

**Faith and the Feminine in Levinas**  
**The Horizon of Hope**

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## **Abstract**

The philosophical works of Emmanuel Levinas rely heavily on the revelatory face to face encounter with The Absolute Other. In this encounter the individual is forced to recognize difference, ethics, and in turn finds freedom. A question remains at the centre of this revelation in how the finite individual is meant to recognize the absolute infinite? This thesis offers a response to this question by presenting faith (an outwardly directed hope) as a preparatory condition of the individual awarded by the Feminine that ultimately bridges the gap between the finite and the infinite.

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## Introduction

At first glance, the philosophy of Alterity as presented by Emmanuel Levinas seems to rely solely on an unexpected revelation. Throughout his works, we are presented with a hard-lined ethical picture that confronts the individual with an encounter that appears to trigger a mysterious and radical internal transformation that brings about ethics, freedom, and the possibility of God. According to Levinas' account, the individual comes face to face with an Other who awakens in him the responsibility and freedom inherent to ethics, thus forcing him to obligation. Given this reading, it would seem that Levinas' philosophy comes to fruition through a passive experience, i.e. an outside intervening force which catalyzes the transformation of the individual. In turn the individual appears, through no action of his own, to realize ethics and the possibility of God's existence. Reading Levinas in this manner implies that there is a spiritual nature to the face-to-face encounter and subsequently removes the causality of the individual, if only partly. This is evident when we consider that under this reading, the prior actions of the individual do nothing to cause said revelation. To the contrary, the individual must simply meet an Other and is somehow able to experience all that this encounter brings with it. While this passive view of Levinas' account of Alterity effectively demonstrates the internal workings of the face-to-face encounter, it opens up Levinas' work to a plethora of criticism. How is it that a finite being can experience the infinite? To this point, what exactly is demonstrable from the notion of revelation? Meaning, what – if anything – can be understood from revelation? Given that the very idea of revelation is that it escapes explanation, how philosophical is Levinas' account of an ethical experience? Should we merely take it for granted, without any possibility of examination?

Now, it would be possible to simply dismiss this reading of Levinas as an ill-informed or misguided interpretation of his works, but considering the level of importance that he places on the face-to-face encounter and how it *imposes* ethical obligation on the subject, ignoring this passivity would simply be avoiding the problem. The fact remains that in order for Levinas' account to have some sort of practical significance, this notion of a revelation must be explained and its mechanisms brought to light. The easiest way of going about this is to look for other examples of the notion of revelation with the goal being to elucidate how it occurs. Some help is found in the works of certain authors within philosophy of religion, though a problem remains as most accounts of revelation seem to mirror Levinas' own, ultimately suggesting that the cause of internal change is external to the subject, out of his hands, so to speak. For example, Alvin Plantinga in his work *Warranted Christian Belief* relies heavily on the notion of spiritual intervention to bring about the internal change of the individual, going so far as to cite the Holy Spirit as one of the foundations of religious belief. This is made evident when Plantinga defines faith as:

A firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

While this may be a neat way of saying that faith is an acceptance of God's existence, the move still stems from a revelatory intervention of a transcendent being (i.e. the Holy Spirit) and tells us very little of revelation itself. Instead we are left in the same position as we are with Levinas, attempting to find a cause in a Being or experience that is inexplicable. This is not to say that Plantinga or Levinas are wrong, but what can philosophy – let alone phenomenology in the case of the latter – *say* about such a moment?

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 309.

Perhaps a way to resolve this enigma is to approach it sideways, i.e. through the faith that is required to “accept” revelation. Could it be that faith is the preparatory mechanism for Levinas’ revelation? Could it be that faith in fact sets up the individual’s encounter with the Other? What if the individual, *prior* to his encounter with the Other, experiences an interaction that prepares him for the face-to-face encounter? And only then could he be able to recognize the Alterity of the Other as infinite and compelling? Revelation of otherness and the ethical responsibility that ensues, one that is absolutely binding, does not happen *Deus ex machina*, but is shaped by a previous activity where the subject develops a proclivity towards the Other that helps to bridge the gap between the finite and the infinite. If successful, this approach would maintain the miraculous nature of the face-to-face encounter from the individual’s perspective, without leaving it completely mysterious, that is, without ignoring the individual’s efforts towards its realization.

Herein lies the goal of this thesis: to demonstrate the preparatory conditions and mechanisms that allow Levinas’ subject to come to terms with the infinite “height” of the Other, the very transcendence that simultaneously constrains him into absolute obligation and sets his freedom in motion, as the following pages shall demonstrate. To articulate this, we will need to describe the subject’s initial and guiltless egoism, one that seeks shelter in the comfort of the House, yet that also begins to open up to another – *Feminine* – presence. The retreat into the Home does indeed indicate a need for safety, but it also announces hospitality, a space the subject begins to prepare for an outsider or a foreigner (*l’Étranger*).

We will then turn to the appearance of the Other that breaks the subject’s solipsism. Infinite and ineffable, the Other suddenly questions the self’s happy enjoyment of the world. What the latter took for his own, exclusively, he must now give to the Other who towers above

him in absolute authority. He desires him in a way that cannot be compared to the needs he sought to satisfy in the world, a *metaphysical Desire*.

This is the moment of revelation we considered so problematic at the outset. To risk an examination of it, we have chosen the lens of faith. Though Levinas says very little about it in his works, there is a quote from a 1986 interview with Levinas, that caught our attention and provides clues towards understanding the encounter and its ramifications:

Faith is not a question of the existence or non-existence of God. It is believing that love without reward is valuable. It is often said ‘God is love’. God is the commandment of love. ‘God is love’ means that He loves you. But this implies that the primary thing is your own salvation. In my opinion, God is a commandment to love. God is the one who says that one must love the other.<sup>2</sup>

From this, it is difficult to see what role faith plays, exactly, though it is clear that it is instrumental in binding the individual to his *unconditional* duty to the Other. Faith does not confirm the existence of God, but of his command, *Thou shall not kill*. In other words, faith grounds the conviction that the divine exists in obligation, in my infinite responsibility to the Other. It is a mechanism which drives the individual to act in accordance with the judgments (commandments) of the Other. To put this otherwise, faith dictates a way of being for the individual.<sup>3</sup> The revelation’s capacity to astonish and transform the subject draws its power from the Other’s transcendence, but it does not happen ad hoc, in the barren soul of an aimless self. It occurs in a being, an “existent” who has already, though ever so slightly, turned its eye towards the horizon of the Infinite. This is not to diminish the authority of the Other, but to emphasize all the work required to bow before it.

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<sup>2</sup> Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 177.

<sup>3</sup> This notion falls in line with that of the Feminine and will be discussed later in this thesis, as faith will be shown to arise from the encounter with the Feminine way of being.



## Chapter One: Groundwork

Before engaging with Levinas' philosophical thought, it is important to start by clarifying the terms and notions he uses to articulate his metaphysics. On metaphysics itself, he writes the following:

It is turned toward "elsewhere" and the "otherwise" and the "other." For in the most general form it has assumed in the history of thought it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be that yet unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an "at home" ["chez soi"] which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself [hors-de-soi], toward a yonder.<sup>4</sup>

What is made clear from this passage is the very foundation of Levinas' thought; an essential separation between two aspects of human life, namely the familiar aspect of the individual and the foreign (transcendent) aspect which is wholly separate from him. From this *absolute* separation we are left to consider how these two aspects of human experience are able to interact with one another. What is required for the individual to acknowledge the transcendent and in turn live an ethically responsible life is some way of bridging the familiar world of egoism with that of the absolutely foreign that transcends his grasp. Let us unpack this in the lines that follow.

The first aspect of human life articulated by Levinas is the familiar world of the individual, a world that is dictated by the ego's entrenchment towards action and is demarcated by a subjective perspective. This can be seen when we consider how Levinas describes the individual, or rather how Levinas describes the experience of the individual as an "I", namely, to experience the world through an egoistic lens. As Levinas writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 33.

To be I is, over and above any individuation that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one's content. The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification.<sup>5</sup>

For Levinas, the "I" looks at the world, and in his gaze he can seize, consume, and transform it. The process of self-individuation, of both recognizing and reinforcing one's own personal identity is not just an inescapable aspect of one's life for Levinas; self individuation is literally what defines existing as an individual. When Levinas speaks of a "being whose existing consists in identifying itself," he makes plain the very foundation of a human existence, i.e. the persistent cycle of self-identification that founds our subjective existence. The best evidence for this assertion is found in our inability to find an example that counters it. There is no situation experienced by an individual that isn't marked by its subjectivity. As Levinas writes of the individual's existence:

I touch an object, I see the other. But I *am* not the other. I am all alone. It is thus the being in me, the fact that I exist, my *existing*, that constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality or relationship. One can exchange everything between beings except existing. In this sense, to be is to be isolated by existing.<sup>6</sup>

From this we see that for Levinas, every aspect of an individual's life –from the moment they are born to the moment that they die – is one that is driven by egoism; not the blameworthy selfishness of a given miscreant, but a starting point, so to speak, that initiates action and a first take on the world. Presumably this holds despite intervention, despite enlightenment, and despite revelation, for if an individual exists, that existence must be founded in subjectivity. In other

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<sup>5</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time & The Other (and additional essays)*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 42.

words, to be alive is to exist as an "I"; a conscious being who is able to act and control said actions.

Now, to be an "I" for Levinas is not just about existence; it is about action. The "I" is one who effects, consumes, and appropriates the world by manipulating it to conform to his own subjective desires:

It is enough to walk, to do [*faire*], in order to grasp anything, to take. In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that each individual – each "I" or “ego” – contains an inescapable entrenchment in action. To properly expound on the notion of action as being linked to subjectivity it is important to first consider perspective and how it relates to the individual. As mentioned above, according to Levinas the individual is able to experience the two aspects which make up life as a human being: the familiar world and the transcendent. The familiar world of the individual is primarily dictated by the self individuation that founds the subjectivity of the individual through his existence as an "I". In other words, this world becomes familiar to the individual. From this it seems uncontroversial to put forward that if the world is appropriated by the individual, then his perspective dominates it, i.e. the individual not only dictates the importance of objects within his point of view, but he also *comprehends* said objects. This follows when we consider what it means to put something into perspective. Taken in a somewhat literal sense, the individual through his perspective is able to *grasp* an object. Just like an individual can physically seize an object, the perspective of the individual grasps it through comprehension, he absorbs it and assimilates it. In this sense, the individual makes his a world that becomes increasingly familiar. I

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<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

hold them in my view, in my thought, and in my understanding in a totalizing movement, despite their resistance, i.e. *Sameness*. Objects of the world come under my control and are made to satisfy my desires *without asking*.

