

I N T R O D U C T I O N



Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) is a thinker who challenges the fundamental pretension of political philosophy to *evaluate* politics. In Levinas’s mature thought, what is said to be “ethical” is a pre-theoretical and even pre-rational vulnerability or exposure to the “other.” As soon as we start to think about ethics, this otherness or alterity of the other, which is the source of ethics, dissipates. All theory, all philosophy, and all conscious thought is only spinning its wheels trying to reach what is properly ethical, of which it can only be a betrayal. Levinas generates a vocabulary for talking about what is beyond the limits of consciousness and language, describing it as “obsession,” “persecution,” “substitution,” “beyond being and essence,” and “saying.” He attempts an explanation of how this language is possibly able to express the inexpressible. In all of this, he makes no attempt to generate norms, to alter the way we see ethical and political reality, to provide a grounding or justification for moral precepts or political institutions. It is fair to say that nothing follows from his thought; there is simply no proper Levinassian way to see politics. On any given issue or question, Levinas’s theory could be used to support either side in the argument; in this sense, for political philosophy, Levinas is completely superfluous. Whether Levinas’s works are read or ignored, accepted or rejected, nothing logically follows for a political philosophy. There is no insight with which the political philosopher must come to terms in the economy of his or her thought. For the political thinker, it seems Levinas can be safely disregarded.

Levinas’s writing itself tries to strive against the current of its very topic. By his own account, the very attempt to render the beyond being intelligible distorts it; the very attempt to understand, to know, to clarify is comparable to egoism, an immoral quest for an unjust self-sufficiency. To hold such a thesis in philosophy borders on self-contradiction—it would seem that philosophy ought to be abandoned entirely. And yet Levinas is a philosopher to

the end; he never gives up on philosophy, and insists that his work be taken as such. How are we to read this work? Not in a traditional manner. Something else is going on in his text, which, it will be argued, is not trying to present theses or to offer descriptions of a reality at all, the choice expressions of which would be somehow sacrosanct as opposed to others. Levinas does not have a doctrine. The motto of the *Gesamtausgabe* of Martin Heidegger, “pathways, not works,” and the directive he gave to the audience at the Davos disputation (including Levinas): “Do not orient yourselves to the variety of positions of philosophizing human beings, and do not occupy yourselves with Cassirer and Heidegger”¹ holds for Levinas as well. In his books *Outside the Subject* and *Proper Names* for example, Levinas points to other thinkers who deal, in different language, with that of which he wishes to speak. And where they do not, where the formulations do not in Levinas’s estimation capture the enigma of the beyond being—in Buber, Merleau-Ponty, or Kierkegaard, for example—Levinas does not place himself in the position of “correcting” them. It is not here a matter of being correct or not. We are outside the realm for which the important thing would be to get the right answer or come up with an accurate description. And yet Levinas knows the tradition, is very attentive to the historical situation in which he writes, and carefully crafts his language for the purpose. Although it might contain, as I shall argue, a structural lack of sense, his language is certainly not arbitrary.

The aim of philosophy is to try to know, to make the structure of reality manifest. The truth that is found by philosophy is never politically neutral; it must in some way impact the philosopher’s view of the community in which she or he lives. A thinking that concluded that everything about a society is perfectly just would be the fantasy of a tyrant or the lie of the sycophant rather than philosophy. Much of the work on Levinas has tried to grapple with this question of its political consequences: What difference do Levinas’s theories make for the way we view the social reality around us? Levinas seems to be explicating the ethical foundations of society. How can we begin to build a social order on a Levinassian basis?

FROM ETHICS TO POLITICS

Yet in its enactment Levinas’s thought does not allow these questions to be answered. He provides no assistance to the worthy task of building a better society. Here we begin to glimpse the impact of Levinas’s work for the

political philosopher—in the interruption of our traditional manner of reading. The political philosopher is trained to bring out the inevitable political consequences of discourse and is attuned as a matter of habit to the political significance of language. Different modes of human expression and self-understandings have implications for social organization, which the political philosopher struggles to elucidate. With Levinas, however, this process is arrested. There is no political import to his thought, no consequences that could be drawn out to support any particular normative structure over another.

