

LEVINAS AND THE ETHICAL TURN: A NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE AND
RESPONSE

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Guelph, 2016

A thesis

presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the program of

Philosophy

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2018

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ABSTRACT

The contentious ‘ethical turn’ in continental philosophy motivates this project. Emmanuel Levinas is among the leaders of this movement to draw renewed attention to ethics in the continental tradition. Levinas describes the transcendence that transpires in the self-Other encounter as the source of ethical obligation. However, given Friedrich Nietzsche’s ethical critique, his followers view the category of transcendence with suspicion. They think it presupposes an ontology of unchanging being. Since Nietzsche and his disciples reject ontologies of unchanging being, preferring immanence instead, they think that transcendence inevitably appeals to some imaginary world beyond the one we inhabit. Consequently, they view all philosophers of transcendence as escapist. To assess whether Levinas’ philosophical project is viable, I draw from Nietzsche’s work to mount a Nietzschean critique of Levinas. I subsequently consider a Levinasian reply to the Nietzschean critique, arguing that Levinas’ transcendence provides a compelling alternative to a Nietzschean ethics of immanence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My friends, family, and the philosophical community at Ryerson University have all been incredibly supportive throughout the process of writing this thesis. I wish in particular to thank my good friends Jake Norris, Daniel Milton, Nathan Smith, and Jordan Pedersen for their repeated willingness to talk with me about the substance of this project. I extend my thanks also to John Caruana, my supervisor, who had the patience to repeatedly explain concepts in various ways until these stuck with me. Finally, thanks to Antoine Panaïoti and Diane Enns for serving as the second and third readers for my thesis, respectively.

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INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Levinas' thought occupies a place of special significance in the 20th century; he is responsible for what many call the 'ethical turn' in continental philosophy. His concept of the Other presents us with a novel way of thinking about ethics that seems to avoid the difficulties associated with traditional ethics, particularly those prevalent strands that ground ethics on rational principles. Levinas' ethics notably opens up new manners of thinking about a variety of topics, including other human beings and the problem of suffering.

Despite the promise of Levinas' project, not everyone thinks it is viable. The most serious challenge to his way of thinking is perhaps posed by those following in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche. Toward the end of the 19th century, Nietzsche provides what appears to be a devastating criticism of the concept of transcendence as it is rooted in the ontology of unchanging being. Throughout the 20th century, Nietzsche's followers, like Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, continue to cast doubt on all iterations of transcendence. They claim that arguments for transcendence presuppose the existence of a perfect, unchanging reality beyond our changing and finite world. But since Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze deny the existence of this unchanging reality, they reject the transcendence based upon it. This allows them to charge transcendence with being an escapist concept, whose adherents flee the changing world and seek refuge in a 'higher' reality.

In contrast to Levinas, Nietzsche and his followers claim that we must rely on an immanent ontology to provide a veritable account of reality and of ethics. Nietzschean ethics are based on the ontology of immanent becoming, which conceives of dynamic forces in competition with each other. In light of the Nietzschean position, it may be asked, does Levinas' thinking of transcendence and ethics withstand a Nietzschean critique? Answering this question will help to determine which of two influential ethical accounts in contemporary continental philosophy is more compelling, and whether there is merit to the ethical turn.

To answer whether Levinas' ethics can withstand a Nietzschean critique, I initially present an account of Levinas' ethics in Part One. Its significance within the continental philosophical tradition is described, as well as Levinas' contrast to both older and contemporary thinkers. Next, Part Two outlines Nietzsche's thoughts on transcendence, the ontology of immanence, ethics, suffering, and Judaism. Part Two culminates with Nietzsche's thoughts being pulled together in order to formulate a Nietzschean critique of Levinas' ethics. During Part Three, I draw on parts of Levinas' philosophy to address the Nietzschean critique. Levinas is also critical of the transcendence based on the ontology of unchanging being; his transcendence is grounded on the Other's strangeness, and not on their essential similitude. Levinas also espouses ontological immanence, addresses the question of suffering, and interprets Judaism in ways that are at odds with Nietzsche. These aspects of Levinas' philosophy are brought together to formulate a Levinasian rejoinder to

Nietzschean critique. Finally, I conclude that this Levinasian response is sufficient to repel my formulation of a Nietzschean critique of Levinas.