The above assertions are made clear in Levinas when he writes in the original French: "tout est ici, tout m'appartient; tout à l'avance est pris avec la prise originelle du lieu, tout est com-pris".<sup>8</sup> What is important to note regarding this quote is lost in English. Commonly, we would translate "com-pris" into comprehended or understood, but in doing so we lose the deeper meaning. This past participle refers not only to one's understanding of an object, but also to one's consumption of it, to an inclusion or, if you prefer, to a totality. Everything for the individual is "com-pris" or included in it. Our subjectivity grasps objects, taking them into our perspective and through this form of consumption, we find our inherent power (ability to act).

To be sure my own most inward sphere of intimacy appears to me as foreign or hostile; usage-objects, foods, the very world we inhabit are other in relation to us. But the alterity of the I and the world inhabited is only formal; as we have indicated, in a world in which I sojourn this alterity falls under my powers.<sup>9</sup>

This power, this constant and relentless consumptive force within the subjective existence of the individual is ever present, never ceasing and in turn represents a basic and central aspect of the individual, namely a deep entrenchment in solipsistic being.

### **Levinas' Happy Atheist**

So far we have examined Levinas' account of the self's existence, but this account is only a fraction of what it means to be an individual. The fact of the matter remains that we do not merely exist; we live and we *enjoy* living as selfish entities. What this means for Levinas is that

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<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, (La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, Netherlands, 1961), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38.

our entrenchment in action, our persistent self identification, and our perspective all aim to ensure a happy and joyful life. For Levinas, "pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment",<sup>10</sup> meaning that the existence of the individual seems to have a predisposition which is meant to foster personal happiness. This is key, for the movement of uprooting that pulls the self out of his egoism and towards obligation to the Other is not motivated by resentment or hostility towards this world. The subject actually enjoys his earthly, self-centered existence, he savors it; yet something *more*, infinitely greater than this mundane enjoyment, will eventually bring him to strive for something greater than his own personal desires, that is, absolute responsibility.

As it stands, before the revelation, the individual can be seen as enjoying his actions and his wants. His life is in and of itself an accomplishment. And with this in mind, Levinas puts forward that we as individuals do not merely live; rather we relish our existence and wallow in our selfish wants. In this sense the individual does not exist in a place but rather dwells in it. This notion of dwelling is a mode of being that is not only valid, but legitimate. Evidence for this is presented by Levinas with the introduction of the dwelling and its relation to self-maintenance:

Dwelling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself* [*se tenir*] not as the famous serpent grasping itself by biting onto its tail, but as the body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds *itself* up and *can*.<sup>11</sup>

Dwelling for Levinas represents a key aspect regarding the ultimate purpose of the entrenchment towards action that accompanies the individual, namely, personal independence. As mentioned above, the individual – due to his perspective and in turn his movement of appropriation – views the world as his own and therefore sees himself as being self-sufficient. This is not yet a

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<sup>10</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

condemnation of egoism for Levinas, who recognizes that the first movement of the self necessarily implies not only some control over a world that threatens the self, but enjoyment in doing so:

Things refer to possession, can be carried off, are *furnishings*; the medium from which they come to me lies escheat, a common fund or terrain, essentially non-possessable, "nobody's": earth, sea, light, city. Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it the elemental.<sup>12</sup>

The elemental, or the world offered to the subject as an object of manipulation and consumption, is seemingly at the mercy of the individual, but can also be against him. The individual has the capacity, the power, to manipulate and grasp the elements of nature, yet if left exposed to these elements he would undoubtedly be at risk. As a result we as individuals experience a fearful or at least cautious attitude towards the world. It seems uncontroversial to claim that this fear is not misplaced, for the world in its hostility has within it a potential to alter or dispose of the self. To put it simply, no one is immune to the potential harm of the hostility of the world, of Being, a threat that continually looms over the subject.

Levinas writes that "the world, foreign and hostile, should, in good logic, alter the I".<sup>13</sup> By this Levinas is pointing to the hostility or resistance that is present within the elemental world and the logical conclusion that accompanies the individual's recognition of it, namely, the alteration of the ego whether through injury, hardship, or death. It is in response to this recognition that the individual seeks to construct a house, a way of "maintaining oneself [*se tenir*]"<sup>14</sup> in spite of the hostile elements of the familiar world. The self-maintenance that Levinas

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<sup>12</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

speaks of when he mentions dwelling is not merely a statement regarding security; rather it speaks to the ability of the individual to remain an individual, meaning it allows the individual to articulate his own ipseity or self identity. This is made clear by Steven Gans in his paper on Levinas and Pontalis:

Dwelling is a stage beyond the solipsism of enjoyment, of 'living from' the things within the world, of property, possession and totalization. Dwelling is prior to the degeneration of desire into need, since it provides the window which gives the occasion for the objectifying look which seeks to grasp, dominate, possess and transform the world into a storehouse of products for use.<sup>15</sup>

From this we see that the dwelling or home is not just a celebration of the accomplishments of the individual nor is it merely a result of the individual's mastery of the world. To the contrary, dwelling is a result of ipseity (personal identification); it is the manner by which the individual addresses the elemental, that is, his mastery over the world and following separation and independence from it. As Levinas writes:

The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the *way* of the same. I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession [...] This reversion of the alterity of the world to self-identification must be taken seriously; the "moments" of this identification—the body, the home, labour, possession, economy—are not to figure as empirical and contingent data, laid over the formal skeleton of the same; they are the articulations of this structure.<sup>16</sup>

From the above quote, we see that for Levinas, this reinforcement and justification directly informs how the individual lives. The building of a home and in turn dwelling in it, can be seen as the way that the individual's life is an extension of his egoistic existence. Alone, the individual is compelled to separate himself from the familiar world partly from fear of the unpredictability

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<sup>15</sup> Steven Gans, "Levinas and Pontalis," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 87.

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38. [...] added by me to maintain subject clarity.

of the elemental, but mainly as a way of solidifying his own independence and happiness. These are the conditions for happiness, one that is driven by egoism and self-identification and is made to live in a manner that ensures the reinforcement and justification of his independence and happiness.

So far, Levinas' account of the individual's self-centered existence doesn't seem to call for faith. What need would there be for it? As Chris Harris rightly points out in his work "Towards an Understanding of Home: Levinas And The New Testament":

This separated I, focused on its own physical and intellectual pleasures, is of course an atheist. There is no move toward the transcendent. Yet Levinas is not critical of this atheism. It is simply a fact. "To be I, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created—these are synonyms" (Lévinas 1969,148). More positively, the separated I is capable of the interiority and the freedom which resists totalization by the State and other institutions.<sup>17</sup>

The individual, when considered alone, is happy, strong, independent, and as a result seems to have no need for faith. Levinas takes the individual's atheism even further giving it such a privileged position that he even cites it as being a direct result of the will and ironically as a gift from God:

It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself. We name "will" a being conditioned in such a way that without being *causa sui* is first with respect to its cause. The psychism is the possibility for such a being. The psychism will be specified as sensibility, the element of enjoyment, as egoism.<sup>18</sup>

From this it is apparent that even though we do not create ourselves (are *causa sui*), we do in a sense, shape our own lives through the pursuit of our happiness, desire, and egoistic drive, that

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<sup>17</sup> Chris Harris, "Towards an Understanding of Home: Levinas And The New Testament," *Religious Education* 90, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall, 1995): 438.

<sup>18</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 58-59.



is, we live an *atheistic* existence that is independent, separated from any other reference. This concept is made especially clear by Michael Barnes in his essay “The Intimacy of Distance: On Faith Learning From Faith” where he breaks down the role of atheism as found within Levinas’ religious works:

So, if we are to be genuinely free and responsible human beings, God too has to be free to “keep [H]is distance,” precisely so as not to come so close that our humanity is swamped by feelings of the spiritual, the numinous, the sacred. In fact, for Levinas the religious experience of the faithful Torah observant Jew is precisely not vested in any sort of mystical awareness; it is, rather, to be found in the conviction of being commanded despite any such “inner” assurance [...] faith takes its stand on the paradox of “absent” or veiled presence, the God who is revealed only in what Levinas calls a “trace.” This enigmatic term, as Levinas uses it, refers not to any residual form which betrays the presence of God, but to how the other enters consciousness from beyond, from “the height” which is irreducible to Being.<sup>19</sup>

As Barnes points out, for Levinas the atheistic state of the individual is not a weakness to be overcome, rather it is a precondition that allows the individual to be open to Otherness and the revelation of God that accompanies it. As Levinas writes:

To relate to the absolute as an atheist is to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred. In the dimension of height in which its sanctity, that is, his separation, is presented, the infinite does not burn the eyes that are lifted onto him. He speaks; he does not have the mythical format that is impossible to confront and would hold the eye and its invisible meshes.<sup>20</sup>

The atheist is a spiritual blank slate, meaning that he is not compelled to behave in accordance with spiritual beliefs. In turn the atheist is only concerned with his wants and needs. From this, the atheist then can be seen as not only happy, but especially receptive to the possibility of further and deeper happiness. It is here that we read Levinas' praise of atheism split from our modern notion, in that the atheistic state of the individual for Levinas is precisely what allows for

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Barnes, “The Intimacy of Distance: On Faith Learning From Faith,” *Spiritus; A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 53.

<sup>20</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

the individual to come to realize the existence of God. To put this in words that relate to the redefining of faith, the atheistic individual being free from any preconceptions regarding spirituality, is receptive to a faith that is worthy despite his happiness and in turn is also receptive to the possibility of God. This becomes evident when Levinas considers the very basic fact that informs an individual's life, namely, the fact that we are not ultimately alone. While the convictions of the religious man would hold that other people ought to be considered as part of God's creation in need of either salvation or religious community, Levinas' atheistic individual is able to look upon others without any preconceived confessional bias. This puts the individual in a position which allows him to consider the Other beyond his specific background, and his voice as a universal command.

### **The Atheist & The Other**

Up to this point I have expounded on the notion of the individual as presented by Levinas. The individual as ego driven and atheistic is free from the convictions and preconceived notions put forward by particular confessions. In this sense he is able to live in the world as he likes; taking what is wanted or needed in the continuous consumptive cycle that is his life. He is happy to pursue his desires, and though he very much enjoys this existence, we cannot say that he is *free*. The individual is stuck, trapped in the consumptive cycle that accompanies his self identification, his point of view, and ultimately his egoism. If left to his own devices, the atheistic individual would in fact live a happy, yet selfish life, one we could call unfulfilled. It is only with the revelation of Alterity, i.e. the appearance of the absolute Other, that the ego can choose to break his consumptive cycle of egoistic desires and begin serving the other. A blind obedience to one's instincts in order to satisfy his needs does not speak of freedom; the latter requires a call that forces the subject to choose between two options, a command that orders

obedience but also opens the possibility of being rejected. In other words, there can be no freedom without the Other who calls into question my egoism, that is, there can be no freedom without ethics.<sup>21</sup>

With the atheistic individual being trapped in his cycle of self identification and egoistic desires, what is it about the Other that enables the individual to break free? According to Levinas what is presented to the individual upon meeting the Other is a realization of a difference that he has not yet experienced in the elemental, a radical difference that challenges the egocentric view of the individual. As Levinas writes:

Its critical intention then leads it beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other.<sup>22</sup>

For the individual, the Other presents the first instance of criticism (“remise-en-question”, in French) where the individual is put into question. A critique which stems from the Other toward the individual effectively questioning and judging his actions and his appropriation of the world which had been hitherto unchecked. Suddenly, the world is no longer mine alone; an Other emerges who begins to question my appropriation, my hegemony. And it is here that the individual realizes the notion of difference, a possible perspective that exists outside of the realm of the individual. To put this in the simplest terms: when the individual comes to meet another person he is in turn made to question what it is that he does and also what it is that the other person does, because for the first time in his egoistic life he is faced with something that he does not immediately understand; something wholly other than himself that can no longer be

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<sup>21</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83-84.