In so doing, Levinas reveals this thinking to itself as inadequate to the aim of the just society. To meet this, its ownmost goal (a discourse that did not want a just society would not be a philosophy), a philosophy must make some contribution toward justice in the real, historical social order, and can do so in two senses. First, as ethics, as clarifying what is really the end of life, and thus able to critically examine, as Levinas puts it, the “religious atmosphere” in which “political life itself swims,”² offering a fundamentally different vision of what politics is to achieve. Second, as the art of rule for the ἀρχιτέκτων, the master-builder—to wit, the study of politics. We need to look no further than Aristotle for a philosophical examination of both of their prospects.³ Ethics, the Stagirite insists, is incomplete, since arguments are incomplete to mold most people to virtue; it therefore gives way to the science of politics for completion. In political science, we want to learn the art of legislation, in order to fashion through law a receptive environment for ethical argument. However, politics is not a matter of knowledge. The sophists err in thinking they can teach it. Politicians themselves do not practice it from knowledge, but from something like experience, which cannot be taught. Where wisdom in legislation comes from is mysterious; books on it are only useful to those who already have expertise, which itself is gained from practice and teaching, the source of which Aristotle does not say. “There is thus a sort of circle in Aristotle’s reasoning. He has said that to acquire and practice virtue one must first be well trained in one’s habits. He has then said that those who wish to provide this training. . . must become legislators. Now he is saying that to become a legislator one must first have been well brought up in one’s habits.”⁴ The ultimate source of virtue, including the virtue of someone that surpasses the training he or she has received, is unknowable. Virtue has an anarchic source. But this means philosophy cannot do precisely what it wants to do, which is not just study virtue but practice it, not just talk about just laws but bring them about. Philosophy is dispensable if politicians already practice good legislation without it.

Levinas is thus again bringing out the sophists' error in thinking that wise legislation is a matter of knowledge that can be possessed. It is correct to think of Levinas as eminently antidogmatic. But his is an antidogmatism that refuses to illuminate politics at all. This is enormously frustrating to the philosopher, who of course does not want to just talk about justice and virtue but to also put it into practice. Levinas's thought, it is recognized by the more astute commentators, is incapable of grounding a justice that is not "to come" but would actually "change the configuration of political spatiality."⁵ This frustration is evident in thinkers who passionately long for justice, like Enrique Dussel.⁶ To see the injustices around one, perceive their causes, and long for them to be remedied is one thing; it is something entirely different to then root around for philosophical theories to ground universally one's particular insight into injustice. Can philosophy do this? Is political philosophy in this sense possible? To answer "yes" is comforting—one's theorizing is self-justified. It is centered around removing injustice, and knows itself to be so. It argues unimpeachably for justice to be done. It does not get into the messy business of actual legislation, actual politics that is dirty, messy, and full of compromises, which can always be critiqued. It presents an argument that stands on its own. If someone does not accept it, then she or he is to blame, since it is rational and coherent and just to boot. To willfully disregard such an argument, one must be simply a bad person, willfully disregarding the voice of reason and of ethics.

In speaking of a responsibility for all, even those who persecute one, Levinas strikes a dagger in the heart of self-satisfied philosophers and their philosophies that position themselves as the voice of ethics. To hold to a responsibility for others, even in the troubling encounter with the one who rejects reasoned argument, is to move from ethics to politics in the sense of Aristotle: there must be habituation to ethical argument if it is to have effect, and politics can lay down laws to help bring it about. It is this move which, I propose, dominates the work of Levinas and makes his work vital for political philosophy's self-understanding.⁷ It is a move undoubtedly of concern to Levinas in part due to the lack of acceptance of reasoned argument on the part of one person in particular, Martin Heidegger. That this great philosopher was not immune to the brutality and barbarism of the National Socialists in Germany brings the question of legislation, of *political* reason, to the fore.

The fact that society is not made up of philosophers who would all obey the superior ethical reason as it is revealed raises problems that forces the

philosopher to make a choice: we can wash our hands of it, retreating to the sphere of argument for anyone willing to listen; or, out of concern for those who are not habituated to reason, we can enter the political sphere and watch attentively in order to learn the best legislative strategy. It is this attention, this wakefulness, the source of which Aristotle cannot explain, which is at the core of Levinas's later work. But the "move from ethics to politics" has then already been made, in fact must be presupposed if anything Levinas is saying is to be grasped. If we do not have the concern for justice of a true philosopher, of a Dussel, everything in the later Levinas would be pointless. But likewise, if we retreat back to knowledge, if we look to arguments to condemn the outrage of the injustice we perceive, we in fact shield ourselves from the demands of justice and lack a concern for those who would reject it. For if the sophists are right, if the art of politics is a matter of knowledge, then all we are lacking is the *force*. We would work like a slave to craft the ethical arguments first, and then look around to find someone powerful enough to implement our plan. But to make politics a matter of applied knowledge is unavoidably to substitute a new injustice for the old. It is to dogmatically treat with the other through violence apart from dialogue, to believe oneself to be right, though one be alone in the world. Fear of this violence is what motivates Levinas's earlier philosophy, culminating in *Totality and Infinity*, which plays the violence of dogmatism off of irenic dialogue with the other. Perhaps such a distinction can be incorporated right into the fabric of one's philosophical ethics, which would be a theory of keeping dialogue open, a method of not holding onto absolutes by skeptically suspending belief in what one thinks to be right in any given situation, subject to revision by the other in conversation with her. This however falls prey to Dussel's complaint about Rorty, that his philosophy of language fails those suffering under unjust forms of domination, who demand that he find out the truth about the cause of their misery, because it never moves from dialogue to practical solidarity.⁸

