and essence *requires* a consideration of the notion of primacy. But to what does the notion of primacy in Levinas' work refer, and how does it relate to ethics?

It is difficult to find *any* discussion of ethics in Levinas' corpus that is not concerned with its structural significance, or more specifically, its relationship with ontology.²¹ For instance, think back to our earlier discussion of *Totality and Infinity*. As we saw there, the first and most focused explanation of ethics as such in *Totality and Infinity* was *still* lodged within a discussion of priority – the priority of metaphysics to ontology. As passages like these are the rule rather than the exception, we might then say that Levinas is less interested in claims about the abstract nature of ethics than he is about the *significance* of the ethical relation. And importantly, Levinas' overwhelming tendency is to speak about the significance of ethics by calling attention to how it is related to ontology. Of course, it is easy to lean on tropes here, as everyone knows that, for Levinas, ethics is “first” philosophy, that ethics is “primary.” What is difficult, however, is appreciating what these claims really mean in his work. Our contention is that the concepts on which this phrase relies – firstness, primacy, priority, precedence – evolve in Levinas' work. Thus, the task of §2 will be to provide careful readings of the relationship

²¹ I follow Levinas in using the term “structure” to describe ethics. Especially in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas treats ethics and ontology as “structures” that stand in certain relations to each other (e.g., see *TI*, 79). In *Otherwise than Being*, he sometimes speaks of “the-one-for-the-other (*l'autre*)” as a structure (*OB*, 26) and at other times he refuses such a characterization (e.g., *OB*, 70). The task of the next section is not so much to grasp the abstract nature of a “structure,” but to understand the precise nature of these relation between ethics and ontology in Levinas' work.

between ethics and ontology in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* in order to extract a rigorous understanding of what the notion of “primacy” amounts to in Levinas’ work.

Primacy

There are compelling reasons to think about Levinas’ philosophical career as an investigation into the notion of primacy.²² For example, if we consider Levinas’ philosophical career as oriented around the Other, this is perhaps most helpfully understood by invoking her primacy – over totality, over my desires, over my freedom. Or to take some other examples, Levinas argues for the primacy of justice over traditional notions of truth, of exteriority to interiority, and of the saying over the said. Of course, the most famous claim regarding primacy – and that on which all the others rest – is the primacy of the ethical. “Ethics as first philosophy,” is, after all, a claim about the *primacy* of ethics. But what do Levinas’ frequent invocations of the concept of primacy mean, and is it certain that all these invocations presuppose the same notion of primacy? To address these questions, let us again turn first to *Totality and Infinity* before moving to *Otherwise than Being*.

○ *Primacy in Totality and Infinity*

As we claimed in the last section, Levinas’ discussions of ethics in *Totality and Infinity* almost always appear as reflections on the structural significance of ethics, or what is the same, as reflections on the relationship between ethics and ontology. Indeed, Levinas claims that one of his “central tasks” is to establish the “primacy (*primat*) of the ethical,” and here, establishing primacy has to do with identifying “an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest” (*TI*, 79). Our task for this section is to understand exactly how he establishes this conclusion,

²² See, for instance, Derrida’s claim in “Violence and Metaphysics” that the notion of primacy indicates both “principle *and* chief” in regards to Levinas’ thought (*WD*, 97).

and to do so, we must turn back to our earlier discussion on the priority of metaphysics – or, “the relation between the same and the other (*l’Autre*) – to ontology (*TI*, 39).

Recall that in *Totality and Infinity*, “ethics” is the calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other. Also recall that this term is introduced as a way of describing how the dogmatism of ontology is overcome by critique: critique begins as an ontology, which seeks to reduce the alterity of all objects to the identity of the same. But when I encounter the Other, the one who calls me into question, I encounter someone who resists comprehension, resists being reduced to my concepts, or to my knowing. On the basis of this encounter, ontology is overcome by critique insofar as the latter discovers the dogmatism of the former’s assumption that all alterity can be overcome in the identification of the I. Now, what is important to note here is that Levinas treats this relation between critique and dogmatism as a model for the relation between metaphysics and ontology: “as critique precedes (*précède*) dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology” (*TI*, 43). At the outset, we should state the obvious: the precedence or priority invoked here is emphatically *not* chronological. On the contrary, Levinas seems to award chronological priority to dogmatism over critique, as he claims that critique *begins* in a dogmatic mode. For Levinas, theory only becomes critique *after* the dogmatic intention associated with ontology is discovered. But despite dogmatism’s chronological priority, critique nonetheless “precedes” it, as metaphysics does ontology.²³ What are we to make of this claim about priority?

Just as Levinas sees his account of the metaphysical relation in distinction from the greater part of the Western philosophical tradition, he cites the priority of metaphysics to

²³ It is hard to avoid thinking here about the *Critique of Pure Reason*’s famous declaration that though “all our cognition commences with experience...it does not on that account all arise (*entspringt*) from experience” (*KrV*, B2).

ontology as another example of his break with that tradition.²⁴ Indeed, he sees his account of priority here as the inversion a Greek assumption associated with Socrates. For Levinas, Socratic thought is best described as “[t]he primacy (*primauté*) of the same” (*TI*, 43). On this line of thought, and surely with the doctrine of recollection in mind, Levinas claims that the Socratic “I” is already in possession of what comes to it from the outside, and the philosophical task is simply to recall, recollect, or to make explicit what the I already contains. Everything – or everything important – is either reducible or translatable into what I already contain, and if I already possess or contain all that I need in myself, then we might say that the principle of Socratic thought lies in the self-sufficiency of the I. It should therefore come as no surprise to see Levinas describe the underlying maxim of Socratic thought as follows: “to receive nothing of the Other (*d’Autrui*) but what is in me” (*TI*, 43). The “I” is self-sufficient, it contains all it needs, and therefore anything that approaches it from the outside must be mediated via concepts that the I already contains. Socratic philosophy insists on the centrality of this self-sufficient “I,” and is therefore regarded as an “egology” (*TI*, 44).

Though these problems might begin with Socrates, they are not thereby restricted to his thought. Indeed, Levinas claims to find in phenomenology – particularly, in Heidegger’s thought – not just Socratic self-sufficiency, not simply egology, but a form of what he calls “ontological imperialism” (*TI*, 44). As we mentioned in §1a, Heidegger insists that comprehension of beings requires an account of Being as such, or that on the basis of which beings are understood. Playing a similar role as “concept” in classical idealism, Being here serves as the principle of intelligibility for beings. As a principle of intelligibility, Being functions as a medium through which beings are comprehended, and thus, Heideggerian understanding reduces the other to

²⁴ “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other (*l’Autre*) to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.” (*TI*, 43)

some neutral term. But also recall that the problem isn't *simply* that Heidegger insists that knowledge of beings requires an account of Being as such, or *simply* that ontology is practiced. The problem is that ontology serves as a model for all thinking, and thus, that Heidegger insists on the *primacy* of ontology. In this vein, Levinas writes,

The primacy (*primat*) of ontology for Heidegger does not rest on the truism: "to know (*connaître*) an *existent* it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of existents." To affirm the priority (*priorité*) of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing (*savoir*)), subordinates justice to freedom. (*TI*, 45)

In affirming the priority of Being over beings, the essence of philosophy is, from the outset, decided, and in this decision, the ethical relation – that relation in which the alterity of the Other is respected – is subordinated to an ontological relation – that relation in which the alterity of the Other is reduced. Building on his interpretation of Socratic thought, Levinas associates freedom with knowledge (*le savoir*). In this context, I am free when I receive from the Other only what is already in me, and thus freedom denotes "the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other (*l'Autre*)" (*TI*, 45). When a being is understood or comprehended by the interposition of some neutral term – be it a concept, or Being as such – that act of comprehension is, in the most fundamental sense, free. So, when Levinas associates Heideggerian ontology with freedom, he is not associating it with some Kantian moralized notion of freedom, but with a gnoseological conception of freedom. Freedom, then, is *opposed* to justice, ethics, or any positive relation to the Other, as freedom is predicated on remaining the same in the midst of all others rather than allowing oneself to be called into question, or to be changed by the approach of the Other. Indeed, Levinas argues that the ontological relation with alterity – one in which the

other's alterity is comprehended by the subordination to a neutral term – is a relation to the other *in name only*: “[The ontological relation] is hence not a relation with the other (*l'autre*) as such but the reduction of the other (*l'Autre*) to the same” (*TI*, 46). As we saw in his discussion of critique, a genuine relation with the Other requires respect for alterity, and far from being a philosophy of respect, Levinas associates Heideggerian ontology as a philosophy of possession, suppression, and ultimately *power* (*pouvoir*).

Why *pouvoir*? As should now be clear, for Levinas, when the Other is thematized or conceptualized she is reduced, and one way to speak of this reduction is in terms of possession. When one reduces the Other to a concept or theme, one does seem to “affirm” the Other, but only by negating her independence. What is affirmed, then, is the theme or the concept, not the Other. In this vein, Levinas writes, “[f]or possession affirms the other (*l'Autre*), but within a negation of its independence. ‘I think’ comes down to ‘I can’ (*je peux*) – to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality” (*TI*, 46). Though concepts and themes are traditionally associated with the “I” who thinks them, Levinas argues that this “I think” ultimately gives way to an “I can,” as the theme to which the other is reduced is *mine*, a product of appropriation that I now possess.²⁵ Because of this appropriative reduction to a theme, a theme which I possess, ontology has a close connection to power. But again, it is crucial to note that Levinas’ indictment has a very specific referent: “Ontology *as first philosophy* is a philosophy of power...A philosophy of power, ontology is, *as first philosophy* which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice” (*TI*, 46 – emphasis mine). It is not *simply* ontology that is the problem, but ontology as first philosophy, a philosophy whose essence is, first and foremost, constituted by ontology. In other words, the problem concerns affirming the *primacy*

²⁵ It should also be noted that *je peux* is the first person singular of *pouvoir*.

or *priority* of ontology. Recall that Heidegger's insistence on the priority of Being over beings "already decides the essence of philosophy." By treating Being as the fundamental principle of thinking, of philosophy itself, Levinas' Heidegger simultaneously affirms the reduction of the other to the same, and therefore, affirms the power associated with the "I can" that occasions that reduction. Thus, we find the following indictment of Heideggerian ontology – "*Being* before the *existent*, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom...before justice. It is a movement of the same before obligation to the other (*l'Autre*)" (TI, 47). By making ontology the principle of philosophy, by treating ontology as primary in relation to ethics, one affirms the primacy of freedom – or, the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other – in relation to justice, which here refers to our obligations to the Other.

If the problem is not ontology as such, but the primacy of ontology, we ought not to be surprised by Levinas' solution: "[t]he terms must be reversed" (TI, 47). If affirming ontology's primacy leads to the elevation of freedom over justice, then reversing the terms – by treating ethics instead of ontology as primary – will, presumably, give way to treating respect for the Other as the principle of all thinking, as determinative of the essence of philosophy. But as our task is not just to understand *that* ethics is primary for Levinas, but also to understand what primacy itself means, we should turn now to his basic argument for *why* ethics must be primary and then to his explanation of what primacy itself means.²⁶

Why must we think about ethics as primary in relation to ontology? Towards the end of the section on the priority of metaphysics, Levinas gives the following argument:

²⁶ One might think that we have already seen Levinas' argument for why ethics must be primary, but in my view, what we have seen is really his indictment of the primacy of ontology. Of course, the elevation of freedom over justice is part of the reason Levinas argues that the terms – in this case, ethics and ontology – must be reversed. But as we will see, Levinas invokes another argument about what ontology presupposes as a reason for thinking ethics is primary.

The relationship with a being infinitely distant, that is, overflowing its idea, is such that its authority as an existent is already *invoked* in every question we could raise concerning the meaning of its Being. One does not question oneself concerning him; one questions him. Always he faces. (TI, 47)

Levinas here describes our relation not with all others, but with an *individual* other – a being “infinitely distant,” the *absolutely* other, or *Autrui*. The Other, yet again, is irreducible to any concept, idea, or theme, and thus, any question we might raise is not an abstract question *about* her, but a question posed *to* her, a question that thereby invokes her authority. Levinas will often describe this relation as “conversation” (*le discours*), which denotes a relation that both maintains the distance between the terms of the relation and includes the recognition that the Other has a “*right over [my] egoism*” (TI, 40).²⁷ As we have hinted at already, another fundamental problem with the primacy of ontology lies in the fact that it cannot account for the (ethical) relation that makes it possible. Or as Levinas says, “[i]f ontology...is impossible...it is because the comprehension of Being in general cannot *dominate* the relationship with the Other (*Autrui*)” (TI, 47).²⁸ If the Other overflows every idea I have about her, if she cannot be reduced to a concept or subordinated to a theme, then she exceeds all that ontology can deliver. Any question I have about the Being of the Other is then said *to* her, and thereby becomes *ethical* because in posing a question to her, I invoke her authority, and such an invocation calls into

²⁷ In his translation of *Totality and Infinity*, Lingis translates *discours* sometimes as “conversation,” sometimes as “discourse.” Moreover, by describing *discours* as a relation that respects the distance between relata, Levinas seems to place *discours* very close to the ethical relation. Metaphysics, we have already seen, is very close to ethics, and Levinas claims that metaphysics is “primordially enacted as conversation” (TI, 39). He also does this with “religion,” which he defines as “the bond that is established between the same and the other (*l’Autre*) without constituting a totality” (TI, 40).

²⁸ It is clear that Levinas cannot mean that *any* ontology is impossible, but that ontology *as first philosophy* is impossible. Were he to argue the former, he would not need to argue that the metaphysics *precedes* ontology, as he does, but that ontology is never appropriate. In the later work, Levinas argues for the *ethical necessity* of ontology, which is demanded by his notion of “the third.” For a clear explanation of this point, see his interview with Richard Kearney, found in Cohen 1986, especially pp. 21-28.

question my freedom. Thus Levinas concludes, “[t]his ‘saying to the Other’ (*dire à Autrui*) – this relationship with the Other (*Autrui*) as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent* – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics” (*TI*, 48). The relation between the one and the Other – “metaphysics” – is enacted as conversation. In conversation, I am confronted with an Other who overflows every idea I can form about her, and every question I ask *about* her is inevitably a question *to* her, and thus, the metaphysical relation is one which is inseparable from the authority of the Other towards which it tends. There is a relation implied, then, in the ontological relation that is more “ultimate” than what any ontology can contain, and thus we must conclude that ontology presupposes metaphysics.

To return to a point we made earlier, what is wrong with traditional philosophical thought is *not* that it has contained an ontology, but that it has been so obsessed with promoting the dignity of ontology that this promotion has become unconditional, and as a result, has reduced the ethical relation – the “ultimate relation in Being” – to something secondary, subordinate, and posterior. In other words, traditional philosophical thought has missed the fact that ontology presupposes a more fundamental relation to the Other – metaphysics, or ethics. To call for the terms of philosophical thought to be reversed, then, is *not* to call for the annihilation of ontology, but for its subordination, or for an alteration of the *place* of ontology in philosophical thinking. And this is precisely how Levinas speaks about his task in *Totality and Infinity*. For instance, consider the following passage:

The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving in discourse (*discours*) a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire – where power, by essence murderous of the other (*l’Autre*), becomes, faced with the other (*l’Autre*) and ‘against all good sense,’ the impossibility of murder, the consideration of the other (*l’Autre*), or justice. (*TI*, 47)

We now have the resources to understand why this is an excellent summary of Levinas' argument for the primacy of ethics. The non-allergic relation with the other – that relation which seeks to respect rather than reduce alterity – consists in transforming the power associated with ontology into justice, or the consideration of the other. This transformation is precisely the transformation from dogmatism to critique, from ontology to ethics. Levinas' objective, then, is to reverse the order of priority associated with traditional philosophical thought: justice before freedom, ethics before ontology. Or to return to a passage we mentioned at the beginning of this section, “[t]he establishing of the primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man...a primacy of an irreducible structure on upon which all the other structures rest...is one of the objectives of the present work” (*TI*, 79). That is, establishing the primacy of the ethical means identifying a *fundamental structure* – “the ultimate relation in Being” – that provides support for all posterior structures, and in particular, for ontology. Being, as Levinas says in “Conclusions,” is exteriority, is alterity,²⁹ and the “origin of exteriority” lies in the “epiphany of the face,” in my spontaneity being called into question by the Other, in ethics (*TI*, 261).³⁰ If, “the exteriority of Being is morality itself,” the most fundamental sense that Being has is inescapably ethical (*TI*, 302).³¹

The real consequence of identifying morality as the fundamental structure of Being is that Levinas precludes one from claiming that other popular structures occupy this position. For instance, reason, freedom, or vision (to take a few of Levinas' favorite examples) ultimately give

²⁹ For the suggestion that exteriority and alterity are interchangeable, see *TI*, 290.