<sup>22</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

consumed. The individual encounters a Stranger whom he cannot know, assimilate, understand, *comprehend*. Whatever authority he had in the elemental suddenly disintegrates before a presence that eludes his grasp and his control. With the Other, the individual finds for the first time, something not simply given, but rather something that is wholly different from him, to his perspective, and his wants. Levinas writes:

Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [l'Étranger], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez moi]. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site.<sup>23</sup>

The Other or the Stranger as posited by Levinas, awakens the individual to a perspective that is wholly different to his own, thus breaking the individual from his cycle of self identification and desire. It is this break that allows the questioning of the individual's constant egoistic drives, revealing to him that the world is not wholly familiar and essentially demonstrating a limitation of the individual through the recognition of his inability to completely possess and control. This must be the case, for the individual prior to this realization is one who knows only the mastery he has over the familiar world. In recognizing difference the individual is able to consider the opposite of mastery, namely, frailty or weakness. As Levinas writes:

Frailty does not here figure the inferior degree of any attribute, the relative deficiency of the determination common to me and the other. Prior to the manifestation of attributes, it qualifies alterity itself.<sup>24</sup>

It is therefore an other who brings about the realization of a life that is not self-sufficient, a life marked by a presence that cannot be mastered despite its vulnerability, indeed because of it.

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<sup>23</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 256.

Here we find the breeding ground within the individual for an idea that what he does has an effect that extends outside his familiar world, ultimately upon those outside himself. With this the individual is made aware of the weight of responsibility that accompanies his actions. As Levinas writes: "a calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoism of the same – is brought about by the other".<sup>25</sup> This happens through the realization of Alterity, an idea of a point of view that is not of the ego, but of the Other. From this it becomes apparent that the introduction of an other brings the individual to doubt his actions. It is at this point that the individual has for the first time an opportunity to be free, as the ego is now faced with an option: either recognize and take responsibility for his actions in the face of the Other or ignore his call altogether. He is thus free to reject the call, but cannot preclude it, that is, cannot deny that there has been a call in the first place.

While the account given above regarding the sheer necessity of difference may demonstrate the importance the Other has to our freedom, it begs the question of how another person can bring about the realization of difference within us. For Levinas, it is the face, or more precisely it is the *face-to-face* encounter with the other person that allows the individual to consider the ethical responsibility that he has to that person. When the individual is presented with the face of the Other it is recognizable, but according to Levinas, it is ultimately elusive. The individual does not know based on the face what the consequences of his actions are. The face of the Other for Levinas represents an encounter altogether separate to that of the consumptive nature of the individual in that it is without capability. The face challenges the inherent ability of the individual in that it wholly escapes subjectivity. This means that the face with its own expressions outwardly represents a defiance to the consuming nature of the egoism

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<sup>25</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

of the individual. No matter what the individual wants, the face stands opposed expressing its own judgments upon that of the individual. Nothing of the face is hidden from the individual; it is therefore *naked* to him, entirely vulnerable and bearing no consequences, no effects, and no reflections of his desires. As Levinas writes:

Such a nudity is the face. The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me because I disclose it, what would therefore be presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perceptions, in the light exterior to it. The face has turned to me—and this is its very nudity. It *is* by itself and not by reference to a system.<sup>26</sup>

It is this nakedness, this frailty as represented by the freedom of the face that, for the individual, is overwhelmingly foreign. It is this experience of the face that allows the individual to realize that there is a horizon that extends beyond his consumptive cycle and opens him up to the notion of Alterity. The individual, unaccustomed to confusion when faced with formal difference, is shaken by his own inability to understand or comprehend this *absolute* difference. In turn he is forced to question his egoistic perspective. And for the first time the individual doubts his own mastery. With this the atheistic individual is presented with something that goes against his desires, questions his actions, and ultimately changes him. In other words, the individual comes to recognize ethics and in turn the possibility of God. As Levinas writes:

The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. Relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation. It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us. The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbour, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

Levinas here is making a connection between the Alterity that is recognized by the individual through his encounter with the Other and the absolute concept of Alterity that is represented by God. This is further solidified when we consider what Levinas said in a 1986 interview: "There are these two strange things in the face: its extreme frailty—the fact of being without means and, on the other hand, there is authority. It is as if God spoke through the face".<sup>28</sup> The confusion and mystery that is presented by the face of an other is representative of the confusion and mystery that is associated with the absolute Other, i.e. God, the source of Otherness in general. Levinas writes:

His [God's] very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan. The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behaviour and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God.<sup>29</sup>

The face-to-face encounter between the individual and an other demonstrates through analogy the undeniable nature of the absolute Other and Otherness in general, meaning that the individual experiences through analogy the mystery of the transcendent notion of Otherness in general. We can see that from this the individual is forced to come to terms with his own actions as they are reflected back at him through the judgmental expressions present in the face to face encounter. It stands to reason that because the individual is not privy to the thoughts and feelings of the Other he does not know if actions are indeed reasonable in his eyes. This places the Other in a position of privilege regarding the judgment of the individual's actions. Therefore, the Other can be seen as the ultimate authority, i.e. the basis for concluding the ethical ramifications and in turn the justifications of an individual's actions. In this, He informs the individual through analogy of the

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<sup>28</sup> Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality," 169.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

an absolute authority, that which stands as the ultimate judge. From this it can be seen that the Other not only determines what is right and wrong, but also that there *is* an ethical right and wrong, as found in God. This reading is cemented by Levinas who said:

The face is not a force. It is an authority. Authority is often without force. Your question seems to be based on the idea that God commands and demands. He is extremely powerful. If you try not doing what he tells you, he will punish you. That is a very recent notion. On the contrary, the first form, the unforgettable form, in my opinion, is that, in the last analysis, he can not do anything at all. He is not a force but an authority.<sup>30</sup>

The face-to-face encounter that is experienced by the individual reveals to him the existence of Alterity and allows him to realize the possible existence of the absolute form of Alterity, which is God. The introduction of ethics as found in the individual's questioning of his own actions accompanies this Alterity, effectively proving to the individual that there is both a right and a wrong; a good and an evil. In this encounter the individual is left to decide whether to continue with his actions or change them in the face of this newfound authority. It is here that we find the revelation of the Other. Unlike Plantinga's account, Levinas *does not present an intervening force* that changes the individual; rather Levinas' account of the face-to-face encounter describes an awakening within the individual, but this awakening is not followed by a demand but rather a command. For the first time, the individual is able to actually choose what it is he wants to do after he is faced with an obligation. The individual can very well ignore the face of the other, but in doing so he remains aware of the existence of a perspective that differs from his own and the effect that his actions could have when looked at through this point of view. As Levinas writes:

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<sup>30</sup> The specific question being answered by Levinas here is: "Is the face a simple or a complex phenomenon? Would it be correct to define it as that aspect of a human being which escapes all efforts at comprehension and totalization, or are there other characteristics of this phenomenon which must be included in any definition or description of the face?" - Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality," 169.



Reflection can, to be sure, become aware of this face-to-face, but the "unnatural" position of reflection is not an accident in the life of consciousness. It involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in face of the other and under his authority.<sup>31</sup>

Since the individual had been hitherto mainly concerned with his own desires, it follows that any form of self-reflection or ethical consideration would seem out of the ordinary, foreign, or unnatural to him. With this it follows that while he cannot fully ignore the revelation that accompanies the face-to-face with the Other, he is able to ignore his judgment. What this means is that the individual does not automatically believe in God and adhere to the Scriptures. Levinas' subject sees God's authority through the Other and is deeply unsettled by it. This distress awakens the individual to the Other's infinity or transcendence and, through him, to his absolute obligation, but in a way that he can subsequently reject his duty. The individual can look at another person, see that there is something different, something outside of himself, something which transcends him, and just shrug it off. The individual can do what is right and recognize his ethical responsibilities to others or he can go so far to the opposite as to kill the other person. Not murdering is an absolute prescription only because it is possible in the first place. What cannot be denied is the transcendent authority of the command made infinite by the very nudity of the face.

What is so striking about Levinas' account of the individual and his analogous revelation of God's existence is how superfluous God's existence seems to be. If the individual is free to act as he sees fit then why do we need God in this at all? This question is an important one as it reveals the mentality that has been spread by a certain view of God. For Levinas, God is not a guardian who steps in when you are in trouble, nor is he a controller who determines the

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<sup>31</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 81

outcome; rather Levinas presents a God who is only present in this world through the Other, which is why the only access to him is through ethics. God grounds justice in both the practical and conceptual forms of it. As Levinas writes:

To place oneself under the judgement of God is to exalt the subjectivity, called to moral overstepping beyond laws, which is henceforth in truth because it surpasses the limits of its being. The judgement of God that judges me at the same time confirms me. But it confirms me precisely in my interiority, whose justice is more severe than the judgement of history.<sup>32</sup>

Levinas here is stating that when the individual recognizes God through his encounters with the Other he is able to behave in accordance with an absolute form of ethics, meaning that the individual is not merely doing what is right according to the laws of the land or in accordance with some political system; rather he is able to do what is universally right. In opening himself up to this sort of gaze, the individual is able to question the effects of his actions and in turn his subjectivity is reinforced.