There would not be any distance then between an ethical theory that ignores the need for legislation, retreating to the purity of (usually condemnatory) argument assumed to provide its own rational force, and an ideology of action that believes it possesses the key to history and needs only to gain the power to implement it. The complete denunciation of injustice in the former is the obverse of the complete justification of it in the latter. This fact is seen when ethics moves to politics, that is, when there is an ethical concern for the one who rejects ethical argument. This concern is lacking for both positions. That society should be made up entirely of philosophers

is the suppressed assumption of each (and sometimes not so suppressed, as is the case of some social-contract theories). Whereas the retreat to ethical argumentation supposes that arguments are enough for anyone, for its part dogmatism aims to create a society of individuals who subscribe to the doctrine, justifying violence against anyone who violates it.

But the solution that would avoid the horns of this dilemma is not very pleasant or satisfying. It must involve all the intensity of opposing injustice without any of the security of philosophical knowledge. In the impotence of laying down one's weapons of philosophical discourse, there is experienced the passion of exposure to critique. This pain is aptly expressed by James Hatley as the ability to "suffer willingly and without reserve what [one] is already suffering anyway."⁹ Saving oneself from this frustration by taking refuge in philosophy does not actually do anything for the other, who is still suffering outrages. It also risks falling into self-righteous disdain for others with less developed moral intuition, condemning them as a proxy for the perpetrator of the injustice. This however is a distraction from Dussel's imperative to find the real causes of injustice in order to extricate oneself from them. One should look to reality, to history, to locate the causes of injustice. But then universal a priori theorizing is merely a diversion; moral sciences of political science and history would investigate injustice, their results being the true source of ethical obligation: an intolerable situation for the philosophical ethicist because it risks too much. What if the historical records are destroyed? What if the powerful totalizing system successfully throws its crimes down the memory hole? What if, in other words, my testimony to the injustice of a situation is falsely and unfairly critiqued? There should be a remedy against this—and so philosophy is retrieved, dusted off, and thrust forward as a weapon in the struggle against injustice.

The intellectual who feels injustice in the gut desperately wishes to unleash his or her philosophical talents on the side of good against evil. But, on the basis of Levinas, we can see that this ought not to be done. *Political philosophy cannot evaluate politics*. It is incapable of what it most wishes to accomplish. Political science and history can and must be normative; these empirical, moral sciences are inherently provisional, however. The demands of ethics thus change with new facts and interpretations, always subject to critique. This does not mean that a vulgar relativism is the true description of our ethical situation, but rather that there is as yet no true description of our ethical situation, that such a description is to come. The contribution of the moral sciences is to explain the causes of injustice so that we may consciously

progress toward it—they provide the ἀρχή of morality. What they cannot thematize, however, is how it is that we come to be concerned for justice in the first place. The moral sciences must assume that we are already interested, or that anyone exposed to the proofs of injustice they provide would be interested in stopping them to the degree they are able. They are thus ignorant of their own motivating source, and fail to make the move from ethics to politics, where the reality of indifference is confronted.

The relationship of the moral sciences with their anarchical source runs parallel to the relationship of metaphysics with the ontological difference. Metaphysics assumes the ontological difference but does not think it as such. It therefore represents being in terms of beings and the ontological difference in terms of what differs in the difference. For metaphysics, beings would ground or cause being. For the moral sciences, the understanding of responsibilities would ground or cause responsibility. Just as modern technology is taken as produced by humankind alone as a plan which is projected, moral responsibility is taken to be truths that one can apply. The “step back” from metaphysics ceases to take the ontological difference for granted, and asks how it is that we can conceive of something like being in the first place. The step back from the moral sciences ceases to take responsibility for granted and asks how it is that this comes about in the first place. The essence of modern technology is not something we produce and control entirely on our own. The same goes for our responsibility for our neighbors. The difficulty lies in language for the step back out of metaphysics, as well as for the step back out of the moral sciences—how to state a difference or a responsibility in a language that is tied to metaphysics, to the logos.