PART ONE:
A SKETCH OF LEVINAS' ETHICS

I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY

Prior to Emmanuel Levinas, very few continental philosophers, certainly at the beginning of the 20th century, were preoccupied with ethics. Martin Heidegger's view on this matter summarized the ethical views of an entire generation. In *Being and Time*, he observes that ethics, along with politics, anthropology, poetry, and historiography, belongs to more limited and regional ontologies. So, Heidegger claims, ethics is not fundamental. Rather, it is ontology which he thinks is fundamental. Heidegger's central aim in *Being and Time* is to provide such a fundamental ontology.¹

Friedrich Nietzsche is indirectly responsible for the turn away from ethics in continental philosophy. Early interpreters of his work thought that Nietzsche's call to go beyond good and evil amounts to a dismissal of all ethical systems. However, it is widely acknowledged today that Nietzsche advocates for the return to what he thinks is a more fundamental value set, 'good' and 'bad'. Embracing the value 'good' from this set is central to his goal of affirming life.

Though Levinas does offer an ontological account, he challenges the claims that ontology is fundamental for the self, and that ethics is derivative.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 16.

Rather than conceiving ethics as a modality of ontological questioning, Levinas states that ontological questioning is a function of ethics. This is why Levinas claims that ethics, not ontology, is first philosophy. The crux of Levinas' argument for this thesis revolves around the self-Other encounter.²

Below, I outline Levinas' description of how, from the first person perspective, one gives an ontological account of individual beings or of existence in general. Levinas thinks obtaining ontological knowledge of something depends on the knowing being's freedom to know. This leads to a situation where any ontological knowledge a being seeks of their own freedom presupposes and makes use of this freedom. Therefore, Levinas concludes that a knowing being cannot suspend their freedom to know, and call it into question. This is an insurmountable obstacle for any being seeking their own fundamental ontology. So, in the third section below, I present Levinas' account of the self's encounter with the transcendent Other. Levinas thinks the Other invests the self with freedom, which is the freedom to respond to the needs of the Other. Levinas then claims that the Other both calls the self's freedom into question, and is the source of the self's freedom as it is ethically oriented toward doing good for the Other.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 43.

II. IS ONTOLOGY FUNDAMENTAL?

According to Levinas, ontology is the “comprehension of beings.” Ontology is deployed when one being seeks to know, or to have an account of, another being, which becomes known as such. Ontological investigations may also be turned toward the nature of existence as opposed to the existence of individual beings. In order to know another being, the being that seeks knowledge proceeds from the security of its own identity; it is the same as itself. The knowing being approaches the known being through the mediation of a third, neutral term. Levinas notes that this third term finds a variety of articulations: it is sometimes expressed as a concept, where “the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought.” This third, neutral term may also be articulated as sensation, “in which objective quality and subjective affection are merged.” Finally, an ontological understanding of beings may be achieved through “Being, which is without the density of existents, is the light in which existents become intelligible.” The movement whereby a knowing being comprehends a known being is a movement where the alterity of each being is supposedly overcome. The knowing being affirms its identity, its sameness to itself, in contrast to the being it comprehends. Moreover, the known being, in being comprehended as having some identity or essence, has its alterity vanquished with regard to itself and to the knowing being.³

³ Ibid., 42.

Ontology requires that the knowing being, the one who achieves ontological understanding, possesses the freedom to investigate and obtain knowledge of the being whose existence has been called into question. A knowing being might examine its own freedom to know beings once this freedom has been called into question. In seeking knowledge about one's freedom to know, one may try to obtain knowledge of the ontological foundations of their freedom to know; this would be a fundamental ontology. However, since ontology must presuppose the freedom to know, the source of this freedom cannot be found ontologically. The freedom to know is the source of ontology as it is given in the first person; the origin of this freedom, which has been called into question, cannot be addressed with recourse to fundamental ontology. Two questions consequently arise: what is the source of freedom? And, what, or who, calls freedom into question? Levinas answers both questions with recourse to the self-Other encounter.⁴

III. THE SELF-OTHER ENCOUNTER

Levinas acknowledges that we do recognize certain aspects about the other human being using the kind of ontological understanding with which we have knowledge of things, or objects. Recognizable features about other humans may include what clothes they wear, what shape or size they are, etc. This is not, however, what makes a human being the Other. Rather, they are

⁴ Ibid., 43.

characterized by the ethical command they issue to do good for the Other. This imperative calls the self's freedom into question, rupturing the self's ontological investigations and their pursuits to satisfy the self's own needs.