### **The Reversal**

While the above may explain the face to face encounter with the Other and the ethical responsibility that it brings, a question remains of why exactly an individual is meant to act upon this responsibility. What motivates the individual to choose to act ethically? The nakedness of the face may reveal or draw an individual towards his ethical responsibility, but this in no way accounts for why he *ought* to act in accordance with said responsibility. The individual for the first time is free to choose to act against his own desire so what exactly adheres him to the ethical? Now, this is not a question of action per se, but rather is a question of ability. Up to this point, the individual is merely an amalgam of desires and is made aware of his own actions through

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<sup>32</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 246

judgement. This does not remove the individual's proclivity to desire or consume instead, according to Levinas, the desire of the individual meets a reversal of terms. To fully grasp this concept we must first recognize that the ethical responsibility the individual is made aware of and in turn the potential results of his own actions are in fact forms of desire. And while the individual is familiar with his selfish desire for himself, the encounter with the Other awakens a new spectrum of desire by reversing its focus. While the individual usually wants for himself, this new desire wants for another. In other words, the face to face encounter with the Other takes the individual's desire and shifts it from one that is not *for* oneself, such as a need or a want, to one that is *from* oneself as a result of self reflection. This becomes evident when we consider Levinas' work "God and Philosophy" where Levinas writes:

But this desire is of another order than the desires involved in hedonist or eudaemonist affectivity and activity, where the desirable is invested, reached, and identified as an object of need, and where the immanence of representation and of the exterior world is restored. The negativity of the in of the Infinite - otherwise than being, divine comedy - hollows out a desire which cannot be filled, nourishes itself with its very augmentation, and is exalted as a desire, withdraws from its satisfaction in the measure that it approaches the desirable. It is a desire that is beyond satisfaction, and, unlike a need, does not identify a term or an end. This endless desire for what is beyond being is disinterestedness - transcendence - desire for the Good.<sup>33</sup>

The desire of the individual normally revolves around himself. They are selfish needs and wants which are directed at his own happiness. In the face of the Other the individual is marked by an encounter that exposes him to the notion of Alterity, to an absolute Otherness which extends beyond his grasp. It stands to reason that the responsibility that is connected to this encounter also extends past the ability and understanding of the individual. In turn, the desire to act in

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<sup>33</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. "God and Philosophy", *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987, 163.

response to the proceeding judgment of the Other is one that falls outside the scope of terrestrial desires. This is what is meant by “a desire that is beyond satisfaction”, as the want to act justly is a want which has no end. It is a way of wanting rather than a singular want<sup>34</sup>. This marks the complete reversal of terms for the individual in that desire takes on a new meaning, it becomes desire *from* the individual expressed in the way of his actions rather than desire *for* the individual gained from his actions.

Acting in accordance with the absolute authority of the Other occurs as a result of the reversal of the individual’s wants. This reversal is the inescapable result of the command of the Other. As was mentioned in the previous section, the individual is still able to ignore this command and act unjustly, though in doing so he does not remove this new found desire. What this means is that the freedom of the individual to choose his actions does not resolve the intentionality of said actions. The individual’s desire is transcendent in this sense, it is beyond fulfillment and marks an awareness of a permanent change of state. As Levinas writes:

This wakefulness or openness to oneself is completely exposed, and sobered up from the ecstasy of intentionality. We have designated this way for the Infinite, or for God, to refer, from the heart of its very desirability, to the non-desirable proximity of others, by the term "illeity"; it is the extraordinary reversal of the desirability of the desirable, the supreme desirability, calling to itself the rectilinear straightforwardness of desire. Through this reversal the desirable escapes desire.<sup>35</sup>

This notion of illeity does not directly represent the actual mechanism of Levinas’ reversal of terms, meaning that the individual does not see himself in the Other. He does not shift his wants because his notion of self shifts, nor does the individual act in favour of the Other for his own self interest. The use of the word illeity is not literal within this section of Levinas, rather it is

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<sup>34</sup>This interpretation is reenforced by Levinas when he writes: “He does not fill me up with goods, but compels me to goodness, which is better than goods received.” Levinas, Emmanuel. “God and Philosophy”, pg. 165.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. “God and Philosophy”. pg. 165.

meant to invoke the concept of the third person, the beyond oneself and objects. In other words, illeity is meant to represent the acknowledgment of the possibility of something that transcends the self, that awakens the individual to a desire beyond selfishness through the reversal of his desire towards the transcendent desire of the Other, namely the ethically good. This is what is meant in the above quote, that the individual sees another first as an object, then in the face to face encounters the Other and in turn is awoken to Otherness in general (i.e. Alterity, the possibility of God, and ethics). This awakening is illeity, the recognition of absolute difference that results in a surrender of egoism. As Levinas writes in “Phenomenon and Enigma”:

Desire, or the response to an enigma, or morality, is a plot with three personages: the I approaches the infinite by going generously toward the you, who is still my contemporary, but, in the trace of illeity, presents himself out of a depth of the past, faces, and approaches me. I approach the infinite insofar as I forget myself for my neighbor who looks at me; I forget myself only in breaking the undephasable simultaneity of representation, in existing beyond my death. I approach the infinite by sacrificing myself.<sup>36</sup>

The individual is awoken from his harmonious egoistic point of view and is made to realize the transcendence of the Alterity through the ethical.

After considering the above, we are given an answer to why the individual *ought* to choose the ethical when in a face to face encounter with the Other. Simply put, the individual through illeity and the reversal of the terms of desire should want to choose to act in accordance with ethics. The individual should encounter the Other and be changed, in turn moving away from his selfish wants towards the good that comes from the ethical. Speaking practically, we can only say that this should happen. Granted all individuals go through this awakening if they encounter the Other in a face to face, though that doesn't mean that they must or even do choose ethics. Ethics and in turn freedom, for Levinas, remains an incredibly difficult choice. While the individual is

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<sup>36</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. “Phenomena and Enigma,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987. pg. 72.

made aware of this new form of desire he must still overcome his selfishness in order to fulfill his ethical responsibilities. This would seem like an impossible task for someone who has never experienced anything outside of his ego before, though after we consider the role of the Feminine and the preconditioning that she provides for the individual in the next chapter we will see that the reversal as well as the ethical responsibility that accompanies it will seem less daunting.

## Chapter Two: A New Definition of Faith

### The Feminine

The most salient aspect of Levinas' account of the individual's revelation of God's command behind the encounter with the Other, is that in no way does the individual require faith to analogously see and in turn be judged by God. In the actual moment that the individual meets the Other face to face, the notion of Otherness is thrust upon him and, according to Levinas, the individual has no choice; he is struck by the infinity of the Other who now confronts him. Faith is simply not involved in this encounter. Beliefs are not required to make this revelation occur, nor is the change that happens within the individual sustained by it. If faith as a belief or as a type of belief is not necessary to an individual's revelation, then it must be the case that faith exists outside of simply holding a belief in something. With this we are left wondering what exactly faith is within Levinas' account and if it is even needed by the individual? Granted we saw in the last chapter that the individual has no choice but to recognize infinite difference and the transcendent notion of complete Alterity that accompanies it. Though if this is the case, how is it possible? Up to this point Levinas has made it clear that the individual is wrapped up in his consumptive cycle of self identification, so how is it possible for him to recognize something that exists outside of it and is so great that it exceeds its comprehension? In other words, how is the finite able to recognize the infinite? It seems hard to believe that the individual would be able to simply abandon his egoistic nature and view the Other as absolute difference, let alone recognize it as a source of ethical authority. This reading is cemented by Levinas when he writes:

How would a total reflection be allowed a being that never becomes the *bare fact* of existing, and whose existence is life, that is, life from something? How in the midst of a life which is from...which enjoys elements, and which is preoccupied with overcoming the insecurity of enjoyment, is the distance to be produced?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 154.

Here Levinas recognizes the difficulty that is presented to the individual, suggesting that it is in fact too much to ask of the individual to just abandon himself by separating himself from his desires while in the face of the Other. This aspect of Levinas' work highlights the need for faith as a preparatory condition of the individual that would allow him to recognize and in turn be able to welcome future encounters with others thus facilitating the individual's acceptance of Alterity and ultimately God. The aim of this chapter will be to show that faith as a preparatory mechanism arises inherently within the individual as a result of emotional and physical yearning. I will show that through his encounters with the Feminine, the individual – as a result of what Levinas refers to as the “original call for aid” – is conditioned to look to something else as a source of safety and comfort. From this I will show that faith for Levinas is a result of our longing for a return to the safety that is brought about by the Feminine and is expressed by the individual as an outwardly directed hope. Ultimately, this chapter will show that faith arises from the conditioned hope of the individual which allows him to be both receptive and conditioned to take part in the unselfish act of introspection when faced with an other.

The key to defining the mechanism of faith within Levinas' work stems from the dense and somewhat illusive notion of the Feminine Alterity. As mentioned earlier, Levinas offers a separate aspectual view of the world in which two aspects, that of the transcendent and that of the familiar, are ultimately made available to the individual through revelation and egoism. This twofold perspective is carried forward when discussing Alterity. To this point, the individual when faced with the Other sees through his eyes the very height of God himself. This Other belongs to the transcendent and must be considered totally separate from the familiar world. The Other in this sense is absolute Alterity. The Feminine Alterity, on the other hand, while still technically different, is not wholly transcendent and her encounter does not produce the



revelation necessary for freedom through ethics. In this sense the Feminine is not wholly outside of the familiar, nor is she completely within it. This suggests that the Feminine Alterity represents a different aspect of Otherness to that of the absolute Other found in the face to face encounter. This model is echoed in an interview, when Levinas answers a question on gender by stating:

allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the Feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or two genders), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and in the Feminine were the attribute of every human being.<sup>38</sup>

From this it is fair to presume that Levinas' notion of Alterity embodies this aspectual divide suggesting that Alterity is not only broken up into different aspects for the individual, but that this Alterity is not characterized by a single gender. This notion is reinforced by Tina Chanter in her essay "Feminism and the Other" when she offers a somewhat opaque definition of the Feminine, stating that Levinas "identifies the Feminine as the equivocal, recognizes that it is what it is not".<sup>39</sup> Chanter here touches on a very important notion regarding the Feminine within Levinas in that it is a non-binary concept. What this means is that the common cis-gendered description of the sexes is irrelevant to an examination of the Feminine in Levinas. When Levinas writes of the Feminine he is not writing about women per se, as the former cannot be seen as a category. In this regard, it would make just as little sense to identify absolute Alterity with the category of the masculine or rather, with men. The face has no physical traits that make it recognizable as a specific gender or race for that matter. As such we can see that the Feminine within Levinas takes hold in an area void of gendered description. This must be the case for if the Feminine is meant to shift from the familiar to the transcendent then to have a gender or to

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<sup>38</sup> Tina Chanter, "Feminism and the Other" in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 47

<sup>39</sup> Chanter, "Feminism and the Other," 51

belong as an aspect of only a single category would inhibit the transitory nature of the Feminine that Levinas is trying to convey. Therefore the gendered pronouns used going forward when discussing the Feminine are merely for simplicity's sake and do not speak of choosing between men or women.<sup>40</sup>

Now, the equivocal nature of the Feminine that Chanter points out does not stop at the issue of gender. As an aspect of Alterity that spans the gap between the transcendent and the familiar, it stands to reason that the Feminine will not easily fit into any given description. This becomes apparent when we consider that the Feminine for Levinas is not classifiable as a being, but rather is a way of being; a category of being that is created and sustained by the individual within the individual:

I am thus describing a category that falls neither into the being–nothing opposition, nor into the notion of the existent. It is an event in existing different from the hypostasis by which an existent arises. The existing is accomplished by the “subjective” and in “consciousness”; alterity here is accomplished in the Feminine. This term is on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness. The Feminine is not accomplished as a being in a transcendence toward light, but in modesty.<sup>41</sup>

Here we are presented with the most difficult and also the most important aspect of Levinas' notion of the Feminine difference in that the Feminine is neither a thing nor an object. We cannot point to the Feminine, nor can we distill it down into its parts. To the contrary, the Feminine is a way of being for the individual that reveals an element of Alterity within an object. Just as when a man falls in love there is no causal evidence that can be traced back to that which he loves. He

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<sup>40</sup> It is important to note that while Levinas does assert, that the Feminine Alterity is not a reference to a gendered notion or concept, he too falls into the habit of conflating the Feminine with the linguistic standards of gender. As we will see later in this thesis, Levinas refers to the Feminine as “the Woman” and in many cases will fall back into gendered pronouns. I am also guilty of this in this thesis, though I attempt to clarify the non-gendered basis of the Feminine, it is virtually not possible to discuss the topic without falling back into the comforts of our gendered language. This does not represent a weakness within Levinas' works rather, I feel that it demonstrates two rather fundamental failings that Levinas' works bring to light, namely, a limitation of the English language and the proclivity towards objectification of the individual. While the prior failing of language has been addressed in the passage above, the later will be discussed in the “Final Thoughts” section of this thesis.