Levinas is thus reproducing Heidegger’s gesture of the leap out of metaphysics. He is not leaving the moral sciences behind completely, just as Heidegger never leaves metaphysical language behind completely. They both rely on the resources of what they are attempting to surpass while trying to make it signify differently. For Levinas, it is what is beyond being, the responsibility prior to and irreducible to our understanding of our situation, which philosophy attempts to retain some traces of in its discourse. It is a difficult, “unnatural” thing to attempt. It must avoid the sophistry of both philosophical ethics and vulgar relativism. It affirms, therefore, that there is an “absolute” responsibility—a responsibility not resulting from our free engagement, an indeclinable responsibility, not subject to our choice, not to be thought about but to be *done*—while at the same time affirming that we do not know what this responsibility is, that it is insufficient to trace it back to its horizons

of appearing in order to understand it and master it. It is a knowledge present in action that vanishes under the gaze of the theorist. It is a knowledge that cannot be made objective. Is this not social language, tradition, a knowledge present in society that can never be an assembled whole present to me? I cannot fully control the language I speak. To a certain extent, it speaks through me. There are better and worse ways to speak, as everyone agrees. But a philosophy conveying an awareness of the historicity of language would insist that morality not be thought of in legalistic terms, but as *expression*. At once refusing both a purely external standard of eternal truth and a purely internal one inviting irresponsibility, the fundamental historicity of Maurice Merleau-Ponty would seem to navigate the dilemma spelled out above. The present work is dominated by this philosopher's relation to Levinas. Merleau-Ponty's work, strongly influential on Levinas, is all about opening oneself up toward the other. The former writes,

The twin abstractions which Hegel wishes to avoid are lives so separated that one can limit the responsibilities of each to the deliberate and necessary consequences of what it has dreamed of, and a History which is one of equally unmerited failures and successes, and which consequently brands men glorious or infamous in terms of the external accidents which have come to deface or embellish what they have done. What he has in mind is the moment when the internal becomes external, that turning or veering by which we merge with others and the world as the world and others merge with us. In other words, action. By action, I make myself responsible for everything; I accept the aid of external accidents just as I accept their betrayals—"the transformation of necessity in contingency and vice versa." I claim to be master not only of my intentions, but also of what events are going to make of them. I take the world and others as they are. I take myself as I am and I answer for all.¹⁰

Levinas rejects Merleau-Ponty, in spite of the fact that his thought seems to support what is at the core of Levinas's work: the responsibility we have for all and the necessity of leaving my egoistic subjectivity for the other.¹¹ Merleau-Ponty continues:

True history thus gets its life entirely from us. It is in our present that it gets the force to refer everything else to the present. The other

whom I respect gets his life from me as I get mine from him. A philosophy of history does not take away any of my rights or initiatives. It simply adds to my obligations as a solitary person the obligation to understand situations other than my own and to create a path between my life and that of others, that is, to express myself. Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine.¹²

For all its brilliance, Merleau-Ponty's thought remains a philosophical ethics. As with Heidegger's notion of original ethics, it is the least naive philosophical ethics possible. It consists of one injunction only: to not be closed off to the other, to being, to the world. The basic contrast is not between good and evil, value and disvalue—it is readily conceded that these cannot be determined by philosophy—but rather authenticity versus inauthenticity, the historicity of life versus the historicity of death, philosophy versus nonphilosophy. We are beings who are open to the world. The denial of this, the indulgence of a flight of fancy about breaking with the world, the refusal to engage history, the unwillingness to play the game of life, enacts an expression that misses the mark. This fundamental insight into the historicity of our existence enables us to grasp the inner meaning of all great works. To deny the truth of this insight is self-contradictory, as the denial is yet another relationship with the world. "What does abstract art itself speak of, if not of a negation or refusal of the world? Now austerity and the obsession with geometrical surfaces and forms. . . still have an odor of life, even if it is a shameful or despairing life. Thus the painting always says something. It is a new system of equivalences which demands precisely this particular upheaval, and it is in the name of a *truer* relation between things that their ordinary ties are broken."¹³ One cannot get beyond being and truth—one is in relationship with them like it or not. We are in the world and are thereby "condemned to meaning."¹⁴

Levinas does not accept this condemnation; for him, to preach openness to the world is limited by the form of the prescription, namely, philosophy. It must be assumed that philosophy *is* this openness—that way everything makes sense, and the accusation that the denial of fundamental historicity contradicts itself cannot be turned back on philosophy. If philosophy is not, then everything is confused. As Kierkegaard wrote:

What people have always said is this: To say that we cannot understand this or that does not satisfy science, which insists on

comprehending. Here lies the error. We must say the very opposite, that if *human* science refuses to acknowledge that there is something it cannot understand, or, more accurately still, something such that it clearly understands that it cannot understand it, then everything is confused. For it is a task for human understanding to understand that there is something, and what it is, that it cannot understand. Human cognition is generally busily concerned to understand and understand, but if it would also take the trouble to understand itself it must straightaway posit the paradox. The paradox is not a concession but a category, an ontological qualification which expresses the relation between an existing cognitive spirit and the eternal truth.¹⁵