³⁰ Here, we would do well to remember that the subtitle of *Totality and Infinity* is “An Essay on Exteriority.” *Totality and Infinity* is, then, an essay on Being.

³¹ As we noted earlier, there is no distinction between morality and ethics in *Totality and Infinity*, so Levinas might as well say here that “the exteriority of Being is ethics.”

way to the ethical relation, as this latter relation is the fundamental structure on which all posterior structures rest.³² But it is important to understand what this argument purports to deliver and what it does not. Levinas claims that the *primacy* of vision is contested, that the *primacy* of freedom is challenged, *not* that these are not structures of Being. He writes,

If, in contradistinction to the tradition of the primacy of freedom, taken as the measure of being, we contest vision its primacy in being, and contest the pretension of human emprise to gain access to the rank of *logos*, we take leave neither of rationalism, nor of the ideal of freedom. (*TI*, 302)

To question the primacy of freedom is not to deny that freedom might have some philosophical relevance, it is to question the unconditional allegiance to freedom. It is rather to put freedom in its proper place, as subordinate to ethics, not as determinative of it. For Levinas, the only way to accept notions like freedom and vision is to seek their justification: “freedom seem[s] to us to be founded on prior structures of being whose first articulations are delineated by the metaphysical movement, or respect, or justice” (*TI*, 302-3). Freedom, then, is not an end in itself, but must seek its justification in something more fundamental: in the ethical relation, in that which calls freedom into question. The primacy of ethics, then, amounts to a claim about fundamentality and irreducibility: ethics is the ultimate relation in Being, the fundamental structure of Being, an irreducible structure on which all posterior structures rest.

○ *Primacy in Otherwise than Being*

If *Totality and Infinity* represents an attempt to establish the primacy of ethics, *Otherwise than Being* represents an attempt to push this very notion of primacy to its limit. As we saw in the last section, the later Levinas’ obsession with the “otherwise” affects his account of ethics,

³² We saw earlier in this section that freedom is closely related with ontology. Vision, likewise, is associated with Heideggerian *Sein*. Levinas often relates this Heideggerian conception of Being with light and vision, as that in which things become visible or intelligible. See, for example, *TI*, 42, where Levinas describes the ontological conception of Being as “the light in which existents become intelligible.”

which is now described not *just* as the calling into question of my spontaneity, but as the breakup or rupture of Being or essence. But *Otherwise than Being* offers us not just a radicalized thought of ethics, but also the tools to construct a novel account of primacy.³³ How, one might wonder, is it possible to radicalize the thought of the Other and the primacy of the ethical relation contained in *Totality and Infinity*? In *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas famously laments the ontological language that he was unable to escape in *Totality and Infinity*. He admits that in the attempt to displace Heideggerian ontology with the ethical relation, a certain violence was inescapable. More specifically, in the attempt to systematize the relation with the Other by opposing it to ontology, i.e., “a philosophical thought which reduces the Other (*l’Autre*) to the Same,” the Other was, in a certain sense, adapted “to the scale of the Same” (*DF*, 293-4). To avoid this mistake, the later Levinas insists on the thought of the otherwise, or *more* than Being. *Totality and Infinity* culminates in the declaration that the ethical relation is the ultimate relation *in* Being, but now, we see Levinas alter this conclusion by insisting on a certain simile: what ethical consciousness reveals is “like a grading in being itself,” but one that, as *more* than being, indeed, as *better*, must necessarily pass into Being’s other (*DF*, 294).

The emphasis on the “more” and the “better” allows Levinas to place the ontological language of *Totality and Infinity* in the right register. In other words, because of Levinas’ insistence on the philosophical relevance of Being’s other, “[t]he ontological language which *Totality and Infinity* still uses in order to exclude the psychological significance of the proposed analyses is henceforth avoided” (*DF*, 295). Although one might justly accuse Levinas of overstating the case – is ontological language really *avoided* or merely relegated to its proper sphere? – it is important to recognize what implications the thought of the “otherwise” has for

³³ As we will see in the next chapter, Levinas will compare this novel account with Kant’s primacy of practical reason.

Levinas' understanding of the primacy of ethics. Despite the fact that there are fewer mentions of primacy, priority, and related terms in *Otherwise than Being* than there are in *Totality and Infinity*, one would be wrong to assume that this concept is somehow less important for the former than the latter.³⁴ In fact, Levinas offers a more nuanced account of primacy in his second *magnum opus*, and this is largely motivated by the need to adapt the concept in such a way as to render it consistent with his more focused engagement with the “otherwise” and the “beyond.” Although there is not a single section in *Otherwise than Being* that is focused on establishing a certain claim to primacy (as we find in *Totality and Infinity*), the notion of primacy does occur at key points of Levinas' later work. To extract this new account of primacy, I suggest that we turn to two key points where Levinas is particularly clear about what is at stake in claiming that ethics is primary: the first has to do with the relationship between questioning and Being, and the second has to do with sincerity and signification. We will address these in turn.

In Chapter II of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas once again calls into question the philosophical allegiance to Being, but does so this time through an examination of intelligibility and questioning. It is tempting to think that ontological intelligibility is the goal of all philosophical activity. Indeed, it is difficult to dissociate such intelligibility from something as simple as asking questions. For example, if the paradigmatic question takes the form “What *is* X?” then all questioning would seem to bear an allegiance to ontology, as the very form of the question invites an answer that must be phrased in ontological language. In this vein Levinas writes,

If the question “what?” in its adherence to being is at the origin of all thought (can it be otherwise, as long as thought proceeds by determinate terms?), all research and all

³⁴ By my count, there are 42 relevant references to primacy, priority, and related terms in *Totality and Infinity* and 18 in *Otherwise than Being*.

philosophy go back to ontology, to the understanding of the being of entities, the understanding of essence. Being would be not only what is most problematical; it would be what is most intelligible. (*OB*, 24)

Questions that take this form delineate the answers that they will tolerate, and indeed, already presuppose a sense of what they attempt to discover – Being. Despite the hold this form of interrogation has over normal philosophical discourse, Levinas insists that the intelligibility of the presupposition is questionable. Not only do these questions presuppose an account of Being – the very thing they ask about – they fail to get to the real heart of the matter: *why* there is even a question in the first place. For Levinas, there is a problem that is “preliminary,” or prior to all questions about quiddity, about what *is*. This problem, in short, concerns what *precedes* all questions about what is, or better, *who* escapes the form the ontological question attempts to impose. For Levinas, questions about quiddity become, or pass over into, questions about “*quis-nity (quis-nité)*” (*OB*, 25).³⁵ Despite the awkwardness of the phrase, the point here is that questions concerning the essence of something become questions posed *to someone*, and thus have all the features of the interpersonal relation that Levinas is so famous for discussing.³⁶ Though there is much to say about quiddity becoming “*quis-nity*,” we should focus here on what the transition tells us about primacy.³⁷ Levinas insists that questions posed *to* someone are indeed prior (*préalables*) or preliminary (*préliminaires*) in relation to questions concerned with

³⁵ Quiddity, or “whatness,” is traditionally understood in distinction to haecceity or “thisness.” While the former refers to the universal features that objects have in common, the latter refers to the qualities that distinguish a particular object from others. By using “*quis-nity*” Levinas puts the emphasis on the *person* – the “*who*” – to which questions are addressed.

³⁶ In particular, we might think here of his argument about the unavoidable reference to the authority of the Other discussed in *Totality and Infinity* (and outlined above in §2a).

³⁷ It should be said that this “becoming” or transition closely resembles a process that Levinas introduces in the first sentence of *Otherwise than Being*: “If transcendence has any meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over into what is (*l’autre*) than being.” (*OB*, 3)

Being.³⁸ However, this does not mean that they are the *first* questions posed. Just as he did in his discussion of dogmatism and critique in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas grants a *chronological* or even a *procedural* priority to ontology, as ontological questions tend to be the first questions we ask. Levinas even grants that “[t]he manifestation of being (*l’être*), the appearing, is indeed the primary event (*événement premier*),” though with a crucial qualifier, “but *the very primacy (primauté) of the primary (premier) is in the presence of the present*” (*OB*, 24).

Let us be as clear as possible about what this statement about primacy amounts to: insofar as we consider the manifestation of Being as the “primary event,” and insofar as we consider ontology to be the primary form of questioning, we treat the concept of primacy itself as inseparable from the time of the present. As we saw in the last section, the otherwise than Being, signaled in our everyday relation with the Other, belongs to immemorial past, a past “on the hither side of every present and every re-presentable.” In associating the relation with the Other with the “hither side” of everything that can be represented, Levinas precludes it from belonging to the order of presence, from the time associated with Being, and therefore implies that ontology (despite Heidegger’s cries to the contrary) is inseparable from the time of the present. Levinas’ claim then, is that ontology can be considered primary *if* the concept of primacy invoked is one that privileges the time of the present. But of course, Levinas will not endorse this view, and for two main reasons. First, what is significant about the claim that quiddity is “preliminary” or “prior” to quiddity (despite the fact that questions about quiddity are not the “first” ones raised) is that questions about Being pass over, or are transformed into questions that signify beyond Being. Thus, if these questions signify beyond Being, we ought to resist the temptation to think

³⁸ “The prior or preliminary questions are certainly not the first questions that are raised. Men act, speak, and even think, without concerning themselves with principles. And the preliminary, pre-originary, the hither side, is not even equivalent to a beginning, does not have the status of a principle, but comes from the dimension of the anarchic...” (*OB*, 187-188, n. 2)

about ontology (and the corresponding account of primacy) as the most important mode of questioning. Second, treating the concept of primacy in terms of presence betrays an impoverished view about the very nature of philosophy. Recall what *Totality and Infinity* declared about the relevance of priority: “[t]o affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy” (*TI*, 45). If the issue of primacy or priority informs one’s view about the very nature of philosophy, then insofar as one presupposes an ontological sense of priority, or a sense of priority that *only* an ontology can fulfill, one grounded in the “presence of the present,” the real sense of the ethical relation will be compromised. Another account of primacy, therefore, is necessary.

In making the “otherwise” or the “beyond” the subject of investigation, Levinas resists the temptation to make ontological intelligibility – and the temporality he thinks it requires – the point of orientation for philosophy. And famously, a key concept that he invokes in order to accomplish this goal is signification. For Levinas, the immemorial past associated with the otherwise reveals an “*other (autre)* signification” which signifies beyond Being. In §1b, we saw the notion of signification arise in Levinas’ explanation of saying: “it is the proximity of one to the other (*l’autre*), the commitment of an approach, the one for the other (*l’autre*), the very signifyingness of signification” (*OB*, 5). We also saw how, in identifying saying with the one for the other, Levinas makes saying inseparable from responsibility. In Chapter V of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas returns to these topics so as to show how thinking about signification in terms of responsibility makes ethics primary in relation to ontology. But in order to understand how he accomplishes this goal, we must look deeper into Levinas’ challenging account of signification and responsibility.³⁹

³⁹ As we will see, the passages under examination here have a synthetic tendency. That is, Levinas attempts to weave together a number of different concepts, terms, and phrases he employs throughout *Otherwise than Being* into

To put it all too simply, for Levinas, responsibility is what makes signification signify. My responsibility for the Other, recall, does not begin in me, but is *despite* me, contrary to my *conatus*, and independent of any decision or commitment for which I may take credit. The source of responsibility is not me, but the Other. The Other makes demands upon me, singles me out, and it is this demand or order that makes me responsible. For these reasons, Levinas treats responsibility in terms of *passivity*. Now, the account of passivity this claim establishes is a very specific one. Levinas is not simply claiming that I experience a demand, and then it is up to me whether or not I choose to fulfill that demand. This approach is misguided for (at least) two reasons. First, the passivity of my receiving the demand would ultimately revert back into my activity, as it would be “up to me” how I to respond to the Other’s demand. What Levinas is after is deeper than this, and concerns what he calls the “subjectivity of the subject.” To think that I experience a demand and then deliberate on how to respond to it presumes that there is a subject there to deliberate, one that pre-exists the demand made upon it, that exists before it is responsible. But for Levinas, the order or demand made upon me constitutes my very identity and therefore makes me what I am. He writes,

Responsibility for the other (*Autrui*)...signifies...the exposure of me to the other (*autrui*), prior to every decision. There is a claim laid on the same by the other (*l’autre*) in the core of myself (*moi-même*), the extreme tension of the command exercised by the other (*Autrui*) in me over me, a traumatic hold of the other (*l’Autre*) on the same, which does not give the same time to await the other (*l’Autre*). (*OB*, 141)

Or as he will later say, “[a]t the bottom of me,” is “a passivity prior to all receptivity, a past that was never present” (*GDT*, 177). My passivity goes all the way down – to the “core,” or to the “bottom” of me. It does not revert back into activity, and it is not an accidental attribute of

one coherent discussion. The result is that it becomes very difficult to keep them distinct, as what they attempt to describe seem to be variations on other concepts – most notably, saying, signification, and subjectivity.

a subject that is essentially active. Ontologically, this thought is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive. How could the Other make a demand on me if I were not there to receive it? How could a demand be placed on something that does not yet exist? For Levinas, the problem *with* this problem is that it betrays an allegiance to the order of presence, as the difficulty is grounded in the allegiance to a temporality that cannot conceive of a demand made to something that does not yet, does not at present, exist. But remember, for Levinas passivity is assigned to a “past that was never present,” a past prior to all memory, prior to all beginning, and therefore divorced from the order of presence. The real sense of subjectivity, then, lies in my responsibility for the Other – a responsibility that precedes commitment or action. Or, to use one of Levinas’ favorite expressions: I exist in the accusative.

In addition to saying, signification, and the one for the other, we may now add passivity and subjectivity to our growing list of closely related Levinasian concepts. Signification, the one for the other *is* saying, and saying in turn, “is passivity,” a “dedication to the other (*l’Autre*) (*OB*, 143).⁴⁰ In my core, at the bottom of me, I am for the other, dedicated to the other. To rest the very notions of subjectivity and signification on terms like the one *for* the other, dedication *to* the other, and so forth means that subjectivity and signification consist in *non*-indifference to the other. Although Levinas has many terms that attempt to describe this non-indifference – e.g., “Here I am” (*me voici*), “substitution,” the “glory of infinity,” “pure election,” and “exposure”⁴¹ – the one we must focus on for our purposes is *sincerity*. He writes,

For subjectivity to signify unreservedly, it would then be necessary that the passivity of its exposure to the other (*autrui*) not be immediately inverted into activity, but expose itself in its turn; a passivity of passivity is necessary, and in the glory of the Infinite ashes

⁴⁰ Indeed, Levinas adds here the “passivity of passivity” so as to distance passivity from any hint of underlying activity.