<sup>41</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 88.

cannot build a loved one. He cannot distill her down into her parts because without “her” (without that aspect of Otherness, that Feminine Alterity) she is merely another object. The Feminine in this sense cannot be known outside of its effect, namely, the ability to change the egoism of the individual from a consumptive force to a protective one. This becomes evident when we consider that “the Feminine is not accomplished as a being in a transcendence toward light, but in modesty”.<sup>42</sup> From this it is clear that the role of the Feminine or rather the effect that the Feminine has on the individual is a product of modesty. This is not modesty in the sense of shyness or humility, but rather marks a modesty of its encounter. The individual is not drawn out is his egoism when he encounters the Feminine as this would mark a complete change of the individual. Due to the modesty of the Feminine the individual is not left completely changed as with the reversal that stems from his encounter with the Other. Though this does not mean that something similar to the complete reversal of terms does not occur.

### **The Feminine Reversal**

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the face to face encounter through illeity awakens the individual to a new form of desire, namely, a desire which stems *from* oneself towards the good as opposed to a desire *for* oneself. This marks a complete reversal of the terms of desire focusing the individual towards the transcendence of the Good which stems from the individual awakening to the absolute Alterity of Otherness in general. Now, the Feminine does not present an absolute Alterity. The dual aspectual nature of the Feminine represents a modesty in her encounters with the individual and therefore a complete reversal of the terms of desire is not possible within such a modest encounter. Though when we consider that this encounter no less represents the individual’s first brush with Alterity it becomes apparent that something of a

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<sup>42</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 88.

change within the individual does occur. We are not presented with a complete reversal of terms; instead the individual undergoes a pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire. This reversal is not a matter of action, but instead relates to ability. To this point the individual only wants for himself and in turn his ability to desire represents a truncated testament to his consumptive egoistic nature. From this it is fair to say that the individual does not have the capacity or ability to desire in any other way. That is, until he encounters the Feminine. This becomes evident when we consider that the Feminine is a different aspect of Alterity meaning that she is both transcendent and familiar. In other words, she can be desired, but she can never truly be claimed and consumed. It follows then that when the Feminine is realized within the individual he is for the first time presented with an object that in some way transcends his grasp. He is not able to consume the Feminine and in turn is woken to a new form of desire. A desire that, like the Feminine, straddles the familiar and the transcendent.

From the above examination we see the pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire which come about from the modesty of the Feminine namely, the desire to *have* rather than to *consume*. This, of course, is still a familiar selfish desire, though it is no longer a desire to consume (i.e. to bring completely into his ownership); rather it is a desire to preserve. This reading is given a solid foundation when we consider what is meant by Levinas when he speaks of one of the key elements of the Feminine namely, fecundity or the ability to reproduce. As Levinas writes:

The “transcendence of fecundity” does not have the structure of intentionality, does not reside in the powers of the I, for the alterity of the Feminine is associated with it; the erotic subjectivity is constituted within the common act of the sensing and the sensed that is the self of an other, accordingly is constituted within a relation with the other, within relation with the face.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. pg. 271

With this the notion of preservation over consumption becomes clear as the individual when encountering the Feminine is presented with an aspect of transcendence that is found in the aspectual nature of the Feminine Alterity. This represents a relation with an other rather than the true and disturbing face to face encounter. In this the Feminine can be seen as a gentle encounter which leaves the individual intact and secure in his egoism. To this end the individual is also presented with a literal form of illeity where by the Feminine awakens within the individual a desire to procreate. This draws the individual's wants towards a literal third person, a child for which he can protect and who will serve as his continuation. In turn, we see that the encounter with the Feminine Alterity mirrors that of the encounter with the Other, though does so with a gentleness and security that does not rip the individual from himself, but instead offers a pseudo-reversal of the subjective terms of his desires:

The movement here is thus inverse. The transcendence of the Feminine consists in withdrawing elsewhere, which is a movement opposed to the movement of consciousness. But this does not make it unconscious or subconscious, and I see no other possibility than to call it mystery.<sup>44</sup>

The inversion that Levinas writes of is the internal change that occurs within the desires of the individual. When he encounters the Feminine, the individual withdraws from his egoistically driven consumptive cycle. He is instead moved to soften his way of wanting which results from the gentle modesty of his encounter with the Feminine. This shift in his ability to desire is an internal one in that it stems from the subjective nature of the individual through the mediation provided by the Feminine. It is not wholly caused by the Feminine, but rather by her interaction with the individual. In essence, the Feminine Alterity awakens a new form of desire within the individual, a desire that is deeply connected to the metaphysical.

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<sup>44</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 88.

## Metaphysical Desire

The egoism of the individual predisposes him to see his own personal desires as the horizon of his existence. In this state the individual is naturally a solitary being who does not have the ability to recognize anything outside of his wants. To this end, he is happy to want and take as he sees fit. This is what it means to live the life of an atheist, a life whose goal is to ultimately reinforce the ego. It is right to say that this all changes when the individual encounters the Feminine: though it does not occur through a revelatory moment, the change still comes about through the subtleties of her presence. The individual still wants, but the desire that is produced by this encounter is one of preservation. It is a desire to be with something rather than to consume it. In other words, it is a desire for companionship. This represents a shift in the wants of the individual and in turn a shift in his overall outlook on the world. He is no longer happy to be alone in his personal satisfaction and instead he is given the ability to realize a desire greater than himself, a desire not just for the Feminine, but for her Alterity. This desire is known within Levinas as metaphysical desire namely, a desire that aims at something it cannot reach: not just difference, but absolute difference. As Levinas writes:

The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it. It is a generosity nourished by the Desired, and thus a relationship that is not the disappearance of distance, not a bringing together [...] Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea.<sup>45</sup>

The encounter with the Feminine Alterity shifts the desire of the individual whereby the individual no longer merely wants an object, rather he wants preservation and continuation through companionship. The individual cannot actually ever have the Feminine, as her equivocal nature prevents it. This metaphysical desire is precisely the reason why, for Levinas, the desire

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<sup>45</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34. [...] added by me for subject clarity.

for the Feminine cannot be objectively attributed to the object of an individual's affection. It is a desire for that which escapes objectification. This is made evident by Chanter who writes of the nature of the Feminine relationship with the individual:

It is not that one exists without the other, in the relation of love. Rather, Levinas is pointing to a fundamental ambiguity; the relation between lovers is characterized by femininity. It goes toward infinity while at the same time it is marked by a return to self.<sup>46</sup>

With the above Chanter demonstrates the specific type of want depicted by Levinas' individual. It is a want for an illeity that is driven by the egoism of the individual. It is a desire to have and to hold rather than the individual's familiar consumptive drive. From the above we can see that by wanting in this way the individual can rightly be seen as wanting and therefore is not fully drawn out of his egoism. Instead his wants are given a new depth by the Feminine thus allowing for companionship, love, and a less shallow form of joy.

With this said it is important to note that the metaphysical desire of the individual for the Feminine is separate from that of the metaphysical desire that presents in the face to face encounter with the Other. While both encounters represent a reversal of the terms of desire for the individual each reversal awakens a different form of metaphysical desire. As was discussed in the previous section the Feminine transcendence represents a gentle awakening and a pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire. In this sense, the metaphysical desire it instills is still deeply rooted in the subjectivity of the individual. He is drawn to the gentleness and security of her Alterity while the encounter with the Other offers a complete separation from security by shaking the individual from his own wants in favour of ethical responsibility.

### **The Feminine & Her Language**

While above we have offered a brief description of what the Feminine is within Levinas and the desire that she awakens within the individual, we are left with the task of understanding

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<sup>46</sup> Chanter, "Feminism and the Other," 44.

how it functions so that we can demonstrate how faith is derived from it. To do this we must consider language within Levinas. In the previous chapter it was mentioned that the face-to-face encounter with the other presents the subject with the first instance of choice and a way of breaking free from his egoistic cycle through ethics. If the individual accepts the revelatory moment presented within the face-to-face encounter then he takes on an ethical responsibility for the said other. The first step of this responsibility for Levinas is language. As Levinas writes, "the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a *right* over this egoism and hence in justifying oneself".<sup>47</sup> Levinas here paints a picture of conversation as being a non-egoistic act, an act that occurs in lieu of the egoism of the individual. This is to say that while the individual is deeply entrenched in his ego, deep in the throes of fulfilling his wants and desires he is struck with ethical doubt. In turn the individual speaks in an attempt to justify his actions and essentially accepts his ethical responsibility. The simple act of conversation therefore represents a break from the egoistic cycle of the individual in favour of an other. As Levinas writes:

The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an "I", as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself.<sup>48</sup>

From this we can see that speaking, no matter the content, is a break from one's own egoism in that it requires the individual to abandon his own wants in order to allow for a response.<sup>49</sup> This response is nothing more than an affirmation that arrives from a perspective that is outside of the individual and his ego. In this sense all conversation is a form of apology or, in other words, it is an acceptance of our personal ethical responsibility. There is a chance that the individual's

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<sup>47</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194-196.



actions could be deemed unjustifiable or justified and from this possibility it can be seen that simply engaging in conversation acts as an implicit acceptance of either outcome. Levinas goes on to further define the use of speech between the individual and the other when he writes:

Speech proceeds from absolute difference. Or, more exactly, an absolute difference is not produced in the process of specification descending from genus to species, in which the order of logical relations runs up against the given, which is not reducible to relations. The difference thus encountered remains bound up with the logical hierarchy contrast with, and appears against the ground of the common genus. Absolute difference, inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is established only by language.