If philosophy is not the openness to the other, then the one standard erected by this fundamental philosophical ethics collapses. For it might be necessary at times precisely to refuse the world, to choose inauthenticity, the historicity of death, and nonphilosophy, with eyes wide open, choosing naïveté, not for the sake of a truer relation between things that could be recaptured, but rather an ethical relation that would respect the paradox. It is on this point that there is deep harmony between Levinas and Kierkegaard.¹⁶

Does this mean I should prioritize the “other” over my own pursuit of knowledge? On one level it would seem to make sense that the choice of the immediate needs of the other over my philosophizing would be the “ethical” thing to do. Someone who “rings your doorbell and disturbs your work”¹⁷ should be attended to, rather than continuing to theorize in one’s armchair. But this way of putting it quickly breaks down: of course I should avoid gross selfishness by prioritizing the other, but the way to do this is not by pretending that my choice of the other breaks with the world. The choice itself has horizons within which it can be understood. It is an answer to the question, “What is the best way to serve the neighbor?” Levinas’s description of this situation as the “entry of the third party” is well known. There are problems, and only provisional solutions. We need our intellects, we need to be engaged as fully as possible in the world in order to best navigate the cross-pressures of others’ demands. And we are back to original ethics, fundamental historicity, the call to philosophize in order to serve the other. Any gross attempt to go beyond philosophy directly ends back up where it started, unable to extricate itself from the need to philosophize imposing itself more than ever. Levinas calls this “the infrangible destiny of being.”¹⁸ The attempt to go beyond it is itself a meaning, and in spite of itself is pulled back into being.

Philosophy as original ethics cannot be overcome by a frontal assault. It is not a matter of choice. Only if we do *not* self-consciously contrive to go beyond it is there a chance to transcend it. This transcendence would not take place in self-consciousness. It would occur rather in our naïveté, in our blind spot. The philosophers of original finitude (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), rejecting as they do the idea of “a philosopher-subject, master of all that is possible, who must first put *his own* language at a distance in order to find that ideal forms of a universal language this side of all actuality,”¹⁹ must admit of such a blind spot. It is here that being can be transcended, according to Levinas. As soon as we try to objectify and understand our situation, being cannot but be infrangible. The “entry of the third” is a necessary thing; it is certainly not an evil or disvalue. With Kierkegaard we must say that our blind spot is a category and not a concession.

The solution is not merely to enlist others in our attempt to follow the inscription at Delphi. It is certainly the case that others can know me better than I know myself, and can enlighten me concerning that to which I was previously blind. Levinas breaks down this experience into its elements. What is happening when I look to others for clarity about what is closest to myself? This is not an easy process. If it were, there would be no problem requiring a shift from ethics to politics in the Aristotelian sense, as we would all be philosophers, effortlessly following the superior reason of the other, having no truck with any inhibiting pride. Our old identity is torn away; a new, truer one replaces it, all part of the philosopher’s trade in practicing death. But we are not philosophical automatons, and the truth can hurt, very deeply in fact. In this pain, we feel the move from ethics to politics within our own subjectivity. What does its pain signify? Is it exhausted by the self-knowledge gained through it? This could only be the case if we ignore the temporal element to it, if we fail to accomplish the “deformalization of time,” Levinas’s great theme.²⁰ *At the time* pain does not have the meaning for the subject it will have later, as the subject has not gained the self-knowledge that is only promised. It is in this pain, wherein not only the outcome but its very meaning is in doubt, that Levinas finds the metonym for going beyond being. It cannot be proved that a pain is a break or interruption with fundamental historicity and is irreducible to it; however, if we do not insist on proof or demand that everything subject itself to our understanding, then we might be able to have the sense that this pain cannot be captured in terms of value or through empathy, both of which it later makes possible. Suffering would not be an ethics, which must assume self-knowledge, but *sanctification*. For

the difference between the holy and the ethical one is this: the holy person can never identify herself or himself as such, but can only be identified by someone else on the outside.

There is no choice between being holy oneself and being a philosopher, on the condition that philosophy be practiced such that the philosopher would not remain in his or her own blind spot, not disregard “his own contingency without even noticing it.”²¹ The blind spot of philosophy is nonphilosophy—including political reality. Aristotle’s move from ethics to politics was spurred by *the empirical recognition* that ethical arguments were not accepted by the many. Philosophy has a political context and political consequences. As opposed to metaphysics, which obscures this context, a philosophy open to nonphilosophy would take responsibility for its political consequences. In its very content philosophy must be “socially responsible,” related to nonphilosophy not as a field to be colonized, but as a passion to be suffered. By not insisting on its right to rule, by suffering exposure to nonphilosophy, philosophy can signify beyond itself as prophetic politics.