⁴¹ All of these terms can be found on *OB*, 145.

from which an act could not be born anew. Saying is this passivity of passivity and this dedication to the other (*l'Autre*), this sincerity. Not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions, or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said. (*OB*, 143)

In this passage, we see Levinas identify sincerity with the passivity *of* passivity – the passivity of saying and subjectivity that does not revert back into activity, but is passive all the way down. As dedication to the other, saying is not equivalent to communicating the said, but an opening of oneself, or as he says elsewhere, a *giving* of oneself. To be *for* the other is to give oneself *to* the other, to say “Here I am” for the other, *without* putting limits on what I am here for, without making excuses that would ultimately signify restrictions placed on my giving. Of course, as soon as my giving is announced in language, as soon as it appears in the said, there are necessarily limits, as the said cannot exhaust the saying, and it is for this reason that Levinas calls sincerity “saying without the said.”

No said equals the sincerity of the saying, is adequate to the veracity that is prior to the true, the veracity of the approach, of proximity, beyond presence. Sincerity would then be saying without the said... a sign I make to another (*Autrui*) of this giving of signs, “as simple as hello,” but ipso facto the pure transparency of an admission, the recognition of a debt. (*OB*, 143)

In something as simple as a greeting, or even the refusal of a greeting, there is a recognition of a debt, an admission of a command, or a giving of oneself.⁴² Or, to put this point another way, what Levinas calls the “scandal of sincerity” consists in the “impossibility of being silent,” non-indifference to the other (*OB*, 143). Although this scandal is supposed to be evident in an event as simple as a greeting, Levinas refuses to reduce it to anything ontological, anything

⁴² Cf. *BPW*, 7.

that can be comprehended under a concept or exhausted in a theme. As Levinas tells us from the first line of *Otherwise than Being*, “the event of being...passes over to what is other (*l'autre*) than being” (*OB*, 3). The sincerity of saying, though seen in something as simple as a greeting, signifies *beyond* Being. Indeed, Levinas claims that it is in sincerity, in a saying without the said, that “the Infinite passes” (*OB*, 147).⁴³ To say that the Infinite passes in sincerity is yet another way of calling attention to my responsibility for the other. In making my dedication to the other the source of both subjectivity and signification, Levinas marks the finite (the same, me) with a trace of the Infinite (the absolutely other). So, to say that the Infinite passes in my sincerity is to say that – in the most basic sense – my dedication to the other, my responsibility for the other, is the source of subjectivity and signification.⁴⁴ But what else is at stake in claiming that the Infinite passes in my sincerity? What else do these reflections about the meaning of subjectivity and signification allow us to say? Or better, what do they have to do with the primacy of ethics?

As we have mentioned over and over again, the concepts Levinas employs in *Otherwise than Being* are designed to expose breaks in Being, or events that signify in a way that is not explicable ontologically. This is, of course, also true of his claims about sincerity. However, what makes sincerity distinctive is not just that it serves as a way to synthesize many other Levinasian concepts (though this is surely the case), but that it is explicitly tied to Levinas’ mature claims about the primacy of ethics. Levinas argues that the way the Infinite passes the finite has a meaning that is explicitly *ethical*. Ethics, as the breakup of essence, or as he now

⁴³ Of course, this draws on Levinas’ reading of Descartes’ Third *Meditation*. For his reading of the Cartesian infinite, see *TI*, I.A.5.

⁴⁴ This is also the basic sense of what Levinas calls “the other in the same (*l'autre est dans le même*)” (*OB*, 146).

says, as “the field outlined by the paradox of an Infinite in relationship with the finite without being belied in this relationship” cannot be fully appreciated by appeal to ontology, but signifies *beyond Being* (*OB*, 148).⁴⁵ Ethics is the locus or plot in which the Infinite passes the finite, the site of sincerity, and therefore belongs to the immemorial past rather than the present of ontology. And crucially, *because the passing of the Infinite is meaningful*, we must consider ethics as primary in relation to ontology.⁴⁶

That the glory of the Infinite is glorified only by the signification of the-one-for-the-other (*l'autre*), as sincerity, that in my sincerity the Infinite passes the finite, that the Infinite comes to pass there, is what makes the plot of ethics primary, and what makes language irreducible to an act among acts. Before putting itself at the service of life as an exchange of information through a linguistic system, saying is witness; it is saying without the said, a sign given to the other (*Autrui*). (*OB*, 150)

It is in my sincerity that the Infinite passes the finite. That is, if I – despite my finitude – am able to think (albeit incompletely) of the Infinite, or the Other, it is because at my core, I am *for* the Other. *That* I am for the Other is absolutely inexplicable from an ontological perspective, as it depends on concepts that are beyond Being, irreducible to the order of presence, and foreign to the said. Despite its lack of ontological intelligibility, my responsibility for the Other is meaningful, and because it is meaningful, we must consider its meaning in an ethical sense, over and beyond anything that ontology can accommodate. Moreover, if Levinas is right to identify saying with signification, with *meaning as such*, then insofar as saying is fundamentally ethical, we must grant that meaning is as well. And finally, because meaning is fundamentally ethical,

⁴⁵ Note the resemblance between this account of ethics and *Totality and Infinity*'s account of what ultimately becomes critique: “a relation being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any what whatever by this cognitive relation” (*TI*, 42).

⁴⁶ To state the blatantly obvious, it is difficult – even by Levinasian standards – to keep all these concepts straight. As mentioned earlier, I think the explanation for this difficulty is that they ultimately signify something very similar, as they are all attempting to discuss my responsibility for the Other and how important that is for thinking about meaning itself (signification) and subjectivity.

whatever ontology succeeds in signifying ultimately signifies *ethically*. In other words, ethics is primary in relation to ontology. It is here, I suggest, that we find Levinas' mature version of primacy. Ethics has to do with the breakup of Being, the rupture of essence, by the approach of the Other, and any account of primacy that tries to understand the Other's approach in ontological terms, in terms of the present, is doomed from the start.

Conclusion

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas claims that ethics is the calling into question of my spontaneity, my freedom, by the presence of the Other. One of the central tasks of that text is to understand such a call as primary in relation to ontology, which consists in reducing the Other to the same. To say, then, that the ethical relation has primacy is to identify it as a more fundamental structure of Being than the ontological relation. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, Levinas describes ethics as the *breakup* of Being, as something that signifies *beyond* Being rather than as a structure *of* Being. To say that ethics is primary for the later Levinas, then, has to do with establishing that meaning itself signifies beyond Being, and is therefore inescapably ethical in character. The primacy *of* the primary is therefore not reducible to the order of presence or to structures of Being. Rather, ethics' status as primary is associated with the "passing of the Infinite," of my responsibility for the Other, which exceeds anything that ontology can thematize.

Now that we have a basic sense of how Levinas uses "ethics" and "primacy" in his two main works, we must now consider more carefully how these works relate to each other, and ultimately, whether the latter's account of primacy requires the renunciation of the former's. In Chapter IV, we will turn to a more focused comparison of these accounts while paying special attention to two figures Levinas with whom Levinas is in conversation: Heidegger and Kant.

Chapter 4:

From Constitution to Fear

“From the very first, *primacy* indicates principle *and* chief. All the classical concepts interrogated by Levinas are thus dragged toward the *agora*, summoned to justify themselves in an ethico-political language that they have not always sought – or believed that they sought – to speak, summoned to transpose themselves into this language by confessing their violent aims.”

- Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 97

One of our most basic contentions is that there are ways of making ethics primary that ultimately rely on a notion of primacy that is ontological. In such cases, the primacy of ethics is really reducible to the primacy of ontology, as the sense of the “primary” that is invoked signifies ontologically, not ethically. What we are looking for is a rigorous understanding of the primacy of ethics, and that requires making ethics primary *for ethical reasons*, not because of the ontological merits certain conceptions of ethics might have. We are now in a position to ask whether or not Levinas provides us with such an account. As we saw in Chapter III, Levinas presents us with two distinguishable versions of primacy. In *Totality and Infinity*, ethics is primary because it is the fundamental and irreducible structure on which all posterior structures rest. In other words, ethics is primary because it *constitutes* all other structures of Being. We might then say that *Totality and Infinity* argues for a “constitutive” account of primacy, as its focus is on the constitutive power ethics has.¹ Any ontological claim presupposes a certain type of relation to the Other without which it is impossible, and this is the essence of its primacy. Although by arguing for the primacy of ethics Levinas is trying (and does begin) to overcome his Heideggerian roots, there are good reasons to think that this overcoming is not – and could not be – sufficiently accomplished in *Totality and Infinity*. Granted, as Derrida helpfully points out in

¹ As we will see in this chapter, this claim also extends to a great deal of Levinas’ early work.

our epigraph, Levinas does often force traditional ontological concepts to speak an ethical language. But, as I will attempt to show here, his early account of primacy does not escape the ontological position it seeks to undermine because the primacy it invokes is *fundamentally* about constitution, not ethics. It is not until the later work (particularly in *Otherwise than Being* and the later essays, lectures, and interviews) that the notion of primacy itself is fully transformed into an ethical concept, which has a meaning over and beyond its constitutive power. Such a transformation is, in Levinas' eyes, a more effective break with Heidegger, and this break is inspired by Kant – particularly, his practical philosophy.

Here, we will begin by examining what Heidegger has to say about the priority of ontology and then comparing it with one of Levinas' early essays about the relationship between ethics and ontology: "Is Ontology Fundamental?" (1951). We should see that while the early Levinas alters Heidegger's account of *what* is prior or primary, the notion of priority itself is left untouched; the terms of the structure are indeed reversed, but to reverse the terms of a structure is not to overthrow the structure itself.² Then, by again examining themes from Kant's practical philosophy and comparing them with a later essay – "Ethics as First Philosophy" (1984) – that again takes up the question of ethics' relation to ontology, we will see how the later Levinas adopts Kantian insights (without falling prey to Kant's mistakes) in order to prioritize ethics for *ethical*, rather than ontological purposes.

Heidegger on the Priority of Ontology

Although it often goes unnoticed or under-appreciated, the notion of priority animates *Being and Time*. It is in the sections explicitly devoted to the notion of priority (*Vorrang*) that

² François Raffoul makes a similar point about Levinas in the fifth chapter of his *The Origins of Responsibility*. However, while he is concerned with Levinas' account of ethics as such, he is more focused on Levinas' account of subjectivity rather than the notion of priority. For a succinct explanation of this problem, see p. 33-34.

Heidegger introduces some of the most central concepts of his *magnum opus* – for example, existence (*Existenz*), the distinctions between both ontic/ontological and existentiell/existential, his accounts of fundamental ontology, ontology itself, and even Dasein, to name a few.³ Famously, *Being and Time* is focused on the question of the meaning of Being – a question he considers *the* fundamental question. Being, “that which determines entities as entities,” or “that on the basis of which (*woraufhin*) entities are already understood,” always refers to the Being of an entity, but is not itself an entity (SZ, 6).⁴ Hence, the mode of discovery that would be appropriate to this question must exhibit Being as such, and therefore cannot be confused with the mode of discovery whereby we become acquainted with entities. Being, in other words, “must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from the way in which entities are discovered” (SZ, 6). Yet, if Being always refers to the Being of entities, then any investigation into the question of Being, the *Seinsfrage*, must inevitably make reference to entities; and since “entity” (*Seiend*) is such a broad term, we must make a decision about *which* entity to investigate in order to understand the object of our interrogation.⁵ Or in Heidegger’s words,

From which entities is the disclosure of Being to take its departure? Is the starting-point optional, or does some particular entity have priority when we come to work out the question of Being? Which entity shall we take for our example, and in what sense does it have priority? (SZ, 7)

This investigation of the meaning of Being must be carried out by carefully choosing the “right” entity for investigation, an entity to which we have genuine access. Since any satisfactory account of Being must, of course, include an account of how Being is comprehended

³ The notion of priority is first introduced in §2 of *Being and Time*, and §§3-4 are explicitly designed to treat of the priority of the question of Being.

⁴ All citations refer to the German pagination of *Sein und Zeit*.

⁵ “Everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way, is being (*Seiend*); what we are is being (*Seiend*), and so is how we are.” (SZ, 6-7)

or understood, such an understanding is *constitutive* for the investigation itself. Explaining this point, Heidegger writes,

Looking at something, understanding it and conceiving it, choosing, access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in his own Being. (SZ, 7)

Working out the question of the meaning of Being, in other words, requires an account of the Being of the *inquirer*, or the Being of the *questioner*. The questioner – in this case, “Dasein” – has a certain sort of priority because asking the question of the meaning of Being constitutes its *own* Being. Dasein is distinguished from other entities by the special stance it takes toward its Being, by the fact that its Being is an issue for it. Heidegger takes this claim about the Being of Dasein to show that there is a “special” (*ausgezeichneten*) way in which Dasein is related to the question at hand, and on the basis of this special or distinctive relation to the question of Being “something like a priority of Dasein has announced itself” (SZ, 8).⁶ But what type of priority has announced itself must be worked out.

○ *The Ontological Priority of the Seinsfrage*

In order to make the question of the meaning of Being transparent, Heidegger initially introduces two types of priority: ontological priority and ontical priority. In §2 of *Being and Time*, priority refers to the (as yet unspecified) priority of the *Seinsfrage*, and in §3, Heidegger attempts to establish this as a case of *ontological* priority.⁷ His argument to this end is rather

⁶ He claims that his “announcement” is not equivalent to a demonstration. Presumably, this demonstration is reserved for §§3-4.

⁷ Though it might seem as if there are four types of priority here, there are really only two *kinds* of priority in play. As we will later see, Heidegger will understand the priority of the *Seinsfrage* as an ontological priority, and the priority of Dasein as an ontical priority.

straightforward, and has to do with the relationship between the *Seinsfrage* and positive sciences (or what we might want to call regional ontologies): the value of the positive sciences is not determined by reference to the information they amass, but in inquiring into the way each science is basically constituted, and this constitution has to do with the status of its basic concepts. Such concepts are not the products of some sophisticated derivation on the part of each positive science, but are rather pre-scientific ways of understanding the domain of Being with which that particular science is concerned. Because of the pre-scientific character of each science's basic concepts, a preliminary research is required – a research that takes these basic, constituting concepts as its theme. This preliminary research cannot itself be considered as part of the positive science itself because it “runs ahead” of these sciences or regional ontologies, revealing the basic, constitutive concepts that each takes for granted. Or as Heidegger says, “[this preliminary research] leaps ahead, as it were, into some area of Being, discloses it for the first time in the structure of its Being, and, after thus arriving at the structures within it, makes these available to the positive sciences as transparent assignments for their inquiry” (SZ, 10).

However, particular scientific or regional inquiries are insufficiently grounded without the work of this preliminary research that examines the basic constitution of the science in question. And this preliminary research, in turn, is, as Heidegger says, “*blind and perverted from its ownmost aim*” if it does not take as its fundamental task the clarification of the meaning of Being (SZ, 11).

In other words, each regional ontology and positive science requires a more fundamental ontology to render its basic concepts transparent. Ontology (in the widest sense) is not something one can eschew, and since all inquiry into entities requires some understanding of the *Being* of entities, the question of the meaning of Being, i.e., the *Seinsfrage*, must have

ontological priority, or be considered fundamental. Because each regional ontology requires a fundamental ontology, there is an ontological priority of the *Seinsfrage*.