Language then is not only how the individual is able to communicate with the Other, but it is what establishes its Otherness. It is a way to share the world with one another, but in a way that keeps the self and the Other separate; when the individual speaks he is essentially acknowledging that the other is not objectifiable, it confirms that *he* is not *Him*. In this sense, language upholds and justifies the separation that marks the face-to-face interaction.

This language and its subsequent relationship to the interactions of the individual that Levinas writes of does not wholly apply to the notion of the Feminine. As the Feminine Alterity represents a different aspect of Alterity from that of the absolute Other it makes sense that the language associated with it would also be of a different nature. And it is in this communicative difference between the Other and the Feminine that we are able to fully grasp exactly how the Feminine is able to function within Levinas' work. Levinas writes about the language of the Feminine in his section on dwelling, stating that the Feminine "is situated on another plane than language and nowise represents a truncated, stammering, still elementary language".<sup>50</sup> From this brief explanation it would be understandable to take the Feminine language as meaning a physical or sexual language. And while the physical nature of this language cannot be denied,

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<sup>50</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 155.

relegating the Feminine language to this domain does an injustice as it ignores the subtleties and power that Levinas is attempting to convey. When we consider what the Feminine does to individual (i.e. shifting his egoism into modesty) it seems unlikely that a strictly physical language will encompass the depth of this encounter and its effects. The Feminine language is more complex than mere physical interaction, it is one of the mind and the body. It is a mixture of intellect, physicality, and emotion. This interpretation is justified when we consider what Levinas writes of the Feminine in relation to eros:

Equivocation constitutes the epiphany of the feminine – at the same time interlocutor, collaborator and master superiorly intelligent [...] The face, all straightforwardness and frankness, in its Feminine epiphany dissimulates allusions, innuendos. Its laughs under the cloak of its own expression, without leading to any specific meaning, hinting in the empty air, signalling the less than nothing.<sup>51</sup>

Here we see that Levinas presents the Feminine as an other who communicates without a spoken language, whose encounters with the individual are marked by a dialogue that is not verbal but hidden. Now, there is nothing modest or hidden about the physical. There is nothing hidden in our grasp or as Levinas writes:

If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power. Furthermore, the relationship with the other is generally sought out as a fusion. I have precisely wanted to contest the idea that the relationship with the other is fusion.<sup>52</sup>

For this reason the language of the Feminine must stem from something more than the physical. If this is the case then the language of the Feminine must be rooted in emotion. Meaning that the Feminine communicates to the individual through an intimate and personal form of desire, namely, gentleness, love, and eros (lust). This reading is backed by what Tina Chanter alludes to regarding Levinas' concept of the Feminine:

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<sup>51</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 264. [...] added by me in order to maintain clarity.

<sup>52</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 90.

To put this another way, the feminine has a language, but it is a silent language. That is the language of love. Associated with the relation of love is the movement of eros, a movement which takes place both as voluptuosity and as fecundity. It is in the difference between these two planes, voluptuosity on the one hand, and fecundity on the other, that the equivocation of the Feminine is produced.<sup>53</sup>

Chanter here is directly linking the encounters of the Feminine and the individual with a silent communication grounded in human emotion, stating that the very definition of the Feminine is found in the individual's inability to decide how he wants her. He wants to caress her, yet protect her. This "language of love" is nothing more than an emotional communication, a communication that is catalyzed within the individual and subsequently sustained through the pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire. To put this differently, the individual recognizes the Feminine Alterity through a medium that is familiar to him, namely, desire, though the desire that is communicated to him by the Feminine is of a different sort in that it relies on relation. This means that, as a way of being that mediates the egoism of the individual, the Feminine's characteristics are dependent on the individual. In this sense the recognition of the Feminine is personal and specific to the individual. The qualities which denote her desirability are subjective and in turn act as an internal catalysis for change rather than being an objectively universal quality. It is something felt rather than attributed. For this reason the language of the Feminine is rightly called a mystery.

This mysterious language through which the Feminine is communicated acts as a mediation between personal needs and the metaphysical desire – or connects the life of egoism with post-Revelation existence – in that the Feminine invites desire but does not accept consumption; instead, it invites mutual nurturing and protection. This is the result of the voluptuosity and fecundity of the Feminine language. As Levinas writes of voluptuousness:

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<sup>53</sup> Chanter, "Feminism and the Other," 43.

Voluptuousness is not a pleasure like others, because it is not solitary like eating or drinking – seems to confirm my views on the exceptional role and place of the feminine, and on the absence of any fusion in the erotic.<sup>54</sup>

The Feminine beckons the individual to come hither for affection rather than consumption. It is equivocation, as resistance to the appropriating impetus of the individual begins to change. But why does this change? Simply put, the individual wants her more than anything. He is already familiar with desire and is accustomed to seek it out. For this reason it follows that when faced with a different and more intimate form of desire that grips him in both the mind and the body, he doesn't just want it, he needs it and to this end will do anything to get it. It is almost as if we were given here a third desire between the desire for personal need and the metaphysical Desire for the Other; indeed what we have is a *tertium quid*, a passageway that connects one experience to the Other. When the ego is comforted by the Feminine, he cares for the first time about something that is not himself. In turn the Feminine Alterity mediates the egoism of the individual through the prescription of emotional precepts. This reading is reinforced by Levinas when discussing the individual without the Feminine in an essay regarding the Feminine and Judaism:

But 'without woman man knows neither good, nor succour, nor joy, nor blessing, nor pardon'. Nothing of what would be required for a soul! Rabbi Joshua ben Levi added: 'neither peace nor life'. Nothing which transforms his natural life into ethics, nothing which permits living a life, not even the death that one dies for another.<sup>55</sup>

The role of the Feminine in relation to the selfish subject begins to appear more clearly. Without the Feminine, the individual cannot begin to separate himself from his own ego and in turn can never be free. With this it seems uncontroversial to state that the encounter with the Feminine represents the genesis of emotional understanding for the individual. This means that

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<sup>54</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 89.

<sup>55</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Athlone, 1990): 32-33.

the pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire brought about by the Feminine Alterity offers a partial break from the individual's egoistic cycle. As Levinas writes:

It is comprehensible and exercises its function of interiorization only on the ground of the full human personality, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority. And this is the new and irreducible possibility, a delightful lapse in being, and the source of gentleness in itself.<sup>56</sup>

While this gentleness (marked by the preservation of the ego) does demonstrate a change within the individual, it cannot be called faith, nor can it be considered its source. In the next section we will examine the vulnerability of the individual that arises from his encounter with the Feminine Alterity, ultimately outlining how the yearning that is produced within the individual brings about his faith.

### **Beyond the Feminine**

Above I have shown how the Feminine through the language of love is able to trigger a change in the egoism of the individual. The pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire that this produces allows the individual to loosen his selfish grasp of the world in order to embrace the Feminine. In other words, through the gentleness of the Feminine encounter the individual is able to feel a new form of want, a want rooted in preservation, procreation and care over consumption. We are now left with an individual forever changed. He now knows of the Feminine and the momentary lapse of being that accompanies her. But what happens when the Feminine is gone? What happens when the individual is alone again? Levinas gives the answer to this question and in turn takes us a step closer to finding a definition of faith within his works when he writes of suffering and pain:

Is not the evil of suffering—extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude—also the unassumable and thus the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the

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<sup>56</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity*, 155.

possibility that wherever a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh happen there is the original call for aid, for curative help, for help from the other ego whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation?<sup>57</sup>

The “original call for aid” that Levinas is describing stems from the suffering of the individual, a suffering that revolves around the notion of abandonment. This is rather telling as it insinuates two very important things, namely that the suffering individual has already had an encounter with the Feminine and that she is the only cure for said suffering. The first insinuation must be the case as both solitude and abandonment presuppose a state of companionship or at the very least an encounter with an aspect of Alterity. The second, and far more important, insinuation that can be drawn from the suffering described above is the idea that for the individual the Feminine can cure his suffering. The original call for aid of the individual begs for help from “the other ego whose Alterity promises salvation.” It is understandable to read this description and assume that Levinas is writing of the absolute Other, as the salvation or revelation that it brings through the face-to-face encounter is well established at this point. Though doing so would be incorrect. The transcendent Alterity of the absolute Other is not one that promises salvation for Levinas; rather it *is* salvation in that it completely breaks with his egoism and, as a result, saves him from a meaningless life of vacuous pursuits by turning him on the path of infinite responsibility.

The Feminine, on the other hand, does not offer this revelatory encounter as the Alterity that she contains is merely a fragment, so to speak, of transcendence. In other words, she promises transcendence, hints at it and even invites and prepares the self towards it, but does not reveal it in full. The individual recognizes the Feminine within an object (person) and in turn is changed by her, though not entirely. It is a distinct internal change of the egoism of the

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<sup>57</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 158.

individual. For this reason we cannot call the encounter with the Feminine one ‘salvific’, but instead must denote it as a promise. This is what Levinas refers to when he writes that the Feminine encounter “includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other”.<sup>58</sup> The Feminine merely represents the possibility for salvation rather than salvation proper. Therefore, when we speak of the suffering of the individual and the original call for aid that it produces we are speaking of the individual’s need for the Feminine Alterity rather than the Alterity of the absolute Other.

The encounter with the Feminine Alterity marks a first for the individual in that it is the first time that he must consider the well-being of something other than himself and in turn is made modest. Granted, he does so in order to obtain the Feminine, but he does still have to consider something outside of himself. When the Feminine is removed and the individual is left alone to suffer, we are again presented with a first for the individual. It marks the first time that the individual looks to another for help. This is made clear by Levinas who writes:

Suffering is surely a given in consciousness, a certain ‘psychological content’, like the lived experience of colour, of sound, of contact, or like any sensation. But in this ‘content’ itself, it is in-spite-of consciousness, unassumable. It is unassumable and ‘unassumability’.<sup>59</sup>

The individual is incapable of handling his suffering alone and further more his suffering is a result of being alone. He is trapped in a state of yearning that forces him to look outside himself for help. This yearning is nothing more than a deeply intense longing for the Feminine Other.

### **Faith & The Home**

We have now seen how the Feminine through her mysterious language is able to change the desires of the individual by way a of pseudo-reversal of the terms of desire. With this the

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<sup>58</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 155.