THE NEED FOR A PROPHETIC POLITICS

Levinas believes it is necessary to resist original ethics and to interrupt our fate as “condemned to meaning” in order that philosophers understand the need for philosophy to go beyond itself. The sense of this need comes from a political insight, the empirical observation of the lack of justice. Without this turn to the empirical, philosophy remains in its blind spot: metaphysics. I will now briefly consider the political context of our own time, modern American democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville notes that democracy pursues the good of the majority, *not* the good of everyone.²² This means that minorities can be treated very badly in democracies. In the United States minorities, especially the black community, endure a great deal of suffering. This suffering—poverty, crime, the breakdown of family structures—is rendered more acute by another feature of democracy pointed out by Tocqueville, namely, the tyranny of the majority. What he finds most repugnant is not American freedom, but lack of guarantees against tyranny. And then he makes a fascinating point: tyranny in a democracy is much worse than elsewhere because it is in a sense totalitarian, as it extends even to thought. He writes, “A king. . . has only a material power that acts on actions and cannot reach wills; but the majority

is vested with a force, at once material *and moral*.²³ The protection of rights against straightforward actions of political bodies—Madison’s dilemma—is not enough. Public opinion can be tyrannical, and its salient feature is that it is not recognized but is rather invisible and silent. But in America, the reply comes, everything is exposed and open, and no central power dictates oppressive measures against a section of the population. This however is the old, monarchical and now-inapplicable model of tyranny. No king can be so absolute as to be able to crush all expressions of opposition, but the majority in a democracy has a much greater control over the visibility of its opponents. The lack of an identifiable central power acting tyrannically is not to be equated with a lack of tyranny. Tocqueville sees that censorship is laughable in America, but this is very far from implying that there is a free-flowing exchange of ideas and opinions. Instead he writes, “I do not know any country where, in general, *less* independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America.”²⁴

Consider the example of the consumer-driven media, which aims to produce stories that are interesting, entertaining, and inoffensive to a critical mass of relatively affluent consumers. If there are not enough people willing to pay to read a type of journalism, it will wither on the vine and die, though it might be true and important. The fate of being socially irrelevant threatens the one who opposes the tyranny of the majority. “The master no longer says,” Tocqueville writes,

You shall think as I do or you shall die; he says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your goods, everything remains to you; but from this day on, you are a stranger among us. You shall keep your privileges in the city, but they will become useless to you; for if you crave the vote of your fellow citizens, they will not grant it to you, and if you demand only their esteem, they will still pretend to refuse it to you. You shall remain among men, but you shall lose your rights of humanity. When you approach those like you, they shall flee you as being impure; and those who believe in your innocence, even they shall abandon you, for one would flee them in their turn. Go in peace, I leave you your life, but I leave it to you worse than death.²⁵

Minorities in democracies are not only marginalized, but deprived of the very means with which to oppose or even express this marginalization. As Annabel Herzog writes, “The problem of democracy is representation,” and,

“The real *problem* is the absence of nonrepresented people.”²⁶ It is not that minorities lack rights, but rather that they are strangers in their own homeland. The majority in a democracy not only holds political power, it also holds moral power. Whether or not the majority obeys a higher law than itself, the very language that any plea to a higher law must use is that of the majority. To form a majority capable of a political consensus one must solicit others using their language. Tocqueville describes his experience: “A foreigner does, it is true, sometimes meet Americans who are not strict slaves of slogans. . . but no one, except yourself, listens to them, and you, to whom they confide these secret thoughts, are only a stranger and will pass on. To you they will disclose truths that have no use for you, but when they go down into the marketplace they use quite different language.”²⁷

The majority likes and is used to being flattered. Democratic citizens are accustomed to being told their opinions are right, that they are inherently good, and that people who hold different opinions and try to live them out must be seriously misguided or full of hate. They are told this because they rule, and flattery of the master has always been a way to political power.²⁸ To appeal to a moral standard in democratic politics, therefore, is to be bound by the language of the majority. Several features exaggerate this. America is a classless society in that the elites in power are not united by any class interest. The language of the majority is tinged with social Darwinism, that is to say, that the justification of social status and material benefits is the ideal of a meritocracy—talent plus effort equals social reward. America is also individualistic in Tocqueville’s sense: the majority begins with self-interest rightly understood instead of the public interest, and lives comfortably in their social spheres, only rarely branching out to consider society as a whole.

Beyond the fact that minorities are disadvantaged at the ballot box by definition, it is also nearly impossible for a minority to make a *moral* claim that it is being oppressed by a tyrannical power in a way that a majority can accept, because it is hard to identify who is doing the exploiting. Since there is no solidarity of elites among themselves it is impossible to point to elites as a class and blame them. It is likewise impossible to claim that the majority is doing the exploiting, since the majority itself is highly unlikely to accept that their normal everyday practices—which do not usually involve conscious exploitation—are harmful to others, morally wrong, and should be changed. Thus minorities are not just disadvantaged by numbers, but are deprived of the very possibility of speaking, that is, explaining their struggles in political speech. It is thus possible for a majority to ruthlessly exploit a minority in a

democracy while at the same time there being virtually no hint (to the majority) that such exploitation is going on, because the minority is condemned to silence. A dilemma worse and more pressing than Madison's dilemma: minorities might have "rights," but it is the majority who sets the boundaries of these rights, and does so according to its own interests. Minorities can appeal for justice only within the paradigm of those in power; their grievances simply cannot be understood in any other language.