○ *The Ontical Priority of the Seinsfrage*

For Heidegger, there is also an *ontical* priority associated with the *Seinsfrage*. Though he begins by focusing on the sciences as such (rather than the ontological commitments they must presuppose), the discussion of the ontical priority of the *Seinsfrage* quickly becomes an investigation of Dasein's "special distinctiveness" hinted at in §2 of *Being and Time*. To expand on a point made above, Heidegger famously claims that Dasein's *ontical* distinction consists in the distinctive relation it has toward its Being, in the fact that its Being is an issue for it. That is, Dasein's understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*) is a "*definite characteristic*" of its Being, and thus Heidegger claims that Dasein is "ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological" (SZ, 12). In other words, since Dasein's Being is constituted by the distinctive stance it takes towards its own Being, it must be considered distinct from other entities whose Being is not so constituted. Dasein's ontical distinction, therefore, signals its ontical priority in relation to other entities. But how does this relate to the ontical priority of the *Seinsfrage*? Because even the sciences are "ways in which man behaves," they are grounded in Dasein's way of Being – existence (SZ, 11). Just as regional ontologies and positive sciences presuppose a more fundamental ontology, fundamental ontology itself is inseparable from the *Seinsverständnis* that is constitutive of Dasein's Being. Thus, Heidegger concludes that the fundamental ontology to which he gestures in §3 "must be sought in the *existential analytic of Dasein*," in examining the structures of that entity whose understanding of its own Being is in turn *constitutive* for that Being (SZ, 13). The priority of the *Seinsfrage* issues in a claim about the priority of Dasein, and Dasein's priority, as should come as no surprise to readers of Heidegger, is threefold.

○ *The Threefold Priority of Dasein*

First, Dasein has an ontical priority, and Heidegger's gloss here is but one sentence: "Dasein is an entity whose Being has the determinate character of existence" (SZ, 13).⁸ To put it more bluntly, existence is the way of Being of Dasein, rather than the readiness-to-hand associated with equipment or the presence-at-hand associated with substances. Second, Dasein also has an ontological priority, which receives as much explanation as Dasein's ontical priority: "Dasein is in itself 'ontological', because existence is thus determinative for it" (SZ, 13). The particular character of Dasein's Being is determined by the fact that its Being is always an issue for it, and the fact that its Being is an issue for it is enough to distinguish it from other entities. But there is also a third sense of priority: "ontico-ontological priority." This third sense of priority shares an "equal primordially" with the other two, and refers to Dasein's understanding of the Being of entities other than itself. This third sense of priority lies in the fact that Dasein provides the "ontico-ontological condition of possibility of any ontologies" (SZ, 13). Although this is the first time Heidegger explicitly mentions this third sense of priority, it seems clear that he has already given a summary of it earlier in §4. Although many positive sciences tend to be concerned with entities other than Dasein, since those sciences are ultimately "ways in which man behaves," they have a necessary relation to Dasein's way of Being (SZ, 13). Anticipating his famous discussion of *in-der-Welt-sein*, Heidegger claims that Dasein's understanding of Being necessarily includes an understanding of "world" and therefore of the entities within that world – i.e., entities other than Dasein. But since sciences are "ways in which man behaves," they are grounded in Dasein's way of Being, or have their ultimate foundation in Dasein's own

⁸ Presumably, Heidegger thinks that this needs only this sentence since he has just showed the senses in which Dasein is ontically distinctive. This suggests that the ontical priority of the *Seinsfrage*, announced in the section title, is reducible to a claim about the priority of Dasein.

ontical structure, and this founding is sufficient to grant Dasein “ontico-ontological” priority. Though these sections of *Being and Time* are characteristically dense, the lesson here is clear enough: because Dasein has this threefold priority, it must be the first subject of interrogation for fundamental ontology.

- *Summary*

We have seen Heidegger invoke (at least) three conceptions of priority – ontological, ontic, and ontico-ontological – and at least two “objects” of priority – Dasein and the *Seinsfrage*. But what do these various senses of priority have in common? Obviously, any satisfactory answer must point to Heidegger’s preoccupation with the idea of a fundamental status. The lesson of ontological priority – that every positive science presupposes an understanding of Being – is that ontology is *more fundamental* than ontic science. The lesson of ontic priority – that Dasein is the ontically distinctive entity – is that Dasein’s understanding of Being makes it *more fundamental* to the question of Being than other entities. And the lesson of ontico-ontological priority – that the ontical sciences are grounded in Dasein’s way of Being – is that Dasein is *fundamental* to, and the condition of, all positive science. In each case, Heidegger’s claims about priority reveal that what is prior is *constitutive*. Ontic sciences could not be without a prior conception of Being constituting its basic concepts, and thus fundamental ontology, in a certain sense, *constitutes* these sciences. In fact, the real value of fundamental ontology lies in its power to reveal what structures of Being are constitutive. The project of fundamental ontology could not get off the ground, as it were, if it did not initially investigate the entity who enjoys a special relation to the *Seinsfrage*, and thus that investigation will constitute all the ontological work that it precedes. And finally, if Dasein has ontico-ontological priority, i.e., if all positive sciences are ultimately grounded in Dasein’s way of Being, then those positive

sciences, are ultimately constituted by Dasein. In these cases, then, to identify something's priority is to call attention to the basic structures that constitute the thing in question.

Constitutive Primacy in the Early Levinas

Although the question of Levinas' relation to Heidegger has been asked time and time again, we would do well to return to it here. But here we focus not on Levinas' criticisms of Heidegger, not on what Levinas rejects, but on the contrary, on what he seems to adopt, if only implicitly. We saw that in *Totality and Infinity*, one of Levinas' primary objectives was to establish the primacy of the ethical. There, establishing primacy consisted in identifying a basic, irreducible structure on which all posterior structures rest. To call ethics primary, then, is to say that it is the basic structure on which all others rest. Moreover, we should recall that in *Totality and Infinity*, ethics delineates the structure of exteriority, of the relation to the absolutely other, and exteriority simply *is* Being.⁹ Thus, ethics is not simply some relation in Being, but the *ultimate or fundamental* relation in Being.¹⁰

As we have also seen, Levinas' argument for this type of primacy is introduced in distinction from what he sees as the characterizing feature of the majority of Western philosophy – the primacy of the same. In order to distance himself from this tradition, Levinas famously asserts that the terms of the relation between ethics and ontology must be reversed. We can no longer associate Being with comprehension, intelligibility, or freedom.¹¹ That is, Being is no longer “the light in which existents (*les étants*) become intelligible,” visible, or open to my cognitive grasp (*TI*, 42). Rather, Being has to do with the approach of the absolutely other, with

⁹ “The ethical...delineates the structure of exteriority as such. Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy.” (*TI*, 304); “Being (*L'être*) is exteriority.” (*TI*, 290)

¹⁰ “This ‘saying to the Other (*Autrui*)’ – this relationship with the Other (*Autrui*) as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent* (*étant*) – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being (*dans l'être*).” (*TI*, 48)

¹¹ Remember that freedom, for Levinas, is associated with remaining the same in the midst of the Other.

exteriority – precisely that which *escapes* my comprehension or grasp, exceeds what is available to me through vision, and calls my freedom into question. In sum, we can no longer say that the ethical relation is grounded in anything like an ontology. We must rather say that ethics – the structure of exteriority – precedes ontology. But in reversing these terms, does Levinas actually distance himself from the tradition, or does he *by this very claim*, demonstrate a certain type of allegiance to it? If the spirit of the Western tradition culminates in *Being and Time*, a text which is animated by a certain account of priority, then if Levinas implicitly adopts this account of primacy, then, to a certain extent, he would also fail to overcome the tradition that *Being and Time* represents. Moreover, if we take Levinas’ comments about the nature of his work seriously, we must also admit that the Heideggerian view of priority is simply adopted rather than questioned. To clearly see this, I suggest that we turn to one of Levinas’ most explicit disputes with Heideggerian thought: ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’¹²

○ *Is Ontology Fundamental?*

As should come as no surprise, Levinas’ 1951 essay is concerned with fundamental ontology. Its deceptively straightforward task consists in providing reasons to think that the answer to the question introduced in its title is a resounding “no.” Far from thinking that the issues involved here are easy or simple, Levinas admits that questioning ontology’s fundamental status after Heidegger’s work seems like a “reckless undertaking.” If this undertaking here seems reckless, it is because the issue regarding fundamentality is not one of subjective preference, but seems to rest on the most obvious evidence. Has not Heidegger shown that the *Seinsfrage* is *the* fundamental question? Hasn’t he shown that all knowledge of relations between beings presupposes the comprehension of Being? Calling fundamental ontology into

¹² Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings (BPW)*, pp. 2-10.

question will be an endeavor worth the time it takes *only* if it can show that it has missed something so obvious or basic that we can no longer rest content with its seemingly unchallenged claim to be *the* philosophical question. Now, it is important to remember that fundamental ontology is not some narrow, epistemic endeavor, since it is concerned not just with knowing minds or beings in the abstract, but with the *situation* that minds find themselves in, with the world into which beings are thrown. So, the target of Levinas' objections is not the narrow epistemic subject that one learns of only in the academy, and it should therefore be clear that Levinas is attempting to question an entire framework that seems to rest on the most obvious evidence. Levinas' question is as follows: Is one forced to "subject relations between beings to structures of [B]eing, metaphysics to ontology, the existentiell to the existential"? (BPW 5) Foreshadowing the material from *Totality and Infinity* we examined in Chapter III, Levinas' question is whether or not we must subject our relationship to the other person to prior *neutral* concepts, or to more fundamental structures of Being. Must, for example, our relation to the Other be subordinated to our comprehension of Being?¹³ Is the relation with the Other reducible to a regional ontology, and therefore reducible to a more fundamental ontology?

Of course, Levinas argues that there is a relation that escapes the comprehension associated with ontology, and far from being some minor or peripheral relation, the relation in question is, recall, the *ultimate* relation in Being. He writes of this ethical relation, "[o]ur relation with the other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension" (BPW, 6). Levinas' point is not simply that extra-epistemic conditions like love or sympathy are necessary for "knowing" the Other. His point is a more

¹³ Here, of course, "comprehension" should not be read in an overly narrow epistemic manner. On the contrary, Levinas uses it call attention to all the practical engagements of Dasein: "This fact of being involved, this event in which I find myself engaged, tied as I am to what should be my object by ties not reducible to thoughts – this existence is interpreted as comprehension." (BPW, 4)

fundamental one about the very nature of the ethical relation, and that towards which it directed - *Autrui*. For Levinas, the Other is not such that she can be known at all or comprehended. In the ethical relation, Levinas says that I am affected by the Other, but that affection is of a very specific type, a type of affection, he insists, that is altogether inexplicable in terms of comprehension.¹⁴

But here, the Heideggerian apologist for fundamental ontology will surely push back. No matter how special the ethical relation is, it still *is*. Levinas even says that the affection that characterizes the ethical relation is affection by a *being (étant)*. If that is the case, are we not talking about something that concerns us “thanks to a revelation of being (*l'être*),” and therefore something that is inextricable from comprehension of Being (*BPW*, 6)? Have we not already understood the Other as *a* being, and therefore under the horizon of Being, under a more fundamental structure of Being? Have we not already understood her on the basis of an ontology, and if so, have we really gotten beyond comprehension? The real force behind this Heideggerian objection is that comprehension must be the model on which all other relations between beings are thought, and in this vein, Levinas writes,

To relate oneself to beings qua beings (*à l'étant en tant qu'étant*) means, for Heidegger, to let beings be, to comprehend them as independent of the perception which discovers and grasps them. It is precisely through such comprehension that it gives itself as a being (*étant*) and not as a mere object. Being-with-the-Other (*autrui*) (*Miteinandersein*) thus rests for Heidegger on the ontological relation. (*BPW*, 6)

But for Levinas, the ethical relation is not a matter of letting be, and the independence of the Other is not grasped via comprehension. What is revealed in the interpersonal relation is not

¹⁴ As will become clear later, Levinas' uses *affecte* here to describe the unique way in which the relation with the Other is the relation with an interlocutor. Any attempt to comprehend the Other is inseparable from speaking to the Other.

simply *that* another person exists independent of my perception of them, but that someone *summons* me, or calls me into question. The Other is not, from the first, grasped in their Being, but is encountered as an interlocutor. For Levinas, the comprehension of the Other is inseparable from invoking her, from speaking to her, and thus, to attempt to comprehend someone is already to speak to them. Levinas therefore identifies speech (*la parole*) as the original relation in Being, and as original, speech is not subordinated to a prior grasping of the Other's independence, but is rather the *condition* of any such grasp.¹⁵

At this point, our Heideggerian apologist might remind us that since comprehension is not some narrow epistemic category, since it is opposed to what Levinas calls "classical intellectualism," the relation "speech" names might not be an exception to the Heideggerian rule, but might rather constitute the essence of comprehension. In other words, if speech really is the original relation in Being, if it is the condition of any conscious grasp we might hope to have, then why wouldn't we simply broaden the concept of comprehension in order to account for this fact? To this objection, Levinas simply retorts, "[t]his we hold to be impossible" (*BPW*, 6). But what is it about comprehension as such that precludes speech from being subsumed under its purview? In order to show why speech cannot be considered as comprehension, Levinas directs our attention to Heidegger's paradigmatic example of comprehension: the handling of equipment. When we comprehend a hammer, we experience it *as* something to drive nails with. Unless something goes wrong, it is not experienced as a substance, but as intimately related to nails, wood, and the storage shed I might try to build with those materials. We might then say that the hammer is "overcome" not just by my (literally) grasping it to drive nails with, but because it is not understood on its own terms, but in terms of what it makes possible *for me*. The

¹⁵ Levinas uses *la parole* and *le langage* interchangeably in this essay.

Being of the hammer is relegated to its place in some referential totality, in a series of objects understood together by reference to the role they play in my projects. If this is the heart of Heideggerian comprehension, our question is: is this the best description for my relation to the Other?

Predictably, Levinas' answer is a resounding "no." If what he calls "the very itinerary of comprehension" consists in the overcoming of the object, then we cannot simply broaden the notion of comprehension so as to account for the relation to the Other. This would be to take a term that is *meant* to describe our relation with objects and simply force our relation with the Other – which is totally unlike our relation with objects – to fit with this already-established model of comprehension. The relation with the Other, as we have already hinted at, is one in which any attempt at comprehension is already a speaking to the Other. When it comes to the Other, I do not simply try to comprehend her Being, I speak to her; "I do not only think that he is, I speak to him" (*BPW*, 7). In fact, Levinas claims that the human other is *distinctive* in that the human is the *only* being I am unable to encounter without expressing that encounter to them, and it is this feature of the relation with the Other that precludes it from being an item of knowledge (*connaissance*) or an example of comprehension, which is modeled on our relation with equipment.¹⁶ Whatever is left of Heideggerian comprehension is exhausted by Levinasian expression: "if one wishes to speak in terms of 'comprehension'...my comprehension of beings as such is already the expression that I offer him of this very comprehension" (*BPW*, 7). Because speech cannot be understood on the model of comprehension, but rather names a more original or fundamental relation, the relation with the Other cannot be understood in terms of

¹⁶ As we saw in the last chapter, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will add that this expression necessarily includes the Other's *authority*.

Heideggerian comprehension. Or as Levinas concludes, “[t]he relation with the other (*autrui*) is not therefore ontology” (*BPW*, 7).

○ *A Heideggerian Priority?*

What does this objection to ontology’s fundamentality tell us about Levinas’ relation to the Heideggerian commitments he is attempting to overcome? Obviously, it contains a pointed objection to Heideggerian thought, but our issue here concerns how deep this objection extends. Our basic contention is that it does not quite defeat it, but rather presupposes some of its most fundamental elements – specifically, its account of priority. The essence of Levinas’ argument is that Heidegger, in his attempt to delineate the basic structures of Being, misses the most important, original structure of Being – speech, or what he will later call the ethical relation. This exclusion is important precisely because the ethical relation is a basic, constituting structure of Being. Indeed, the best way to summarize Levinas’ various claims about speech being an “original relation,” about ethics being the “ultimate relation in Being,” is to say that the relation Levinas describes is *prior* to the relations on which Heidegger focuses, most notably, comprehension. And crucially, the priority invoked here is *very* similar to Heidegger’s notion of an ontological priority. Just as Heidegger claimed to show that all regional ontologies and ontic sciences rest on a prior, fundamental ontology, Levinas claims to show that Heidegger’s fundamental ontology has missed a prior, *ethical* relation on which it is necessarily founded. In describing this relation as “the condition of any conscious grasp” (*BPW*, 6), as our “first experience, the very one that constitutes us, and which is as if the ground of our existence” (*IR*, 184), or as “the ultimate relation in being (*l’être*)” that necessarily “precedes all ontology” (*TI*, 48), Levinas invokes a Heideggerian account of *ontological* priority, as all these claims consist in

a claim about the irreducibility of a certain relation in Being. But this relation is meaningless without its animating element: *Autrui*.