<sup>59</sup> Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 156.

individual is able to look outwardly into the world and consider the well-being of an other through his newly found form of desire. This desire for companionship is rooted in love and protection rather than his normal consumptive and objectifying behaviour. While the individual may ultimately still want the Feminine he more importantly wants to preserve the Feminine for himself. This leaves the individual permanently changed. He is now able to consider others as somewhat different to himself, as representing an aspect of Alterity that promises or suggests transcendence. Now changed, the individual for the first time is susceptible to suffering the pains of abandonment and solitude. He is left with the metaphysical desire for the companionship of the Feminine and in turn is made to seek it out in what Levinas refers to as the “original call for aid”. And it is within this call for aid where we find the definition of faith within Levinas’ works. This must be the case, as the original call for aid is the first time that the individual actively seeks out Otherness. In other words, it is the first time that an individual, from his own volition, abandons his mastery of the world in exchange for a chance at something else, at another presence through a different form of desire. With this being the case, I aim to demonstrate in this section that faith within Levinas can be defined as an *outwardly directed hope*. To do this, I will unpack the notion of the House and Home within Levinas’ work demonstrating how the Home acts as a vehicle for faith through the suffering of the solitary individual. In doing so I aim to not only solidify our new definition of faith, but also give further justification and credence to Levinas’ descriptions of the Home and its role.

Before delving further, it seems pertinent to first give a clear distinction between two terms that will be used, namely, the House and the Home. The House, within Levinas, is merely a shelter where an individual can find safety from the elemental. It becomes a Home when we consider two aspects that become associated with the House after it is lived in, namely, self



reflection and welcoming. While both of these aspects will be discussed at length in this chapter a brief overview will help guide the reading of this section. With this in mind, the individual in his Home is able to reflect on his actions and accomplishments through the collection of possessions thus reaffirming his egoistic mastery of the world. In turn he not only finds safety, but a metaphorical reflection of his self. The Home as a reflection of the ego of the individual offers a way to accept others into his life. As the individual, at this point is without the ability to shake his own selfish ego and accept anything outside of himself as more than an object to be used, the Home acts as both a space for acceptance to take place and a physical representation of the acceptance of others in general. In essence, the Home is a physical manifestation of the change afforded by the Feminine encounter i.e. the manifestation of caring for others through the newly awakened form of desire within the individual.

With the above distinction in mind we will now move forward to an in-depth examination of the Home. Chris Harris, in his article “Toward an Understanding of Home: Levinas and The New Testament”, gives an account of the House within Levinas that highlights its economic resistance to the hostility of the elemental world. As Harris writes:

In this sheltered nook [The Home] we can accumulate possessions. We can work on the elemental world, on its wood and its stone, and bring the products of our labor home. “Labor, possession, economy” are among the articulations of this symbiosis between the ego in the world. Levinas uses economy in its original Greek sense of household management. The house is my base for managing the world. It is also a place of recollection where I can be myself, where “the separated being can...shut itself up in its interiority”.<sup>60</sup>

Taken in a literal sense the House offers protection from the elemental while providing a respite from the constant fear and strife that the individual must endure within the world. While this may be true, Harris’ interpretation highlights the more subtle aspect of the House as it relates to self

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<sup>60</sup> Harris, “Toward An Understanding Of Home,” 437.

maintenance. This comes through in the idea of being shut up within interiority which in Levinas' language refers to one's own thoughts. With this in mind the House becomes more than a simple shelter in which we find security; rather it becomes a place where the individual is capable of recollection and, eventually, of welcoming if not care. In other words, the House becomes a Home. The individual is capable of developing himself, however egoistically, through and by his possessions. He is in turn reminded of his power and mastery over the world. The Home then can be seen as not simply being full of things that are not only of use but that act as trophies and mementos, further reinforcing his egoism. The individual looks around his Home and sees proof of his ability and accomplishments.

Harris' account is apt in pointing out that for Levinas, the notion of the Home runs even deeper, acting as a space of comfort and of peace of mind. This is made plain by Levinas who writes:

The recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over, for it to first take form as the world, is accomplished as the home. Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire.<sup>61</sup>

In essence the Home acts as a sort of egoistic center for the individual; the foundation and physical justification of his egoism. From this we see that for Levinas the Home is literally the materialization of the individual's egoism. As the Home is so intertwined with the needs of the individual he is fundamentally inseparable from it. This notion is echoed in Harris when he writes: "There is, then, some attraction toward this egocentric view of Home. But it is a view closed in on itself [...] a place to which one keeps returning. There seems no escape from it".<sup>62</sup> While the individual is happy to live amongst his objects and relishes in the constant reminders

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<sup>61</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 152.

<sup>62</sup> Harris, "Toward An Understanding Of Home," 438. [...] added by me for subject clarity.

of his accomplishments that the Home brings, the truest form of freedom (ethics) is ultimately kept from the individual in his sheltered state of dwelling. This of course is only elevated when he is face to face with the Other.

While the role of the Home in Levinas' work is unmistakably important it takes on a new and interesting dimension when we consider the Home in relation to the Feminine and in turn faith. As it stands, the individual within the Home is both protected and happy. He is at the same time comforted by his accomplishments and empowered by his mastery of the world in which he lives. Though this may be the case, Levinas is quick to point out that the Home is not without strife:

However, the negative moment of this *dwelling* which determines possession, the recollection which draws me out of submergence, is not a simple echo of possession. We may not see it in the counterpart of presence to things, as though the possession of things, as a presence to them, dialectically contained the withdrawal from them, this withdrawal implies a new event; I must have been in relation with something I do not live from.<sup>63</sup>

According to Levinas, the possessions within the Home are akin to trophies collected by the individual which reflect his mastery of the world and his ability to transform the elements to his will. And while these possessions are ultimately a good thing, they carry with them a twofold reminder of what the individual doesn't have. The first case that Levinas is attempting to describe is the insatiable need that results from the egoism of the subject, in that no matter how many things the Home contains it is always lacking. The physical desires of the world, however fully satisfied by the ego, continually leave him empty and unfulfilled. The individual looks upon what he possesses and is made to long for what he does not. In this sense, we are never able to be truly satisfied by our possessions. With this the individual is made to constantly seek out more

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<sup>63</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 170.

objects and possess more things in a never-ending egoistic cycle. The second and more meaningful warning that Levinas presents is found in the very purpose of the Home itself, namely in its separation. As Levinas writes:

But the separated being can close itself up in its egoism, that is, in the very accomplishment of its isolation [...] banishing the transcendental relation that alone permits the I to shut itself up in itself—evinces the absolute truth, the radicalism, of separation. Separation is not only dialectically correlated with transcendence, as its reverse; it is accomplished as a positive event.<sup>64</sup>

From the above we see that the capacity for reflection that the Home provides for the individual dialectically contains a reminder of the existence of Alterity through the individual's isolation and withdrawal from the elemental. It is not the possession of objects that contain a reminder which breaks the individual away from the act of dwelling in his Home, rather it is the Home and the isolation that it provides which forces the individual to recognize his desire for companionship. To put this another way, the Home for Levinas is inherently lonely and it is loneliness that plagues the individual in his Home reminding him that "I must have been in relation with something I do not live from".<sup>65</sup>

The relation that Levinas speaks of is nothing other than the first relation had by the individual; his relation with the Feminine. After being abandoned with the metaphysical desire associated with his encounter with the Feminine, the individual is left in a state of suffering (i.e. of loneliness). The individual who is now aware of the Feminine Alterity is also made aware of his egoism. This must be the case as the Home shows him what he has, namely, his possessions and accomplishments, though having known companionship the individual realizes that they are not enough to satisfy him. In this lonely state the Home and the objects therein remind the

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<sup>64</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172-173. [...] added by me for subject clarity.

<sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 170.

individual of what he lacks and in turn he is compelled to seek out companionship. The draw towards an Other that is produced by his metaphysical desire is so deeply rooted and foundational to his existence that it permeates his actions. In turn, the individual who is safe and warm in his Home is plagued by the loneliness that accompanies his thoughts and is analogously returned to a state of suffering. It is through faith (an outwardly directed hope) that the individual is able to take action ultimately in an attempt to change his current state.<sup>66</sup> Levinas writes of the individual overcoming the negative state of dwelling:

But in order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how *to give* what I possess.<sup>67</sup>

Levinas here is not speaking of a literal giving away of possessions rather he is speaking of the notion of hospitality, the idea of welcoming others into one's Home.

The notion of hospitality of course is not merely referring to allowing people into your Home. Hospitality for Levinas is a much more dramatic notion. It is the very abandonment of safety, the potential negation of one's own perspective or solipsism. For Levinas, hospitality is the offering which accompanies language and the ultimate act of faith performed by the individual. It is important to note that while language within Levinas' work takes on many roles in this particular instance, he is referring to a specific type of language, namely the discreet language of the Feminine. As mentioned in a previous section, this particular type of language does communicate though it does so without speech. It is a subtle language marked by an emotional and physical welcome.<sup>68</sup> The silent language that Levinas denotes as integral to the

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<sup>66</sup> This is known within Levinas as the last chance of the hero and will be discussed in detail in a coming section.

<sup>67</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171.

<sup>68</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 155.

individual's escape from the loneliness of the Home is analogous to the language of love of the Feminine. What this means is that the longing and loneliness that the individual feels while separated in the Home stems from his first encounters with the Feminine. He is reminded while in the Home that he was nurtured, loved, and made better by this relation. In this sense Levinas calls for the individual to give away the most important thing that belongs to him namely, his mastery of the world through the sharing of it.

It is in the opening of the Home (the welcoming), the acceptance of and need for intimacy that haunts the lonely individual, that we see the Home as being a vehicle for the individual's faith. While the need to welcome others that stems from his isolation is a result of the individual's relation with the Feminine, the solution to this loneliness is only possible because of his faith (hope). Remember that up until the moment where the ego nestles in the Home in lonely isolation that he is not merely happy; rather the individual from his perspective is the most important thing in the whole world. In his egoism, he is made master of all things and in turn is imbued with the sense of importance and power that accompanies it. With this in mind the very notion of giving up this power while relinquishing his security through the welcoming of others into his Home must be thought of as incredibly difficult. Just as was mentioned when discussing the individual coming face to face with the Other, it seems shocking that the egoistic individual who is safe in his Home would simply give up his mastery of the world in order to share his possessions, yet now that the individual has faith it is a much more likely scenario. As Levinas writes:

And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, interiority of the home, and inhabitation [...] In human welcome the language that keeps silence remains an essential possibility. Those comings and goings of the Feminine being whose footsteps reverberate the secret depths of being are not the turbid mystery of the animal and feline presence whose strange

ambiguity Baudelaire likes to evoke. The separation that is concretized through the intimacy of the dwelling outlines new relations with the elements.<sup>69</sup>

The individual is able to open his Home thus transforming it into a Home because of the faith (the outwardly directed hope) he feels towards the Feminine Alterity. He is so passionate for the Feminine, has such a positive desire based on of his past relations that he is willing to potentially lose everything for it. The reverberations of the Feminine which Levinas speaks of are nothing other than the accumulation of the individual's positive memories of the Feminine<sup>70</sup> and in turn the individual opens his Home and relinquishes his security as a result of his faith in the Feminine Alterity. What is important to note here is that this act contains no guarantee. There is no rational justification for the individual to think that relinquishing his security will end in anything but his death. It is faith, the hope that the individual feels towards the Feminine, that drives him to act against his own self preservation. Through the opening of his Home and his world to the possibility of further relations with the Feminine Alterity, the individual is able to live a life of faith and it is the welcoming into the Home that instigates this.