The Other fundamentally differs from the self with which they are in proximity; this allows the self to try to interpret the Other's expression instead of instantly understanding it.⁵ Nevertheless, the Other resists the interpretive powers that the self exercises in trying to know the Other: "In discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed a moment to hold [them], forthwith contests the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor."⁶ The Other's resistance to the self's freedom to know them reveals that the Other attends to their expression, or to their manifestation. What the self knows about the Other is not dependent on mediation through the self, but is rather something that the Other teaches, reveals, and is master over.⁷

The inability to interpret the Other, to hold them in a theme or identity, comes from the revelation of the trace of the Infinite in the Other. No matter what else the Other communicates besides, the trace of the Infinite in them is always part of their expression.⁸ The Other expresses the trace of the Infinite in them to the self, thus placing in them the idea of infinity.⁹ This idea is unique "in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total

⁵ Ibid., 195.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 200.

⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁹ Ibid., 49.

coincidence of their ‘objective’ and ‘formal’ realities is not precluded... The distance that separates *ideatum* and idea here constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself.”¹⁰ Hence, the Other resists the self’s freedom to know the Other not because the Other is a force too great to presently be conquered, but because of the excess that they communicate: “The expression the face [of the Other] introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power.”¹¹ The separation between the Other as they express themselves and the Other as they are interpreted marks the Other’s transcendence of any interpretation, or of attempts to situate them within being (i.e., to obtain an ontology of the Other). This transcendence does not result from some perceiver understanding that what they perceive is an essence that exceeds the present perspective; the Other’s transcendence is instead given through the Other’s mastery over their expression, their irreducibility.¹² The Other’s radical transcendence appears as “the very *unforeseeableness* of [the Other’s] reaction.”¹³

The trace of the Infinite that the Other expresses has a decidedly ethical dimension, separating the Other from objects of enjoyment. The things that a self lives from are dominated when that self takes nourishment from and enjoys living from things. When a self lives from something and dominates it, the thing has its being “*suspended* by an appropriation... The ‘negation’ effected by appropriation and usage remain[s] always partial. The grasp that

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 198.

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ Ibid., 199.

contests the independence of the thing preserves it ‘for me.’”¹⁴ For instance, a self that consumes food retains its nutrients; these are preserved even in helping to undertake new labour. The dominated being is also retained through the self’s knowing it to be of a certain kind, as well as the recollection of such. However, Levinas claims that the Other’s resistance to the subordination of being lived from is a command for the self not to try to subordinate the Other.¹⁵ To be sure, someone who encounters the Other can exercise their powers against the Other by ending the latter’s existence altogether.¹⁶ But this exercise of power is not absolute domination, since this would require that the Other be maintained in the grasp of force or of identity. Instead, this “total negation,” the erasure of a radically singular being, is what Levinas states to be the definition of murder.¹⁷ Thus, the Other cannot be absolutely dominated or mastered, though they can be murdered. Furthermore, the imperative not to try to subordinate the Other, arising from the trace of the Infinite in them, also implies a command not to murder them: “This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in [the Other’s] face, is [their] face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder.’”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 198.

¹⁵ Ibid., 199.

¹⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 199.

The Other, in defying the self's freedom to know the Other and to live from them, calls these powers and their free exercise into question.¹⁹ As well, because of the ethical charge whereby the Other commands the self not to try to bring their powers against the Other, the self's powers become unworthy in the face of the Other.²⁰ This prompts Levinas to write, "measuring oneself against the perfection of infinity is... where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise."²¹ In spite of the Other's immeasurable overfullness and height, a profound poverty accompanies the expression of the trace of the Infinite.²² Theoretical destitution characterizes the Other, since they remain out of the ontological order that the self might impose on the world around them; the Other is like a stranger in a foreign land who is neither bound nor protected by the local laws.²³ However, "The nakedness of [the Other's] face extends into the nakedness of the body that is cold... To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger."²⁴ While the Other could possibly possess what surrounds them, the Other appears to the self not to be of the self's ontological order, and so not to possess the things in their surroundings. However, the Other is a living being; they have needs that must be satisfied for them to live.