Levinas' identification of the ethical relation as the primary, irreducible structure on which all posterior structures rest turns on his account of the Other. And in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" he provides a particularly clear and succinct summary of why we must distinguish the Other from all other beings. As we just saw, the Other is distinguished from all other beings because it is impossible to approach her without speaking, without expression. The ethical relation, therefore, must necessarily include the idea of language because the primary term of this relation – the Other – is the one to whom I speak. This feature of the Other necessarily distinguishes her from objects, because my comprehension of objects involves *overcoming* them, not speaking *to* them. For Levinas, the difference between the Other and objects is precisely why the Other cannot be subsumed under the structure of comprehension. This difference is also a form of priority – one that closely resembles the account of *ontical* priority in *Being and Time*. Just as Dasein enjoys an *ontical* distinction from all other beings, thus making it the primary object in ontological analysis, the Other enjoys a distinction from all objects of comprehension, thus making the ethical relation she makes possible the primary relation in Being. As we saw earlier, all these Heideggerian claims to priority rest on a similar conviction: what is primary is irreducible, fundamental. A primary structure therefore constitutes what comes "after" it, and thus are examples of *constitutive* priority.

- *Conclusion*

In sum, in an attempt to overthrow the central tenets of Heideggerian thought, Levinas actually adopts a Heideggerian view of priority to show that, in his search for basic structures of Being, Heidegger misses what is *actually* fundamental – the relation with the Other. What

priority or fundamentality amounts to here is almost exactly what Heidegger thought it was – something which is necessarily presupposed by all ontic structures, that which constitutes all posterior structures. Levinas, therefore, presupposes a Heideggerian, *constitutive* account of priority in order to expose the poverty of Heidegger’s ontological analysis. Thus, in its early stages, the Levinasian project focused on reversing the terms of a structure with which Heidegger was already at home. But, as we have suggested, reversing the terms of a structure is a markedly different project than questioning the structure itself. It should therefore come as no surprise that Levinas came to regret his use of ontological language, and of the traces of Heideggerian thought in his early project.

To put it in terms from the last chapter, although the early Levinas recognized the need to expose the rupture of totality that the call of the Other introduces, this was not yet to recognize the need to thematize the rupture of a certain sense of primacy or priority that is necessary to overcome the Heideggerian form of ontological thought Levinas so desperately sought to leave. One of our basic contentions is that one helpful way to think about the difference between Levinas’ early work and his later work is by thinking about this shift in his account of priority or primacy. Moreover, and as we noted at the outset of this chapter, it is helpful to understand Levinas’ turn *from* Heidegger as a turn *towards* Kant. In the next section, we will see that it is this Kantian turn that allows Levinas to formulate an account of primacy that goes beyond the constitutive primacy associated with Heideggerian ontology.

“Kant Against Heidegger”

If one were to list the many similarities between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, one should perhaps begin with the comparable objectives of these texts – to establish the primacy of ethics. Among their many differences, one of the most striking (and not just to the

eyes of an historian) is that many of Levinas' invocations of primacy are now attached to a name – Kant. This tendency is not restricted to *Otherwise than Being*, as it also occurs in many of the essays published and lectures given later in Levinas' career. For instance, in 'Transcendence and Intelligibility' (1984), Levinas cites Kant's primacy of practical reason as a turning point in modern philosophy, a point at which a new sense of intelligibility was recognized. For Levinas, what Kant recognized was an intelligibility "according to a *spiritual intrigue wholly other than gnosis*," an intelligibility "otherwise than according to knowledge (*savoir*)" (BPW, 154). Since establishing the primacy of ethics is simultaneously the establishing of a new type of intelligibility, it is clear that this Kantian thought is integral to the later Levinasian project.¹⁷ Moreover, if we are attempting to identify two different senses of primacy in Levinas' corpus, we should also recognize that Levinas takes the Kantian account of primacy – what we will call *ethical* primacy – to be *opposed* to the various forms of constitutive primacy associated with Heidegger. Indeed, Levinas' turn from his Heideggerian roots will require that he give up the presupposition that constitutive primacy is most meaningful sense of primacy, and that will in turn be replaced with a fully ethical notion of primacy. But what is ethical primacy, and why does Levinas turn to Kant for it? Although one might point to the many invocations of Kant's doctrine of primacy in *Otherwise than Being*, or the rare, historical essay 'The Primacy of Pure Practical Reason,'¹⁸ the most striking evidence for this claim can be found in his series of lectures *God, Death, and Time*.¹⁹

¹⁷ As we will see, Levinas will locate this new type of intelligibility in a meaning *beyond* Being, or, a meaning that calls to my responsibility rather than to my intellect or comprehension.

¹⁸ Levinas (PPR), pp. 445-453.

¹⁹ These lectures are, conceptually and temporally speaking, very close to *Otherwise than Being*. In some cases, the former copies passages word for word from the latter. But the lectures have the advantage of allowing Levinas to follow up on some historical references that he did not pursue in *Otherwise than Being*. I therefore focus on the lectures here, as they give more explanation for Levinas' invocation of Kant than *Otherwise than Being* does.

○ *The Radical Question*

In *God, Death, and Time*, Levinas speaks of “the radical question,” a question that introduces an opposition, namely, Kant against Heidegger. The heart of the radical question concerns the identification of a meaning beyond what ontology can deliver: “Is meaning always an event of being? To be – is this the significance of meaning?” (*GDT*, 58) For Levinas’ Heidegger, the question of the human is subordinated to a question about *Being*, about the human’s “service” to Being, her part in the “adventure” of Being, or, adopting the language of the *Letter on Humanism*, her role as a “shepherd or guardian” of Being. As evidence Levinas recites Heidegger’s claim about the ontical priority of Dasein: “*Dasein*’s privilege resides in the fact that it exists ontologically” (*GDT*, 58). Likewise, and with ontological priority in mind, he points out that each question is, for Heidegger, reducible to a more fundamental question about Being: “[t]he question mark of every question comes from the question: What does being signify?” (*GDT*, 58). The reduction of the human to Being (and the priority implied in such a reduction) is *precisely* what the radical question challenges, and Levinas sees in Kant a way of contesting the most fundamental claims *Being and Time* makes. Or more precisely, we see in Kant’s thought the possibility of placing ontology itself into question, of questioning the conceit that everything important about the human is, at bottom, a matter of ontological importance.

But what, specifically, is it about Kant’s thought that permits Levinas to read him as a radical thinker, as a thinker of the radical question? *Part* of Levinas’ reading of Kant hangs on an interpretation of the first *Critique*’s “transcendental ideal.” Levinas argues that one of the lessons of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that thinking, while operating within the bounds of its

legitimate use, *fails* to reach Being. In allowing for a regulative use for transcendent ideas like God or immortality, Kant allows an idea to be meaningful to us without that idea being attached to comprehension of Being. Indeed, reason itself demands that we think beyond Being (which is here equated with the given, or what can appear in a possible intuition). That is, the ideas of reason – those whose objects *cannot* possibly appear in intuition, those that are beyond any possible experience – have a regulative use insofar as they direct the work of the understanding *despite* the fact that they do not (and cannot) “reach” Being.

But another, more important aspect of Levinas’ appropriation of Kant has to do with his understanding of primacy. In fact, Levinas takes issue with Heidegger’s reading of Kant because Heidegger puts an illegitimate focus on the first *Critique* and the questions that animates that work. While Heidegger’s reading of Kant privileged the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Levinas rightly sees that of Kant’s famous questions (What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? What is man?), it is the *second* question that Kant ultimately prioritizes. Indeed, Levinas claims, “the second [question] seems to surpass the first with all the breadth of the last two” (*GDT*, 59). In other words, Kant – against what Levinas sees as the Western philosophical tendency – subordinates the question of knowledge to the question of morality, and thus awards a type of primacy to the question about what one should do over the question regarding what one can know. But seeing as Levinas’ ethics is not thoroughly Kantian – i.e., it contains no reference to an abstract moral law – what might it mean for Levinas to take Kant’s second question seriously?

○ *The Religious Moment*

Levinas often praises Kant for his “religious moment.” For instance, in his essay on the primacy of practical reason, Levinas summarizes what he takes to be the import of Kant’s doctrine of primacy:

That practice...is the basis of *logos*: this is the great novelty in the primacy of pure reason. It is this subordination of knowledge to an interest – before the postulates of pure practical reason, before the existence of God and the immortality of the soul in which pure practical reason believes with a rational faith – that is the religious moment in Kantian thought. (PPR, 451)

This passage is instructive for a number of reasons. First, it shows us that Levinas’ religion is not synonymous with positive theological concepts. Rather, religion is the condition under which such concepts signify. As he says in *Totality and Infinity*, [i]t is our relation with men...that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of” (TI, 79). Whatever sense positive theological concepts have, that sense is dependent on our relation with others. Indeed, this is why Levinas insists on characterizing religion as “the bond that is established between the same and the other (*l’autre*) without constituting a totality” (TI, 40). Religion, therefore, is defined in close proximity to the ethical relation, to ethics, which in turn makes the signification associated with concepts like “God” ultimately *ethical*. With this characterization of religion in mind, we can see why Levinas approvingly calls Kant’s doctrine of primacy his “religious” moment: in subordinating knowledge to a (moral) interest, Kant grounds the meaning of religious concepts like God and immortality in *ethics*, not the other way around.

What is puzzling, however, is that although Levinas often expresses his admiration for Kant’s practical philosophy, he nevertheless tends to focus on the *Critique of Pure Reason* in his more explicit treatment of Kant’s texts. There are, of course, significant gestures to the practical philosophy in the first *Critique*, but one would assume that if the practical philosophy is so

formative, so important, we would find Levinas pointing to examples of this radical form of thinking in Kant's practical texts themselves. We should recall that we began by noticing that the primacy section from the *Critique of Practical Reason* makes a promise that it ultimately does not keep. But are there other places in the practical philosophy that more closely approximate the goal set forth in the second *Critique*? Are there other places where the religious moment in Kant is clearly explicated? To answer this question, we must turn to the *Religion* itself.

- *Kant on Morality and Religion*

There is much about Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that might be considered grist for Levinas' mill, the most obvious being Kant's claims about the relationship between religion and morality. In the *Religion*, Kant starkly claims that "morality in no way needs religion...but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason" (*RGV*, 6:3). In this context, to say that morality is self-sufficient is to say that religion is not necessary either for the recognition of duty or for its performance. Nonetheless, Kant thinks that religion might very well be morality's proper *consequence*. As is well known, Kant thinks that an empirical end is not necessary for moral conduct, and any insistence on the necessity of favorable consequences for the moral agent shows, in Kant's view, that the agent in question is "already contemptible" (*RGV*, 6:4). But contrary to his popular image, Kant insists that we cannot simply be indifferent when it comes to the question regarding the results of right conduct. If we cannot be indifferent about the question of results, then in addition to thinking about what our duty is, we must also think about what ought to follow from the observance of our duties. For Kant, the question about the results of right conduct prompts the idea of the highest good – a *justified* happiness, or happiness that is proportional to our observance of duty. Now, the idea of the highest good is

emphatically *not* a ground for the observance of duty itself, but an idea about how the world ought to be. We, “under the guidance of practical reason,” are entitled to include in this idea *anything* necessary for the highest good being accomplished. What this means is that the idea of the highest good is constituted by what practical reason considers necessary, or what is the same, by what is *morally* necessary. Importantly, the transition from the idea of morality to the idea of the highest good is Kant’s paradigm example about how religion and morality relate. After introducing the idea of the highest good, he writes, “[m]orality thus inevitably leads to religion, and through religion it extends itself to the idea of a mighty moral lawgiver outside the human being, in whose will the ultimate end (of the creation of the world) is what can and at the same ought to be the human end” (*RGV*, 6:7). So not only does morality demand that we think the highest good – of happiness proportional to our observance of duty – it also demands that we think of any ideas that necessarily attach themselves to the idea of the highest good, namely, God. The idea of God is therefore *morally* necessary to posit, as only a “higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent being...can unite the two elements of the good,” i.e., observance of duty and happiness proportional to it (*RGV*, 6:5).

Although the details here are notoriously complex (and for most, unconvincing), the structure of Kant’s argument is what is important for our purposes. Morality leads to religion, but it is not thereby grounded in religion. In other words, morality is *prior* to religion insofar as religion is restricted to what is *morally* necessary rather than the reverse. In the language of the second *Critique*, religion’s interest is subordinated to morality’s interest; morality therefore has the right or prerogative to determine religion. To put the matter in Levinas’ terms, if morality is prior to religion, then whatever sense religion might have is ultimately dependent on ethics rather

than ontology.²⁰ It is this feature of Kant's thought – the establishment of “a sense that is not measured by being or not being” – that Levinas finds most compelling (*OB*, 129). Thus, he claims

If one had the right to retain one trait from a philosophical system and neglect all the details of its architecture...we would think here of Kantism (*kantisme*), which finds a meaning to the human without measuring it by ontology and outside of the question “What is there here...?” that one would like to take to be preliminary, outside of the immortality and death which ontologies run up against. The fact that immortality and theology could not determine the categorical imperative signifies the novelty of the Copernican revolution...” (*OB*, 129)

The subordination of religion to morality or ethics is obviously an example in which the latter is primary, but what we are trying to extract is an account of primacy that *is itself* ethical. Ultimately, the primacy of morality over religion is itself an instance of ethical primacy. For Kant, what we are entitled to say about religion is restricted to what is *morally* necessary, rather than what is most ontologically sensible. The ontological positions associated with immortality and the theologies that stress its importance do not determine the categorical imperative (i.e., the principle of morality) but are determined by it. Likewise, what Levinas finds in Kant's religious moment is an account of meaning that is not at all determined by ontology, but one that is *prior to* and *determinative of* ontology. These are two important pieces of ethical primacy that Levinas indeed finds compelling, but there is an even clearer example of ethical primacy in the first essay of the *Religion* – one which closely resembles elements of Levinas' own later position.

- *Kant on Radical Evil*

²⁰ It should be noted that Levinas does not fully accept Kant's argument for the existence of God, as the notion of God Kant relies on is ultimately an ontological one, *even if* the reasons for positing that God are ethical. What Levinas accepts is rather about the *ethical reason* for positing the existence of God, rather than the conception of God that is posited. The reason for positing and the thing posited are, in this case, surely separable unless one thinks that it is really necessary to posit God in order to think the highest good.

Part I of Kant's *Religion* contains his famous essay on "radical evil" (*radicale Böse*). The central task of the essay is to show that human beings possess a propensity (*Hang*) to radical evil that is innate but nonetheless imputable. The conception of radical evil that Kant has in mind, one that goes to the *radix* of the human being, is not reducible to one or more evil acts, but concerns evil maxims adopted by the human being. "We call a human being evil," Kant explains, "not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law), but because these are so constituted that they allow the inference of evil maxims in him" (*RGV*, 6:20). While actions are in principle available via sense experience, maxims (or subjective policies of action) are not, and thus in order to call a human being evil, her actions must be such that they ground an inference to an underlying *evil* maxim, or an evil *principle* of action. But what Kant is searching for is not just any maxim, but a fundamental maxim which is responsible for all other particular evil maxims. In other words, what needs to be identified is a principle *of* principles – a fundamental maxim that determines what particular maxims one adopts.²¹ For Kant, all maxims must contain an incentive (*Triebfeder*) and this incentive must be *incorporated* into the maxim itself. The incentive – i.e., the animating element, or "the subjective determining ground of the will" (*KpV*, 5:72) – must be incorporated into the maxim because if the maxim were adopted due to a causal force independent of the agent, then such an adoption would not be free, and thus would not be imputable.²² This claim about incorporation is closely related to Kant's famous treatment of incentives from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and there, Kant argues that the

²¹ In this section of the *Religion*, Kant famously calls this fundamental maxim a *Gesinnung*.