Without the Feminine the individual would not know loneliness and to this point he would not be able to escape its suffering. His faith allows the individual to have hope for the Feminine and to recognize the necessity of the Feminine Alterity in his world. This faith in turn is what allows the individual to come face to face with the Other and reverberates throughout his life. It informs his perspective, shapes his house into a Home, and when considered in the face of an Other, gives him a chance at freedom from his egoistic desires.

Before going further, it is very important to address a possible misunderstanding that could arise from the account that I have given of the suffering individual. It would appear that

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<sup>69</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 155-156. [...] Added by me to maintain subject clarity.

<sup>70</sup> It is important to note that this does not necessarily rely on the existence of an actual woman rather, it is dependent on whatever form of the Feminine evoked the new form of desire within the individual.

when the individual is left alone in his Home, he suffers. This is true, though this suffering is not a suffering of solitude in the sense of the individual's solitary existence; rather it is the suffering of loneliness. Now, this distinction may seem purely semantic, but for Levinas it is not. The solitude of existence for Levinas is the subjective nature of the individual and represents the mastery of world through his own egoism. In this sense solitude can be seen as both the source of mastery and dignity for the individual. The suffering that is the focus of this section is of a different sort in that it stems from the removal of relationships. As such this suffering can only affect an individual who has already been made aware of the Feminine Alterity, and her importance. The loneliness of the individual who is aware of his egoism through the companionship afforded by the Feminine Alterity is in a state which shakes his very way of thinking. Before the Feminine, the individual only wanted for himself and the House acted as the receptacle for his accomplishments. Now that the individual is alone and for the first time realizes what it truly means to be alone (i.e. without companionship) the individual experiences the opposite of mastery. The House becomes about the revulsion towards attainability. It is a monument to being without her. This is the suffering of the lonely individual and is what ultimately draws him away from the house and towards a Home for sharing with an Other.



## Conclusions:

### Why Hope?

In the above section I have shown how faith as an outwardly directed hope comes to affect the individual and how it is actualized while in the house. And though this may have demonstrated the notion of faith as being hope for the individual, it does not offer a direct and solid foundation for this definition as found within Levinas' work. From the above consideration of the Home I demonstrated why it is hope; I must now demonstrate why it *has* to be hope. In this section I will offer a justification for hope by examining the notion of suffering in connection with Levinas' words on the hero and the notion of the last chance. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that hope is the only active recourse for the suffering individual and in turn the only possible definition for faith within Levinas' works.

Levinas begins his discussion on heroism by first outlining the relationship that suffering has to death, stating that:

In suffering there is, at the same time as the call to an impossible nothingness, the proximity of death. There is not only the feeling and the knowledge that suffering can end in death. Pain of itself included like a paroxysm.<sup>71</sup>

From this we see that for Levinas, the suffering of the individual which occurs as a result of his loneliness both reminds and informs him that death is a possibility. Suffering in this sense reveals the potential disconnection from being that occurs with death and unveils through analogy the opposite of transcendence (i.e. infinity), namely, nothingness. Now, the suffering individual is not actually faced with nothingness, as this would imply an impossible connection with infinity. In other words, it would suggest a preconceived knowledge of all things (infinity)

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<sup>71</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 69.

which would then give the individual the ability to recognize its opposite (nothingness). Instead Levinas is quick to put forward that the suffering of the individual is one of need<sup>72</sup> (in our case, of companionship). With this in mind, suffering and death present themselves to the individual as passivity or, in other words, the seeming removal of his abilities:

This way death has of announcing itself in suffering, outside all light, is an experience of the passivity of the subject, which until then had been active and remained active even when it was overwhelmed by its own nature, but reserved its possibility of assuming its factual state.<sup>73</sup>

It follows that the individual who is suffering is in fact placed in a position of inaction. When the individual suffers he experiences that suffering as something being done to him. In this sense, suffering can be seen as a way of being for the individual that feels to him like a trap or a cage. These, of course, are mere metaphors, though they function to illustrate the passivity of this experience. The suffering individual does not just feel his suffering, he lives in it as if ensnared by an outside force. This idea is mirrored in the descriptions in the last section of the lonely individual who suffers in the House and embodies what is meant by Levinas who states that “pain and suffering are the phenomena to which the solitude of the existent is finally reduced”.<sup>74</sup> The overwhelming loneliness coupled with the inability to produce a solution turns the once safe and secure house of the suffering individual into an extension of his suffering, a reminder that he is alone and, without intervention, will remain that way.

While the suffering that Levinas describes is meant to highlight the individual’s passive experience of it, in actuality the individual is not without recourse. According to Levinas the individual is left with two options: he can either die (remain in a state of passivity) or, if he is willing to sacrifice everything, he can act out of faith against it. And this is precisely what was

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<sup>72</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 69.

<sup>73</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 70.

<sup>74</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 68.

outlined in the previous section. When the suffering individual is alone in the House he is reminded of the companionship he once had with the Feminine Alterity and in turn is made to choose to act against his suffering, through faith, or to allow his solitude to overwhelm him. Both, of course, are available options for the individual, but in allowing his suffering to take hold of him the individual is essentially resigning to death; or as Levinas puts it: “this is the passivity when there is no longer hope”.<sup>75</sup> With this being the case the only viable option for the individual is to act against his suffering. Levinas illustrates this when he outlines the main characteristic of the hero ultimately pointing to an act of hope (i.e. faith) as the driving motivation for the actions of the suffering individual:

Prior to death there is always a last chance; this is what heroes seize, not death. The hero is the one who always glimpses a last chance, the one who obstinately finds chances[...] In the present, where the subject’s mastery is affirmed, there is hope. Hope is not added to death by a sort of *salto mortale*, by a sort of inconsequence; it is in the very margin that is given, at the moment of death, to the subject who is going to die. [*Dum Spiro/spero*].<sup>76</sup>

From this we see that the individual who suffers while reminded of the possibility of death is moved to act out against his own annihilation. The “last chance” of Levinas is the embodiment of hope that moves the individual to overcome his suffering. While this could be seen as Levinas merely describing an act of desperation it is with the addition of Cicero’s famous phrase (*dum spiro spero/ while I breathe, I hope*) that we are shown that hope is meant to be much more to the individual. While alone in the House the individual suffers for the companionship of the Other and in turn what motivates him and drives him to relinquish his safety is faith. The egoistic greed that would normally motivate the atheistic individual is cast aside when he cries for help (i.e. relinquishes his safety by opening up his house into a Home).

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<sup>75</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 73.

<sup>76</sup> Levinas, *Time & The Other*, 73. [...] & [*Dum*] added by me to maintain subject clarity.

## **Final Thoughts**

To this point I have shown how the egoistic individual is changed through his encounter with the Feminine Alterity which awakens within him a metaphysical desire for companionship. As a result of this desire the individual is forever changed and is no longer able to simply live a life of atheistic happiness. Instead he is plagued by the suffering of her absence, locked in a house that reminds him of the Other that he once lived for. In this state of solitude and abandonment the suffering individual, through an act of faith, cries out for the Other, ultimately abandoning his relative safety for possibility of ending his suffering. It is this account that encompasses all of the preconditions necessary for the individual to receive and accept the judgement of the Absolute Other. Without the Feminine the individual would never look outwardly. Without metaphysical desire he would not open his house. And without faith he would not seek out an Other.

With the introduction of faith, ethics remains the source of freedom for the individual with the revelatory encounter with the Other resting at its core. This freedom, with its unwavering responsibility for others, still represents a difficult and relentless form of ethics that is ultimately dependent on the individual abandoning his wants for a deeper metaphysical desire. And while faith does not make this task any easier, it does make it possible. Faith gives the individual a chance at freedom and a chance at shaking off his egoism in lieu of the judgement of others. Hope motivates the individual to look outside himself while weakening his egoism which makes revelation possible, but not guaranteed. To this end, the introduction of faith helps to highlight the difficulty that the individual faces when dealing with the Feminine and how he is capable of resolving it. This is evident in that the Feminine Alterity and the desire that she brings

about within the individual straddles the transcendent and the familiar which makes her both desirable and Other. She is both a thing that is wanted and a thing that can not be had and while this does give her the benefit of communicating with the individual through a language that he will understand (i.e. want), it also leaves room for his ego. Just as the finite individual can not be expected to recognize the infinite of the absolute Other without some sort of preconditioning, he too can not be magically made to respect the Alterity of the Feminine. It is still in the nature of the individual to wrongly objectify (make consumable) the Feminine. He tends to conflate his metaphysical desire with a physical need, thus manifesting an overemphasis on lust and sexuality. Similarly, he attributes his desire of the Feminine to the want of a woman ultimately idealizing beauty standards, gender, and biology. Needless to say that examples of this remain prevalent in our society and seem to stem from an systematic proclivity towards objectification. Levinas' descriptions of the individual account for such a proclivity and subsequently map out the egoistic roots that make up its foundation. In doing so, we are presented with an explanation of this behaviour as well as the tools to uproot it. Tina Chanter articulates this concept to perfection when she states that:

Rather, he [Levinas] has taken femininity seriously and not merely defused the Feminine either by putting it down as 'weak' or by dressing it up to make it acceptable but only on male terms. It is the world of male values, the universal rule of reason, the law of totality that Levinas is reacting against when he says 'the virile judgement of history...of "pure reason" is cruel'.<sup>77</sup>

The cruelty of the history, the objectifying and disconnected interpretation of the totality of a situation, perpetuates the egoism of the individual. Through metaphysical desire and the faith that it produces Levinas shows that we are capable of breaking free from the violence of "the

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<sup>77</sup> Chanter, "Feminism and the Other," 53. [Levinas] added by me to maintain subject clarity.

fabrication of a thing, the satisfaction of a need, the desire and even the knowledge of an object".<sup>78</sup> Faith as outlined in this thesis offers the individual a slight reprieve from the harsh cycle of his egoism. It allows him to be drawn outward towards the gentleness of others, but it is not an encounter that marks the complete separation of the individual from his egoism. Faith on the other hand merely makes the individual aware of his egoism by compelling him to seek out the companionship of others. In this sense through the constant reminder of the Alterity of the Feminine that faith provides the individual is meant to be deterred from the objectification of others. Having now a knowledge of the role of faith we may be able to understand the unjust behaviours of the individual and ultimately attempt to curb our own proclivities towards objectification. For as Levinas writes "violence is consequently also any action which we endure without at every point collaborating in it".<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 6.

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