This description of the temptations of injustice in a democracy is familiar and unsurprising. In any political form there will be the temptation to abuse power. The solution would not seem to require any interruption of fundamental historicity. In fact, the contrary appears to be the case, in that the exercise of power should endeavor to be a *conversation* between ruler and ruled. Those in power should make the effort to listen to the concerns of the citizens and engage them in a kind of discussion.²⁹ Is this a workable ethico-political ideal? Levinas's early philosophy presents a picture of the ethical relation that follows the movement of conversation. (I adopt Stephan Strasser's periodization of Levinas's work. The first phase includes his essays *On Escape, Existence and Existents*, and *Time and the Other*; the second stage or middle period includes preeminently *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*; and finally, in the third stage, there is foremost *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.³⁰ More often, I will contrast an early and a late Levinas, that is, the difference between his two great works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.) For Levinas in his middle period, ethics is an exercise in conversation as opposed to the construction of propositions of universal validity, a process of opening outward to the other rather than the attempt to justify power through arguments. Power can only be exercised justly if it is engaged in dialogue. The relation with the other is always a "teaching"; our learning from the other must be at the root of any relation with them.

If ethics is eminently opening toward the other in dialogue, there must be a common language at its basis. This realm between us is already there, and we cannot think our subjectivity without it. As the polis was for Socrates in the *Crito*, language gave birth to us and obliges our gratitude. If we are able to relate to the other in conversation, which Levinas calls the "marvel of marvels,"³¹ it is due to our prior relatedness to language. Our relationship to being in language would be undeniably more primordial than the relationship to the other it would make possible. I will argue that this prior relatedness takes place in Levinas's text in the figure of the *feminine*. Far from requiring a break with it, the ethical relation would be nourished by it and rely upon it.

But then original ethics would be the true ethics. This is precisely the conclusion Levinas comes to in his earlier work, which I will view later (in chapter 3) as a philosophical ethics. However, Levinas surpasses it in his later philosophy. I argue for a privileging of the late Levinas as opposed to *Totality and Infinity*; I hold that to accept the former means to reject the latter. The secondary literature certainly accepts a shift between the early and late Levinas, but usually tends to see them as complementary perspectives.³² But Levinas in his middle period views the ethical relationship in terms of conversation, while he later insists on the radical break with being that “ethics” entails. He is thus able to answer the question, “What happens when the other is simply unable to conduct a conversation?” After all, the point concerning minorities in democracy is that they are *robbed* of their right to speak. Insisting upon a conversational model of ethics cannot take full account of this. What is needed is a philosophy as prophetic politics, a thinking that can sense the enormity of injustice.³³

To frame Levinas’s thought in terms of a rethinking of philosophy as a “prophetic politics,” as this work attempts to do, means contrasting it against two other conceptions of ethics. First, prophetic politics is certainly opposed to the naive Enlightenment attempt to draw up an a priori set of rules that would define universal moral behavior. Levinas is in agreement with Scheler’s critique of Kant’s “colossus of steel and bronze.”³⁴ Levinas is generally very close to Scheler, as Derrida has noted.³⁵ Each of their work attempts to maintain the historico-relativistic character of ethics while not giving up on the idea of an absolute ethics.³⁶ Scheler is laying a *foundation* for ethics, and not elaborating “the ways in which the discipline of ethics applies to all of concrete life,” an endeavor for which metaphysics is not relevant.³⁷ Scheler’s ethics of material values is insufficient for this attempt, as Heidegger saw, in that it leaves obscure the ontological meaning of the unity of the person in act. The attempt to lay a foundation for ethics as an enterprise separate from fundamental historicity should therefore be abandoned. Second, then, is ethics as conceived by the philosophers of original finitude, who rightly grasp that there is no foundation of ethics outside of history. But this becomes questionable for Derrida: such philosophies “should be able to abandon the word ‘finitude,’ forever prisoner of the classical framework. Is this possible? And what does it mean to *abandon* a classical notion?”³⁸ Levinas, like Scheler, does not give up on the idea of an absolute ethics; he does however give up on *the attempt of discovering* (philosophically) an absolute ethics. An absolute ethics would not be a

philosophical truth able to be understood by the intellect—but this would not mean that it would be nothing.