²² "...freedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim* (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself); only in this way can an incentive, whatever it may be, coexist with the absolute spontaneity of the power of choice (of freedom)." (*RGV*, 6:24) In the secondary literature on Kant's *Religion*, this has come to be known as the "Incorporation Thesis," following Allison 1990.

moral law must itself be capable of becoming an incentive.²³ Were an action to be determined by a maxim that happened to conform to the moral law without the moral law being a sufficient determining ground, then that action might be legal or permissible, but it will not be moral. If an action is merely legal – or indeed, if it conflicts with the moral law – then Kant assumes that a competing incentive is pulling the person away from the making the moral law an incentive. But because incentives must be incorporated into maxims, the person must be said to have incorporated this competing incentive into her maxim and is therefore still responsible for its adoption.²⁴ And it is this failure to make the moral law a sufficient determining ground that informs Kant’s conception of evil. Evil, for Kant, does not most fundamentally denote some villain performing sinister acts for their own sake, but rather has to do with subordination of the moral law to another incentive, typically having to do with one’s own pleasure, advantage, or profit. The evil one, then, is not just someone who does the wrong thing. Rather, the evil one might never do things that are explicitly contrary to the moral law. Evil consists in having the *ground* of one’s maxims corrupted, and thus, someone who does the right thing for the wrong reason is in the same moral category as the person who always performs the wrong action – the latter person is just less common. From a Kantian perspective, then, we might say that the paradigm example of evil is not the sadist, who derives pleasure from the pain of another, but the capitalist, who makes their own profit the principle of all action. Summarizing these points, Kant writes,

²³ See Chapter III of the second *Critique*’s analytic: *KpV*, 5:71-89.

²⁴ This argument is supposed to illustrate what Kant calls the “rigorist’s criteria” according to which one can neither be indifferent towards the demands of morality nor constituted such that she is good in one area and evil in another: “For if he were good in one part, he has incorporated the moral law into his maxim. And were he, therefore, to be evil in some other part, since the moral law of compliance with duty in general is a single one and universal, the maxim relating to it would be universal yet particular at the same time: which is contradictory” (*RGV*, 6:24-25). This is why the evil in question must be radical – because it “corrupts the ground of all maxims” (*RGV*, 6:37).

...the *corruption (corruption)* of the human heart is the propensity of the power of choice to maxims that subordinate the incentives of the moral law to others (not moral ones). It can also be called the *perversity (perversitas)* of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order as regards the incentives of a *free* power of choice; and although with this reversal there can still be legally good (*legale*) actions, yet the mind's attitude (*Denkungsart*) is thereby corrupted at its root (so far as the moral disposition (*Gesinnung*) is concerned), and hence the human being is designated as evil. (*RGV*, 6:30)

When one subordinates the moral law to other non-moral incentives, one's attitude, disposition, or fundamental maxim is corrupted at the root, and therefore renders the human being in question evil. And crucially, this is true even when we are speaking of actions that conform to the moral law. If my decision to give to the poor, for example, is made on the basis of a desire for a certain sort of social image, then the maxim of my action is evil because it subordinates the moral law to self-love. In this case, although my action might conform to the moral law, it was not performed for the sake of the moral law, and is therefore evidence of a corrupted, and indeed evil, maxim. In making self-love a principle of action, I have subordinated it to the moral law, and in so doing, I have reversed the *ethical order* of incentives. So again, the difference between the good and evil person is not to be sought simply in what incentives are incorporated into a maxim, those of morality or of self-love, but crucially, "*which of the two he makes the condition of the other*" (*RGV*, 6:36).

It follows that the human being (even the best) is evil only because he reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims. He indeed incorporates the moral law into those maxims, together with the law of self-love; since, however, he realizes that the two cannot stand on equal footing, but one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law – whereas it is this latter that, as *the supreme condition* of the satisfaction of the former, should have been incorporated into the universal maxim of the power of choice as the sole incentive. (*RGV*, 6:36)

This argument is designed to show that two competing incentives cannot be incorporated equally in a maxim, and thus, one must be subordinated to the other.²⁵ What Kant is attempting to show is that what is required for a satisfactory view of evil is a fundamental *Gesinnung* responsible for the formation of all posterior maxims, and the worth of this *Gesinnung* lies in a particular claim about ethical order.²⁶ The subordination of the moral law to the law of self-love, self-love made a fundamental principle of the adoption of all maxims, “is precisely the source of all evil” (*RGV*, 6:45).²⁷

The point, for our purposes, has to do with the notions of order and subordination. My suggestion is that the notion of priority or primacy that characterizes the relationship between morality and self-love is the same notion that characterizes the priority of morality to religion. These claims are emphatically non-ontological in character, as they refer to what *ought* to be subordinated, rather than what actually *is* subordinate. Now, this is not to say that there are no ontological or metaphysical claims made in the *Religion*. On the contrary, Kant’s text is full of such claims, the most obvious being his claim that one’s *Gesinnung* must be obtained via a decision made outside of time. What concerns us here is the *sense* of those claims. Kant’s arguments are not always designed to provide the most metaphysically sensible view of the world. That would imply that the standard for a philosophical position is, at bottom, a metaphysical or ontological standard – a position that bears little resemblance to much of Kant’s actual philosophical practice. His claims are not designed to say what is most plausible from a

²⁵ Structurally speaking, this argument is very similar to the argument of the primacy section. As we saw in Chapter I, the primacy section argues that theoretical reason and practical reason cannot simply be juxtaposed, but one must be subordinated to the other. Structurally this point is identical: the moral law and the law of self-love cannot be juxtaposed, but one must be subordinated to the other.

²⁶ As there is a significant debate over how to translate this word, I leave this it untranslated.

²⁷ While Kant’s argument does imply that subordinating the moral law to *any* other maxim is the source of evil, he thinks that all non-moral maxims are reducible to self-love.

metaphysical point of view, but rather to clearly explicate what is *morally necessary* to assert about the nature of the human being. The positions which Kant sets forth are designed to provide insight into the most fundamental concepts of our thinking, and for him, those concepts are inescapably moral. And it is here that ethical primacy comes to the fore. To say that ethics is primary in a sense that *is itself ethical* is to say that ethics is what is fundamental, what is beyond question, perhaps even what is sacred. That “ethics is *ethically* primary” means that ethics is that to which thinking devotes itself, and that in the service of which thinking operates. That is, ethics is the ground of philosophical justification, *not* what must *be* justified. It is therefore also the standard against which all thought is judged. Thus, the point is not just that ethics “is” most fundamentally, it is also to say that it is ethics that determines the ideal order of philosophical concepts. To make a claim about ethical primacy is therefore not just to make a claim about what is fundamental, it is also to say something very specific about what fundamentality actually amounts to.

At this point, the warrant for Levinas’ claim about Kant being a thinker of the radical question should be established. What Kant provides Levinas is an account of meaning that is not ultimately grounded in a reference to Being. Again, all the details of Kant’s thought are not adopted, all the architecture of transcendental idealism is not embraced, but the spirit that animates Kant’s radical question is taken very seriously in Levinas’ later essays, to which we now turn.

From Constitution to Fear: The Later Levinas

- *Ethics as First Philosophy*

We have seen that in Levinas’ early attempt to leave the climate of Heideggerian thinking, he was unable to leave behind a certain Heideggerian understanding of priority. That

is, although he did reverse the terms of traditional philosophical thought, he left the principle of connection between those terms untouched, and thus, failed to overcome his Heideggerian legacy. We have also seen that Levinas claims to adopt a certain mode of thinking that he associates with Kant's understanding of primacy. But in what specific ways does this Kantian inspiration show itself in Levinas' later work, and to what extent does this represent a shift in Levinas' thinking? To answer these questions, I suggest we turn to one of Levinas' final essays "Ethics as First Philosophy."²⁸ This essay is especially important, I suggest, because it clearly demonstrates how Levinas' understanding of priority develops. By comparing it to "Is Ontology Fundamental?," an essay written in devotion to a very similar question 33 years earlier, we can see how the later Levinas takes a different approach to characterizing the relationship between ethics and ontology.

As ever, Levinas' 1984 essay attempts to point to a meaning, here associated with "first philosophy," that is not reducible to ontology. Obviously, Levinas will oppose any conception of first philosophy that seeks to elevate a certain conception of knowledge (*savoir*) above all else. By giving a reading of a few key figures and moments in the history of philosophy – Aristotle, Descartes, and Hegel, for example – Levinas argues that first philosophy has been, on the whole, associated with a certain form of knowing, a certain form of knowledge. Not only, as Levinas claimed in *Totality and Infinity* and repeats here, does knowledge seek to reach out and grasp what is external to it, to reduce the distance between the knower and the known, this movement leads to a point in which knowledge *itself* is known. That is, what it means to think is to know, and the culmination of knowledge has to do with the point where knowledge turns in on itself, in on the knower, where one *knows oneself*. By treating the knowledge of oneself as the

²⁸ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader (LR)*, pp. 75-87.

pinnacle of knowing, and by making knowing the essence of thinking, Levinas argues that the tradition has reduced first philosophy to self-consciousness. By putting first philosophy, or “the very occasion for wisdom and the wise,” in service of knowledge, wisdom is equated with the true, that which reaches and grasps Being (*LR*, 76). And as knowledge, on this account, culminates in self-consciousness, knowledge of oneself is treated as the standard of wisdom, and thus, serves as the model against which all other forms of wisdom are judged.

Levinas’ task in “Ethics as First Philosophy” is to question this movement, to again pose the radical question, to ask whether or not there is a meaning that goes beyond knowledge and its ineliminable reference to the priority of Being and self-consciousness. Or to use the term he relates with first philosophy, Levinas asks whether or not there is a more *urgent* form of wisdom that exceeds or goes beyond the movement of knowledge. As is typical of much of Levinas’ work, Levinas returns to an analysis of Husserl’s thought in order to expose what lies beneath or beyond intentionality. Levinas’ basic point in discussing Husserlian intentionality is that intentional consciousness is not basic, but implies a *nonintentional* consciousness. He writes,

But this reduced consciousness – which, in reflecting upon itself, rediscovers and masters its own acts of perception and science as objects in the world, thereby affirming itself as self-consciousness and absolute being – also remains a non-intentional self-consciousness of itself, as though it were a surplus somehow devoid of any willful aim. A non-intentional consciousness operating, if one may put it like this, unknowingly as knowledge (*savoir*), as a non-objectivizing knowledge. (*LR*, 79)

Beneath intentional consciousness, i.e. consciousness of something or consciousness aimed at an object, there lies a consciousness *of* consciousness, a non-intentional consciousness. Unlike intentional consciousness, whose essential activity lies in its directedness at an object, non-intentional consciousness is “devoid of any willful aim.” As devoid of any willful aim, non-intentional consciousness is not best thought of as an active consciousness, but rather one that

lies beneath all intentions, all fulfillments, and thus, as *passivity*. Now, were one unfamiliar with *Otherwise than Being*, one might think that by describing non-intentional consciousness as passivity, Levinas is merely restating one of Heidegger's insights – that we are thrown into the world, that we are without having chosen to be. However, the whole thrust of Heideggerian *Geworfenheit* is that this original passivity must be overtaken, claimed, or resolutely adopted by something more active, by the mineness associated with authenticity. As we saw in our reading of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinasian passivity does not ultimately revert into activity, but is what he calls a passivity *of* passivity, a pure passivity. Passivity refers to something beneath intentional consciousness, beneath all activity, a non-intentional consciousness that signifies not in virtue of intentionality, not in virtue of the object its intention is aimed at, but rather because of its relation with that which resists the very order of presence. Indeed, non-intentional consciousness or passivity signifies in virtue of its being *accused*. Because the real sense of non-intentional consciousness lies in being accused rather than by aiming at an object, Levinas therefore concludes that originally (or better, *pre-originally*), “One comes not into the world, but into question” (*LR*, 81).

At this point, one might (rightly) wonder why we are focusing on the fact that non-intentional consciousness lies beneath intentional consciousness. Is this not simply a claim about constitutive priority? Is Levinas not claiming that there is something more fundamental than intentional consciousness, akin to the Heideggerian claim that all regional ontologies imply a fundamental ontology? Is he not simply claiming, then, that non-intentional consciousness precedes or *constitutes* intentional consciousness? Non-intentional consciousness is indeed constitutively prior to intentional consciousness for Levinas, and if this were the extent of his point, our claim that Heideggerian priority haunts Levinas' thought would still be justified.

Indeed, if his point were merely *that* there exists a non-intentional consciousness “beneath” intentional consciousness, our analysis would be finished, and while Levinas would be closer to ethical primacy than many others, he would still fall short. But what is relevant here is how Levinas uses this claim about constitutive priority to talk about something beyond all claims to constitution. His focus is on the *significance* of non-intentional consciousness, and the significance he invokes is emphatically *not* ontological. He writes,

...it is in the passivity of the non-intentional, in the way it is spontaneous and precedes the formulation of any metaphysical ideas on the subject, that the very justice of the position within being is questioned, a position which asserts itself with intentional thought, knowledge and a grasp of the here and now. What one sees in this questioning is being as *mauvaise conscience*; to be open to question, but also to questioning, to have to respond. Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say *I*, to be in the first person, precisely to be me (*moi*). But, from that point, in affirming this *me* being, one has to respond to one’s right to be. (*LR*, 82)

Part of what Levinas is saying here is that a shift in emphasis is necessary. Again, if his point was merely that the non-intentional is a more fundamental structure of Being, then non-intentional consciousness would still signify ontologically, would still revert back into an action, or into the order of presence. What the non-intentional signifies is that *responsibility* is the condition of possibility not just for intentional consciousness, *but for meaning as such*.²⁹ What is questioned is not just a claim about some fundamental structure of Being, but *Being itself* – the *very justice* of Being. In claiming that language is born in responsibility, Levinas shifts the emphasis *from* affirming one’s Being (which is associated with self-consciousness and ontology) to responding to one’s *right* to be. And crucially, one must respond to one’s right to be “because of one’s fear for the other (*autrui*)” (*LR*, 82). But what does it mean to fear for the Other, and

²⁹ As we will later see, even “condition of possibility” is an ethical term.

how does that relate to my responsibility, my right to be? To explain fear for the Other, Levinas poses a difficult question:

My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun,' my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man (*l'autre homme*) whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? [...] A fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intention innocence. (*LR*, 82)

To fear for the Other is to fear for the Other's death, to treat the Other's death as *more important* than my own. Indeed, fear for the Other's death is *my* fear, but understanding the sense that "my" takes here is crucial. First, it is mine because I am responsible for the Other. The violence that my existing might generate would not be an issue for me if I were not already responsible for the Other. Indeed, the primary reason Levinas introduces non-intentional consciousness is because of its connection to responsibility. What non-intentional consciousness signifies is, at bottom, that I exist in the accusative, that at my core, I am *for* the Other. Moreover, placing my responsibility over and beyond what I intend (both in a phenomenological *and* ethical sense) gives Levinas another way to say that my responsibility for the other is not grounded in my action, decision, or commitment. It is, he says, "as if I were devoted to the other man (*l'autre homme*) before being devoted to myself" (*LR*, 83). Because I exist in the accusative, because my passivity signifies beyond the presence associated with Being, or because it signifies in relation to an immemorial past irreducible to the present, it is "as if I had to answer for the other's (*l'autre*) death even before *being*" (*LR*, 83). Fear for the Other's death is thus my fear because at my core, I am for the Other. Second, though fear for the Other's death is indeed mine, it does not revert back into fear for *my own* death. As a contrast case, Levinas again cites Heidegger. Fear, in this context, is not reducible to *Being and Time*'s account of *Befindlichkeit*,

or state-of-mind. On Levinas' reading, these "states" have a double intentionality – they refer to the object associated with the state, and then back to oneself. Fear, then, would refer both *to* the wolf who causes my fear, for example, and the fear *for* what the wolf might cause: my own death. There is no such doubling in my fear for the Other's death. The fear begins and ends with the Other. Again, the fear is indeed mine, but the "mineness" invoked here does not refer to my death, but my responsibility.