The Other invests the self with the freedom to respond to their needs by calling into question the authority of the self's powers. The interlocutor is hereby given the opportunity to answer the Other, to try to justify the exercise

¹⁹ Ibid., 215.

²⁰ Ibid., 83.

²¹ Ibid., 84.

²² Ibid., 200.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

of their powers, as well as the opportunity to respond to the needs of the Other. Since the only way to justify the Other's needs being deprived of satisfaction requires the Other to be identified as such a kind of being, and since this is ethically impossible, the interlocutor cannot justify letting the Other suffer, their needs going unsatisfied. Hence, the Other invests my freedom with a meaning that it otherwise lacks; this responsibility for the Other cannot be evaded. Because the Other is marked by the trace of the Infinite in them, so too is their interlocutor's responsibility Infinite.²⁵ There is no point where the interlocutor can absolve themselves of this ceaseless responsibility.²⁶ Indeed, Jacques Derrida, one of Levinas' contemporaries and commentators, remarks that people are often bound by responsibility for Others even after these latter die.²⁷

The responsibility that the Other orders of their interlocutor is a responsibility to do good for the Other. A human does good to the extent that they take up this responsibility and try, always without success, to fulfil the needs of the Other.²⁸ Levinas claims that despite the uselessness of suffering, the Other gives an ethical orientation to their interlocutor's existence.²⁹ The suffering of a solitary subject remains irredeemable with respect to existence only.³⁰ However, when Levinas writes, "philosophy is the questioning of Being,"

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 200.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (United Kingdom: Routledge Classics, 2006), xvii-xviii.

²⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 103.

²⁹ Ibid., 239.

³⁰ Ibid.

he adds, “if [philosophy] is more than this question, this is because it permits going beyond the question, and not because it answers it. What more there can be than the questioning of Being is not some truth—but the good.”³¹

Levinas answers the problem of the origin of a self’s freedom to know with an appeal to the self-Other encounter. He claims that the Other calls the self’s freedom to know into question through the command not to try to reduce the Other to an identity that can be known. This is a command to respect the Other’s alterity. Furthermore, the Other, through the imperative to try to satisfy their demands, invests the self with the freedom of responsibility. The freedom to know is therefore ethically oriented toward trying to know what the Other’s needs are, and trying to satisfy these. Ontology is thus not fundamental for the self or for their freedom to know. Rather, the ethical relation animates the self’s freedom to know, which includes the freedom to philosophize. Because the freedom to know arises in the service of the Other, Levinas states that ethics, not ontology, is first philosophy.

³¹ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 9.

PART TWO:
A NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE OF LEVINAS

I. INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

In large part, Nietzsche is remembered for questioning people's hidden assumptions and motivations. Through doing so, he is often able to level penetrating criticisms against whoever or whatever he turns his attention toward. Therefore, in trying to formulate a Nietzschean critique of Levinas, some time must be spent anticipating what assumptions Nietzsche might accuse Levinas of making, and whether Nietzsche agrees with these assumptions or not. For this reason, and because Levinas' ethics centers on the transcendent Other, Part Two begins with a Nietzschean account of transcendence. A Nietzschean might criticize the notion of transcendence for presupposing the ontology of unchanging being, which Nietzsche himself rejects. Afterwards, Nietzsche's ontology and its derivative ethics are presented. These serve as tools for Nietzsche's affirmation of life. They also provide ammunition for Nietzsche's critique of Judaism, which is important to consider here in light of Judaism's influence on Levinas' philosophy. Together, these aspects of Nietzsche's work can be used to form a Nietzschean critique of Levinas' philosophical project.