Only, it would seem, when we leave the realm of understanding could we participate in this absolute. If this were the case it would also mean that such participation would be incommunicable. All of this must be left in the conditional, as to state that there *is* an absolute ethics and that it is *x*, would always be false. But *perhaps* there might be one. Who can but fail to feel the ethical content present in accounts of the concentration camps, for example? The oppression of the weak and helpless is wrong, and facing this concrete suffering we can sense the presence of an unqualified command. In response we must act and we must speak, but the criterion for our acting and speaking is totally undetermined; our manner of response is up to us. There must be a difficult translation—as Robert Bernasconi writes, “The language of the victim is not a universalizable language”³⁹—but what is not up to us is the language we must speak to others concerning this call. We are not isolated individuals and our response inevitably has a communal element, even if it is a breaking with others. The translation of the call into language and action is a matter of prophetic politics. It is not private, it is not an individual choice, it is not a matter of personal belief; there must be political consequences to it. But unlike a simple moral appeal, there is no easily understandable concept to be grasped. That is, there is no appeal to *interest*. For morality serves human interests. An extant system of morality aids the functioning of human communities, *both* by protecting the legitimate interests of the community *as well as* covering over injustices that would damage the community’s sense of itself. Those who rule a community will rarely if ever admit that their rule perpetrates injustice; this would damage the legitimacy of their position, it is much preferable to uphold the pretense that their rule is just and for the common good. Prophetic politics does not draw its authority from morality, even while it might inhabit it to draw upon its conceptual resources—the very ideal of justice the unjust ruler purports to accept can be turned against him, for example. Though it could never be a *doctrine* of revolution, it is still extremely dangerous, in that it does not necessarily have the interest of the community and its continuity in mind. Whether it is ultimately to have a conservative or radical import is undetermined, and it cannot determine it itself: only others can.

Prophetic politics is an appeal to others to do something concerning an injustice. The injustice might in the common moral worldview be entirely excused, in which case it would also be a challenge to the validity of this

conceptuality—a revolutionary way of thinking for which there would be no provable authority. As far as its content goes, it would present no solution or comprehensive system that would remedy the injustice. There would be no way in the present to be sure that the higher authority is real except the witness of the one who offers it.⁴⁰ This witness can be personally scrutinized, the life history examined; but there is again no distinguishing mark here which would establish the validity of the claim made. She who witnesses is not unaware of this embarrassing situation, and it is perhaps this awareness that makes it different from a moral appeal. For in a moral appeal, one knows oneself to be correct; and one has an understandable argument explaining this at one's disposal when pressed.⁴¹ Prophetic politics, however, transcends what everyone in a certain context recognizes as morally good, transcends communicable sacrifices, and ventures onto the rough ground of revealing the community to be other than its self-image: a source of ethical authority beyond interest, which Levinas calls *illeity*. This authority does not come from its rational content nor the person bearing it. It is radically separate from all these. It is the “religiosity of the religious.” A model might be a preacher delivering a sermon to a congregation, where the authority is supposed to originate neither from the preacher nor from the words spoken, but rather from the divine, and is an individual call to each listener each in his or her own way. What this analogy does not capture, however, is the total exposure of the speaker. Challenging the sacred cows of a society while laying down the weapon of argumentation to defend oneself is not a prudent course of action, and it is precisely this needless risk that functions as the witness. If someone is willing to put him or herself on the line for something that is not even in his or her interest, this would seem to indicate *illeity*. The courage and sacrifice itself is only a *trace* of *illeity*—it could never be said to be *illeity* itself. It does however render it plausible, or at least possible that there is such a thing. It is this possibility for which the late Levinas argues. Can we really be satisfied with a comfortable doctrine of moral relativity, or the leveling down all action to interest? A witness to a moral truth that would transcend interest would not, however, be a truth—it would not be able to be used as a tool of understanding, it would not be useful for me, it would not be in my interest. It would “not be about me,” though this is of course the rhetorical form assumed by innumerable moralists whose true impelling source is interested or full of *ressentiment*. But this only shows that the exposure is total, and that *illeity* simply cannot be held subject to cognitive discrimination. A hermeneutics of suspicion still cannot entirely dismiss the possibility of a

disinterested acting, even if it is a tired and abused claim.⁴² Even if in most cases the claim to be disinterested is a masquerade, we can ask with Alasdair MacIntyre, “Why *this* masquerade?”⁴³ We have the sense that the source of authority is disinterestedness. Yet to formulate it into a doctrine and attempt to politically implement it would be horribly imprudent. Illeity cannot be distinguished from *il-y-a-eity*.⁴⁴ But just because we cannot tell the masquerade from the real means neither that there is no difference, nor that we cease to be obliged to pursue a prophetic politics of being exposed to injustice for the sake of this difference.