What we have thus far seen is that, by shifting the emphasis away from the question of Being as such to the question of my *right* to be, the very justice of Being is questioned. Or in other words, what we have seen is a true Levinasian *suspension*. This suspension is not a Husserlian *epoché*, as what is suspended is not simply the existence of an object. Rather, emphasizing the question of one's right to be allows Levinas to suspend the "logical and ontological privilege," of the inevitable return to the self associated with ontology, and thus by extension, the "ideal priority" of ontology (*LR*, 85). As we now well know, one of Levinas' most basic claims is that the priority of ontology has only rarely come into question,³⁰ and the first thing Levinas says in 'Ethics as First Philosophy' is that this failure to question ontology has led to the assumption that it is the very source of wisdom. By subjecting basic ontological positions to ethical critique, Levinas places the locus of wisdom in a source external to ontology, and thus questions ontology's status as the fundamental philosophical discipline, or its "ideal priority." The meaning of Being, for Levinas, lies in a gesture that goes *beyond* Being, one that asks for a *justification* for Being, or indeed, one that asks "if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place" (*LR*, 85). Crucially, in asking me to account for the violence my own Being might generate, an appeal is made to my responsibility, not to my

³⁰ Generally, Levinas will allow for two particular exceptions: Kant's primacy of practical reason, and Plato's *epekeina tes ousias*.

comprehension. Responsibility cannot appeal to comprehension as it comes from an immemorial past that was never present, and therefore, cannot be re-presented or made the object of ontological analysis. At bottom, Levinas' point is that non-intentional consciousness or passivity signifies *ethically*, as a summons to responsibility, a summons that is inexplicable from an ontological perspective. He therefore concludes,

To be or not to be – is that the question? Is it the first and final question? [...] This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding (*compréhension*) of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself. (*LR*, 86)

For Levinas, the "first" question concerns my *right* to be, and the question of my right is not a question that ontology can answer. As a call for justification, the question's significance does not appeal to anything that Levinas includes in the ontological order – not to re-presentation, not to my *conatus*, not to my concern for my own death. Rather, it appeals to a fear – a fear for the Other's death, a fear that summons me to responsibility. Or as Levinas says, this first question appeals to my "capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it" (*LR*, 85). Importantly, what makes the question of my right "first" has nothing to do with a claim to ontological fundamentality, as it signifies *beyond* Being. That is, it is not simply the case that the allegiance to the priority of Being misses something that is more fundamental in an ontological sense. Rather, the firstness, priority, or primacy of the question of my right to be consists in the *urgency* of the question, or in its *ethical importance*. Or in still other words, what Levinas delivers is a conception of first philosophy, of *firstness as such*, that signifies independently of and prior to any ontological standard that could be in a position to evaluate it. *Ethics is not thought in terms of Being*, but in being asked to justify itself, *Being is thought of ethically*. And

here, we claim, the spirit of Kant's original definition of primacy is respected. In Levinas' work, there is indeed a connection between Being and ethics, and not only is ethics the primary term, the notion of primacy itself has an inescapably ethical meaning. In treating ethics as first philosophy, Levinas treats ethics as the locus of wisdom, the occasion for the wise. Therefore, the sense of "ethics is first philosophy" does not lie in the claim that ethics is a more fundamental structure of Being, but that ethics calls Being into question.

○ *Ethical Primacy and the Question of Method*

Let us return to where we began: in his attempt to establish the *ethical* primacy of ethics, Levinas presents us with a thought that is *first and foremost* an ethics. If this is the case, then it might come as a surprise that some find it difficult to locate "an ethics" in his work.³¹ Of course, our focus been on what it means for ethics to be *primary, prior, or first*, rather than with ethics in general, but we have nonetheless seen that Levinas' "ethics" is distinct from many traditional ways of thinking about ethics. For example, there is no reference to any abstract Kantian moral law, Levinas is not concerned with Aristotelian virtue ethics, and he certainly is not interested in the maximization of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Or as Derrida remarks in *Writing and Difference*, Levinas is not concerned with presenting a list of rules for behavior, but is after something more basic. That is, he does not offer us "a *theory* of Ethics," but "an Ethics of Ethics."³² Now, it is our contention that Levinas' investigation into the "Ethics of Ethics" unfolds as an investigation into, and a transformation of, the notion of primacy he associates with ontology. And to state the painfully obvious, this is an issue of method – a subject to which

³¹ For example, Diane Perpich's book-length study of Levinas' work begins with this question (Perpich (2008), pp. 1-16). It is worth noting here that Levinas famously says that his project is to find the *meaning* of ethics, not to "construct" an ethics – see *EI*, p. 90. It is possible that since it is so common to construct an ethics without first considering the meaning of ethics, Levinas' philosophy doesn't strike the common reader as an ethics.

³² *WD*, 111. Of course, this essay was on Levinas' early work, not his later work. Nonetheless, this description applies *more* to the later work than the earlier due to Levinas' transformation of his notion of primacy.

Levinas often seems averse. He famously claims that transparency in method is not possible, that we go wrong when we assume that the point of philosophy is to make something transparent, and that those who spend their lives writing on method have sacrificed the more interesting work that they could have done with their time.³³ Nonetheless, Levinas' work is obviously influenced by certain philosophical methods, particularly the transcendental and phenomenological methods.³⁴ Moreover, briefly looking at Levinas' comments on these methods can serve as a helpful framework against which we can situate our own interpretation of ethical primacy, as well as some popular approaches to Levinas' thought.

In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas approvingly cites the transcendental method as a way in which we may work backwards, as it were, from the experience of totality to the condition of possibility for that totality, to the "situation" where totality breaks up – infinity.³⁵ But in *Otherwise than Being*, a work which claims to have been faithful to intentional analysis, Levinas claims that the infinite – that which breaks up or ruptures the experience of totality – has a meaning that is not grounded in what he calls a "transcendental foundation for 'ethical experience'" (*OB*, 148). Indeed, he argues that appreciating the relevance of the otherwise and the beyond requires prioritizing that which cannot, strictly speaking, be experienced, that which cannot appear in a theme.³⁶ In this spirit, Levinas responded to a

³³ See *GCM*, 89.

³⁴ In what follows, I restrict my focus to what Levinas says about each of these methods. Of course, Levinas' understanding of phenomenology or the transcendental method can be disputed, as there are different ways people use those terms. I do not see any reason to contribute to the (already overly vast) literature on what – in general – phenomenology or the transcendental method is.

³⁵ Cf. *TI*, 25.

³⁶ In *God, Death, and Time*, he will go as far as to claim that "[t]here is no ethical experience; there is an intrigue" (*GDT*, 200). Intrigue, here, denotes the other in the same, the passing of the Infinite. For a discussion of these latter two terms, see Chapter III, §2b.

question about his “method” by saying that “[i]t is not the word transcendental I would retain, but the notion of intentional analysis” (*GCM*, 87). The essence of intentional analysis, Levinas suggests, consists in the insight that the ways in which meaning is accomplished are essential to the meaning itself. “If,” he writes, “in starting from a theme or idea, I move toward the ‘ways’ by which one accedes to it, then the way by which one accedes to it is essential to the meaning of the theme itself” (*GCM*, 87). Of course, if we think about transcendental methodology generally as any method that attempts to determine conditions of possibility, then we might be tempted to include Levinas’ account of intentional analysis under the broad term “transcendental.” But Levinas initially resists this move. He argues that transcendental methods tend to presuppose a static notion of “foundation.” “Foundation” is an architectural term which ultimately refers to something that is “before” all it supports. Because of this connotation, Levinas associates the very notion of foundation with “rest *par excellence*, the Same *par excellence*...” (*GCM*, 88). An idea is transcendently justified when its foundation is revealed, when its conditions of possibility are determined, but a foundation here denotes something essentially static, something at rest which supports that which is built on top of it. On this description of the transcendental method, it is easy to see why Levinas tries to distance himself from it. Far from justifying an idea by reference to a static foundation, Levinas proceeds from the human and her approach, and crucially, what such an approach provides is an alternative type of justification:

...there is another sort of justification of one idea by the other: to pass from one idea to its superlative, to the point of emphasis. You see that a new idea – in no way implicated in the first – flows, or emanates, from the overbid. The new idea finds itself justified not on the *basis* of the first, but by its sublimation. (*GCM*, 89)

For Levinas, an idea is justified in the passage from that idea to its superlative, or to its point of emphasis. Indeed, Levinas goes as far as calling emphasis a method or procedure for

philosophy.³⁷ His style of thinking, then, is based on what it emphasizes, and on our reading, *what* Levinas emphasizes is ethics (conceived as the relation between the same and the Other that breaks up or ruptures Being). And ethics is emphasized, not for its ontological virtues or relevance, but *for ethical reasons* (reasons which ultimately refer to my responsibility for the Other). So, if we are to analyze other approaches to Levinas' thought, our question will be, what is *emphasized*? In order to show why appreciating Levinas' ethical account of primacy is so important, I will briefly focus on some of the literature that deals with this notion in Levinas' work.³⁸

One way of thinking about Levinas' account of primacy, priority, or firstness is by stressing its relation to the phenomenological tradition. For example, Steven Crowell claims that the only philosophically defensible way of understanding ethics' primacy lies in appealing to the ethical relation as the only explanation for intentional content. He writes, "[e]this is first philosophy because it is only by acknowledging the command in the 'face' of the Other that we can account for the sensitivity to the normative distinctions that structure intentional content."³⁹ For him, the entire problem concerns the conditions for intentionality, and it just so happens that our relation to the Other is the best explanation for the intentional content we have. The ultimate justification for ethics' primacy therefore has to do with its constitutive power: "[t]he phenomenological justification for the claim that ethics is first philosophy lies in the impossibility of clarifying the normative within experience ontologically."⁴⁰ By phrasing the

³⁷ "I am treating emphasis, as you see, as a method (*procédé*)." (*GCM*, 89)

³⁸ Obviously, the literature on Levinas' work is vast, and much of it mentions the phrase "ethics as first philosophy." However, the notion of primacy is rarely thematized and given sufficient attention. In what follows I have chosen a number of sources that, more than others, give explicit (if, in some cases, still insufficient) treatment to the notion of primacy that Levinas' phrase depends on.

³⁹ Crowell (2012), p. 564.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 579.

problem this way, Crowell admits that what is at stake here is as much about “the transcendental ground of intentionality or meaning,” as it is anything explicitly “ethical” in our more common use of that term.⁴¹ This approach to the problem of first philosophy clearly emphasizes the *ontological* or *constitutive* power of the ethical relation, and thus, whatever sense is to be made of the claim that ethics is primary will ultimately signify ontologically *rather than* ethically.⁴²

In her treatment of Levinas’ 1984 paper, Bettina Bergo appreciates some of the stress Crowell puts on the phenomenological aspects of Levinas’ work, but ultimately suggests that we must better appreciate the move *away* from comprehension that Levinas’ work demonstrates. For Bergo, we must understand the difference between ethics and ontology along the lines of the distinction between wisdom and comprehension. She is surely right about this. However, she does not call attention to the fact that ethics and ontology are not just names for the terms of the philosophical relation, but that they also characterize *firstness as such*, i.e., the *connection* between ethics and ontology. For instance, she rightly claims that “the particular configuration of ethics and metaphysics that Levinas proposes...is less concerned with the epistemological ambitions of phenomenology than with a desire that belongs neither to intellect nor contemplation.”⁴³ Yet, she nonetheless concludes that the real sense of the ethics that is “first” lies in the fact that it constitutes intersubjective life:

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 579.

⁴² Indeed, Crowell even calls the relation with the Other “the basic problem of social ontology” (p. 566). Adrian Peperzak offers a similar statement regarding primacy. In *Beyond*, he claims that the best way to think about the primacy of ethics is that “the question as to ‘what there is’ (and how and why) cannot be answered if we exclude all normative connotations” (p. 34). This is the most explicit statement of primacy in *Beyond*, and it seems to be, in spirit, close to Crowell’s position – we cannot adequately account for what there is if we exclude normativity. Levinas surely agrees with this, but again, I do not think that it captures the emphasis of his work.

⁴³ Bergo 2012, p. 357.

Such is the project that Levinas unfolds: first philosophy must cede to ethics as the phenomenology of enacted intersubjective ties. This implies that first philosophy as mere epistemology is impossible, because it is derivative, and, finally, that the tension between ontology and theology in Aristotle's first philosophy is radically displaced in Levinas: it becomes the twofold moment of the gaze of the Other as summons, which elicits my address as the beginning of dialogue, and of a shared, objective world.⁴⁴

Now, our question about this position is not whether or not it is right, per se. As we have seen, Levinas does argue for the constitutive primacy of ethics. Our question is rather, *does this capture the emphasis of Levinas' work?* Though Bergo gives an illuminating reading of how the phenomenological aspects of Levinas' work relate to the Aristotle's claims about first philosophy in the *Metaphysics*, no mention is made of my *right* to be, for example.⁴⁵ Thus, it seems, the real sense that first philosophy has is, for her, reducible to *ontological* fundamentality rather than *ethical* necessity.⁴⁶

But let us say more about Levinas' statement regarding emphasis. Levinas made this statement in response to a question from Theodore DeBoer, whose 1986 article "An Ethical

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 358.

⁴⁵ Although she does not quite make primacy itself an ethical concept, Bergo comes much closer to doing so in *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics* than she does in her 2012 paper. There, the focus is on the ethical necessity of ontology: "...it remains true that ethics subordinates ontology *while* requiring it" (Bergo 1999, p. 40).

⁴⁶ Although I am suggesting that these commentators miss the point of emphasis in Levinas' work, they should be applauded for actually tackling the notion of primacy. What often happens is that commentators simply suppose that "primacy" or "firstness" has a meaning clear enough that they either need not discuss it, or they devote only a sentence or two to the concept. For instance, Atterton 1999, Avram 1996, Greisch 1987, Hughes 1998, Mosès 1998, and Wyschogrod 1999 all invoke either "primacy," "priority," or "first philosophy" in the titles of their articles, but provide no substantial discussion of what those concepts amount to, for Levinas. A notable exception is Murphy 2014 who argues that making the focus of Levinas' work "primacy" threatens to oversimplify the role of ontology in his work. She writes, "[m]ore meaningful than a debate concerning the validity of any claim to first philosophy is an investigation of the structure that marks the relation between ethics and ontology, a structure that in some ways undermines the pretense of first philosophy itself" (p. 17). As one might surmise from our analysis of Levinas' work, there is something profoundly right in this claim – the structure that marks the relation between ethics and ontology should be investigated. However, we disagree with the claim that this means that any claim to first philosophy is threatened. Murphy seems to presuppose both that there is only one sense of priority in play in Levinas' work, and that sense of primacy is not itself ethical, but somehow neutral – it is neither ethical nor ontological. By noting the different senses of primacy Levinas employs, one can appreciate the force of Murphy's argument without giving up on the project of first philosophy as such.

Transcendental Philosophy” attempts to incorporate Levinas’ response into a larger discussion of transcendental philosophy and phenomenology. After giving a reading of key aspects of *Totality and Infinity* and other early works, examining Levinas’ relationship to Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, DeBoer argues for a very specific notion of the transcendental philosophy that animates Levinas’ work. He writes,

In formulating a conclusion regarding the question of method, we can ascertain that Levinas uses a transcendental method, which is also called “intentional analysis.” In the final analysis, however, this analysis is not based on experience or self-evidence but on a tracing back from every intuition or reason to an ethical condition that cannot be thematized. This condition reveals itself when thought “breaks” in theoretical and practical respects, when the appeal of the other disturbs the self-sufficient existence of the self.⁴⁷

Transcendental methodology, on DeBoer’s account, is not differentiated from intentional analysis. They both call attention to the backwards movement in Levinas’ work whereby he proceeds back from “totality” (in *Totality and Infinity*) or from the event of Being” (in *Otherwise than Being*) to the *ethical* condition of that totality or event. By identifying transcendental conditions as ethical conditions, DeBoer not only gestures towards an ethical understanding of priority, but he also goes beyond the static foundations that Levinas associates with transcendental philosophy. Thus, he concludes that if Levinas’ thought can justly be called “an ethical transcendentalism, the adjective *ethical* must be stressed.”⁴⁸ Moreover, when confronted with this characterization and asked whether or not he agreed with it, Levinas had this to say:

Well, I am absolutely in agreement with this formula, provided that ‘transcendental’ signifies a certain priority: except that ethics is before ontology. It is more ontological than ontology; more sublime than ontology. It is from there that a certain equivocation

⁴⁷ DeBoer 1986, p. 108.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

comes – whereby ethics seems laid on top of ontology, whereas it is before ontology. It is thus a transcendentalism that begins with ethics. (*GCM*, 90)

We are entitled, therefore, to claim that Levinas' philosophy is a transcendental philosophy so long as the conditions that such a philosophy invokes are *ethical*, or so long as ethical conditions signify a certain *priority*. Or better, we are entitled to understand Levinas' thought as transcendental philosophy so long as we understand that the "beginning" Levinas invokes when he "begins with ethics" *is itself an ethical term*. DeBoer, therefore, comes *very* close to understanding the unique significance of priority in Levinas' work, but he ultimately stops short, as he fails to realize that Levinas' early invocations of primacy are modelled on an ontological understanding of that term.⁴⁹

The account with which we have most in common is found in Richard A. Cohen's *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*. "The importance of Levinas' philosophy," he claims, "lies in its 'argument' about *what is most important*."⁵⁰ Crucially, this sense of importance is a very particular one – one that is irreducible to knowledge or truth but is instead identified with the *good*. Levinas' work does not issue in a command to *know* the good, but is rather a plea to recognize that the good is *more important* than knowledge. The good is not more important than

⁴⁹ Moreover, DeBoer rightly cites Kant's positive influence on Levinas' work, but he restricts his focus to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, rather than thematizing Levinas' debt to Kant's practical philosophy. Also, Robert Bernasconi 2005 helpfully divides readings of Levinas' thought into transcendental and empirical readings. The former treat the ethical relation as a condition of possibility for posterior structures of Being while the latter stress the concrete "experience" that is sometimes associated with the face-to-face. Bernasconi rightly notes that the typical way of understanding transcendental philosophy seems unable to account for Levinas' resistance to the term "experience," and ultimately, Levinas' endorsement of the transcendental method does not preclude his treating the face-to-face relation in empirical terms. In treating transcendental conditions as explicitly ethical, as concerning the *ethical* primacy of ethics itself, I do not treat the term "transcendental" as opposed to empirical, and thus, I do not take my account here to fall prey to Bernasconi's criticisms of those who stress transcendental aspects of *Totality and Infinity* at the expense of its empirical aspects. Here, invoking ethical, transcendental conditions has to do with ethics' relation to ontology, not to the "absolute priority of the face-to-face" (Bernasconi 2005, p. 41). Indeed, what my analysis shows is that without an explanation of what *kind* of priority is invoked here, we risk misunderstanding the emphasis of Levinas' work.

⁵⁰ Cohen 2001, p. 4.

knowledge because the good “is” more fundamentally. To say that the good is more important than knowledge is to give good priority in relation to knowledge, and this priority, the principle of connection between two terms, is itself determined by the good, is an “excellence.” In other words, it is in Levinas’ commitment to “defending ethics *ethically*” that we see the heart of his distinctive way of thinking, and Cohen calls this commitment “ethical exegesis.”⁵¹ He writes,

Philosophy – in this case ethics, what I am calling ethical exegesis – would be the absolute source of all meaning, hence the ground of psychology and sociology and all the sciences, social or natural. While not another epistemological grounding of epistemology, ethical exegesis nonetheless still has the pretension to provide the *reason* for philosophy. But “reason” in the sense of “end,” “purpose,” “aim” – what is most important, most significant.⁵²

Ethics is the source of meaning, but the very notion of a “source” is transformed into an ethical concept. Following Levinas’ inspiration, meaning is treated in terms of a passage to the superlative, in terms of a claim about what meaning is *best*. That is, ethical exegesis focuses providing an account of what is most important, significant, or urgent. This claim about ethical exegesis serves as a framework against which Cohen reads the entirety of Levinas’ work, and thus, it should come as no surprise that it affects the way he interprets the priority of ethics. The priority of ethics, for Cohen, is likewise thought in terms of urgency, in terms of emphasis. He rightly recognizes that the sense of priority Levinas adopts cannot be reducible to an ontological priority (though he does not recognize that Levinas couldn’t escape this view in his early work). The priority of ethics, Cohen correctly notes, does not consist in the question of Being, but rather concerns one’s *right* to be. Moreover, the “answer” to the question of one’s right to be, as “more *urgent*, more emphatic” than the question of Being as such, “determines the answers to all other

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵² Ibid., p. 17.

questions.”⁵³ The urgency, the emphatic sense of the question of one’s right to be, then, best captures the sense of the priority of ethics.

DeBoer and Cohen, each in their own way (and Cohen to a greater extent than DeBoer), rightly recognize that what should be emphasized in Levinas’ work is its inescapably *ethical* nature. In our view, interpretations whose emphasis is inescapably ontological might very well be valuable for thinking about a plethora of issues. For instance, emphasizing the ontological implications of Levinas’ work might help to clarify his relationship to other thinkers whose thought are first and foremost are ontologies. Indeed, it is a worthwhile project to simply look at what Levinas’ ontology, as a whole, actually amounts to. But if not carefully qualified, these projects will miss the spirit of the work they seek to clarify, or its point of emphasis.

Resisting Cain’s Sober Coldness: A Conclusion

“Let us accept this for a moment: if Cain *is* not his brother’s keeper, then it would be necessary to *commit oneself* as one’s brother’s keeper.”

- Levinas, *God Death, and Time*, 182

If we have learned anything from Levinas’ work as a whole, it is that answering “yes” to the question “Is ethics primary?” is not enough. The early Levinas, in an attempt to show that we are not duped by morality, argued that morality is the fundamental structure in Being, a basic structure on which all other structures rest. As we saw, this claim is inseparable from a Heideggerian, “constitutive” account of primacy. According to this constitutive account, what is primary is what is most fundamental in an ontological sense, and thus the “primacy of the primary” consists in a claim about constitution. A structure of Being, for instance, in primary insofar as it constitutes all posterior structures of Being. The early Levinas, then, challenged

⁵³ Ibid., p. 126.

what Heidegger prioritized, but not *how* he prioritized it. What the later Levinas realizes is that his critique of ontology unwittingly gave ontology the very status it sought to contest. Or in other words, what the early work unwittingly shows is that the primacy associated with ethics *is itself* an ontological concept.

The later Levinas seeks to center philosophy around a meaning that signifies beyond Being. It is no longer enough to simply reverse the terms of a structure that is, at bottom, ontological; it is necessary to establish a new *uniquely ethical* sense of primacy.⁵⁴ This new sense of primacy is not solely concerned with what exists more fundamentally. Rather, primacy or “firstness” is an ethical concept, and has to do with my *right* to be; it therefore appeals to my responsibility, not to my intellect, not my comprehension. It signifies not on the basis of Being, but instead calls Being into question. My right to be, exemplified in my fear for the Other’s death, has a meaning despite the fact that it is unintelligible to ontology. My right to be, in other words, signifies only on the basis of responsibility, or *ethically*. For the later Levinas, to say that ethics is primary means that ethics is more important, more urgent than ontology. Thus, the calling into question of Being is not enacted as an ontological critique, but as an *ethical* one.

We have also sought to call attention to the later Levinas’ debt to Kant’s practical philosophy, especially with respect to the notion of primacy. Levinas reads Kant as a radical thinker who provides the tools for moving beyond Heidegger’s ontology. While we might point to the many aspects of Levinas’ thought that resemble Kant’s – the subordination of religion to morality, the close resemblance of Levinas’ account of nonintentional consciousness to Kant’s *Gesinnung*, and so forth – the most important has to do with the identification of a meaning that

⁵⁴ I do not claim that there are *only* constitutive claims in the early work while there are *only* ethical claims in the later work. Rather, these periods of Levinas’ thought can be distinguished by paying attention what they emphasize, and part of what this reading shows is that appreciating what Levinas does with the notion of primacy is a clue to appreciating what is being emphasized.

is not reducible to ontology. By treating practical philosophy as a way of determining what is morally necessary, Kant provides the grounds for thinking about a meaning beyond Being. Although, as we saw in Chapter I, Kant did not sufficiently appreciate the force of his own problem, he nonetheless provides the grounds for an understanding of meaning that is not confined to Being.

In closing, let us call our attention to the epigraph to this section. If Cain *is* not his brother's keeper, it would be necessary to *commit himself* as his keeper. This is the heart of Levinasian primacy. Meaning itself means beyond what is. To rest content with an account of meaning that only reaches Being, is to ignore the plight of the neighbor, is to ignore my responsibility for her misfortune, to fall prey to Cain's sober coldness. Moreover, to model philosophy itself on an account of meaning that is ethically impoverished is to ignore what is signified in events as simple as greetings, as simple as saying "after you." To recognize the force of the beyond Being is to recognize that the responsibility that the beyond signifies affects how we think *about* thinking. If our most basic question concerns our *right* to be, if it calls for a *justification* for our Being, then the answer it requires is not amenable to an ontological investigation into what "is." It is an injunction to care for the neighbor, to fear injustice more than death, and to prefer that which justifies Being to that which assures it.

Conclusion

Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy.
- Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 304

The current philosophical *Zeitgeist* is full of calls for philosophy to be more “practical.” Sometimes this general call is simply a request for professors to use more familiar examples in their courses in order to better demonstrate abstract philosophical points, as if all that is wrong with philosophy is its mode of presentation. Other times, these calls are more genuine. Motivated by the conviction that philosophy actually has something to say about the ways in which life should be lived, some insist that thinking philosophically can make one a better person. Perhaps this expectation is the reason why academic philosophy so regularly disappoints those who are not seeking tenure (and many who are). If contemporary philosophy’s basic orientation were not constituted by the desire to get the most nuanced, ontologically sensible, and indeed, *marketable* position on the page, what would be different about the discipline? What might philosophy look like if it actually prioritized – not just reticently or haphazardly “made room” for – speaking to the ethical concerns of common life *for the sake of the lives involved*? What might philosophy be if it were first and foremost concerned with what is morally necessary to say? In other words, what if Hölderlin’s prediction – that all future metaphysics would be part of moral theory – were right? If we now say that Hölderlin was wrong, it is not with glee, arrogance, or conceit, but with regret.

What can our minor tradition teach us not just about what philosophy is, not just what it can be, but what it *should* be? We began by showing that Kant, despite his claims about the primacy of practical reason, resisted the full subordination of metaphysics to morality. If Deleuze seemed to establish a closer link between metaphysics and ethics it is because that relation was ultimately one of identity, not of primacy. And though the early Levinas identified

métaphysique with the ethical relation, by treating the ethical relation as the (ontologically) fundamental relation *in Being*, he ultimately sacrificed the primacy of ethics to the primacy of ontology. What the later Levinas delivers that Kant, Deleuze, and even the early Levinas could not is an account of meaning whose ultimate sense is ethical. That is to say, what it means *to mean* is ultimately an ethical, rather than an ontological issue. If we are trying to discern what philosophy might look like if Levinas' insights were respected, and we know that meaning itself is more about ethics than ontology, is our proposal simply that philosophy departments ought to replace their courses in ontology and metaphysics with courses in ethics?

As we have already hinted at in Chapters III and IV, Levinas himself would vehemently reject this proposal, and understanding the ground of this rejection will help to reinforce a claim we have been making since the beginning – that an investigation into the ethicality of ethics should include an investigation into the notion of primacy. To say that ethics is primary in relation to ontology is not to say that ontology is not worth doing. Indeed, this is evident from Kant's initial definition of primacy. What is at stake is which term must be subordinated to the other, not which one we should practice. The issue is whether ethics should be ontological, or ontology should be ethical. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the later Levinas *insists* on the importance of ontology, so long as it is understood ethically. In his 1984 interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas was asked the following question:

Is not the ethical obligation to the other a purely negative ideal, impossible to realize in our everyday being-in-the-world? After all, we live in a concrete historical world governed by ontological drives and practices, be they political and institutional totalities

or technological systems of mastery, organization, and control. Is ethics practicable in human society as we know it? Or is it merely an invitation to political acquiescence?¹

Levinas answered,

This is a fundamental point. Of course we inhabit an ontological world of technological mastery and political self-preservation. Indeed, without these political and technological structures of organization we would not be able to feed mankind. This is the great paradox of human existence: we must use the ontological *for the sake of the other*; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends.²

This is the heart of Levinas' mature account of ethical primacy, and indeed, his most important contribution to those of us who continue to think in his wake. To say that ethics is *ethically* primary is not only to say that ethics determines what is subordinate to it, but also to demand that the *manner of determination, the principle of connection, the notion of primacy itself* be ethical. In Levinas' answer to Kearney, we see him insist on the *ethical necessity* of ontology. We must use ontology for the sake of the Other. It is impossible to give the bread out of one's own mouth, to borrow a famous Levinasian phrase, if one ignores the existence of bread. Likewise, it is impossible to do justice to the Other without taking into account what justice requires *for that* person. When I am approached by someone who is hydrated but hungry, it matters that I give them bread and not just more water. When I am approached by someone nourished but unsheltered, it matters that I give them a place to stay, not just bread. These,

¹ *Face to Face*, p. 28.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Levinas insists, are ontological matters. But the clear force prompting our concern for these matters is our concern for the Other.

So, what would philosophy look like if it prioritized ethics? Clearly, this does not simply mean that we ought to work harder to make philosophy “relevant.” This presupposes that it is *not already* relevant, which in turn suggests that the philosophy in question is, at best, indifferent to the Other and at worst, harmful to her. To return to our Stoic example from the beginning, a philosophy that prioritizes ethics will identify the *soul* of philosophy with ethics. That is to say, it will make ethics the animating element of philosophical thought, the most important and urgent aspect of what it means to think philosophically. An ethical philosophy will therefore be animated by concern for the Other, by the attempt to justice by her, rather than by the attempt to subordinate the concern for justice to the more abstract concern about what exists. Prioritizing ethics does not mean that we eschew ontology altogether, but that we subordinate ontology to ethics, that we strip ontological investigation of its autonomy and put it at the service of what matters more – the Other, and indeed, *all* others. If there is a risk in play here, it is that ethical philosophy will make ontology inseparable from politics. But if this seems like a loss, we would do well to ask ourselves whether or not our philosophy is good for anything – or better, *anyone* – outside of the academy. Or to end where we began, if this seems like too much to ask, we ought to ask ourselves if we have been duped into thinking that knowledge is more than a mere means.

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