II. TRANSCENDENCE FROM THE ONTOLOGY OF UNCHANGING BEING

While references to transcendence are somewhat difficult to find in Nietzsche's work, he explicitly criticizes ontologies that posit the existence of unchanging beings. Nietzsche notices that many philosophers in the European tradition have, since ancient Greece, claimed that unchanging beings endure despite their changing appearances; the part of a being which does not change is its essence. Philosophers of unchanging being can thus claim that multiple appearances nevertheless bear reference to the same essential being, and, though that being's essence may not be knowable entirely, its perceivers can still have partial and veritable access to a being's essence.³² During the first half of the 20th century, after Nietzsche died, philosophers start regularly using the term 'transcendence' to refer to the measure by which a perceived being's essence evades the grasp of the perceiving being. Hence, these iterations of transcendence presuppose the ontology of unchanging being. It is, no doubt, on these grounds that a Nietzschean critique may be formulated against transcendence.

In order to articulate a Nietzschean critique of transcendence, I initially present the philosophical views of Parmenides, a presocratic philosopher. Parmenides espouses the ontology of unchanging being, and is therefore a target for criticism in Nietzsche's work. The ontology of Parmenides is next shown to support the position that a being's essence transcends its

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §54.

appearance. Following this, the basis for Nietzsche's rejection of the ontology of unchanging being is described. Because Nietzsche rejects this ontological framework, he dismisses the actuality of unchanging essences, and so too of the transcendence these support.

Nietzsche is critical of Parmenides and of the Eleatic philosophers who follow Parmenides.³³ The Eleatics, like Parmenides, "den[y] the reality of change," and claim instead that what is real is unchanging.³⁴ According to this way of thinking, "What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is not*."³⁵ Parmenides indeed makes the claims Nietzsche attributes to him. The ancient Greek philosopher writes that thinking must suppose either that the objects of thought necessarily exist, or that these must not exist. Since it is impossible to think of and inquire after what does not exist, Parmenides concludes that whatever can be thought must exist.³⁶ Furthermore, Parmenides states that anything which exists can neither be destroyed nor come into existence from non-existence: "For you will not cut off what-is from clinging to what-is, neither being scattered everywhere in every way in order nor being brought together."³⁷ In other words, whatever exists cannot have a beginning or an end. This is because a beginning is a passage from non-existence into existence, while an end is the reverse. However, Parmenides' claim that we cannot speak or think

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Reason' In Philosophy," in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), §2.

³⁴ Ibid., §2n.

³⁵ Ibid., §1.

³⁶ Parmenides, in *A Presocratics Reader*, ed. Patricia Curd, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), B2.

³⁷ Ibid., B4.

of what does not exist means that it is impossible to conceive of beings before or after they exist. In addition to this reasoning, Parmenides states that anything which has no beginning or end does not change. Hence, whatever can be thought, and consequently whatever exists, does not change.³⁸ As Parmenides sees it, individual beings that permit the grasp of thought do not change. He thinks this also applies to general existence, which is different from individual beings but yet serves as a ground for them. Thus, Parmenides writes, “what-is is ungenerated and imperishable, a whole of a single kind, unshaken, and complete.”³⁹ By claiming that individual beings and existence itself are unchanging, Parmenides commits to the ontology of unchanging being: existence is thought to ground all that is, while everything that exists shares in general, unchanging existence.

Individual beings and being in general do not change on Parmenides’ view. Beings and existence therefore have essences that remain the same across all places and times. No matter the point of access to being in general or to a being, its unchanging essence can be discovered in thought. While beings can be known as they essentially are, their essences are accessed through how they appear perspectively. The distance between how beings appear and how they essentially are marks the extent to which essential beings transcend their appearances. Since something’s essence is its truth, which has meaning, thinking can discover not only the essence, but also the truth and meaning of whatever it investigates.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., B8.

Nietzsche dismisses Parmenides' and the Eleatics' position that unchanging being is the source of beings, and of the appearance of change. Part of why he does so is because our access to beings, and to existence, is always partial and perspectival: "There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing.'"⁴⁰ Furthermore, Nietzsche writes, "what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance!"⁴¹ Thus, Nietzsche thinks it is unnecessary to posit the existence of an unchanging being behind its appearance. He claims, furthermore, that there are conceptual difficulties with adopting the ontology of unchanging being. One might suppose that there are unchanging beings behind their changeable appearances, and that "*the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, ...that much more complete will our 'concept' of this matter, our 'objectivity' be."⁴² In this case, the difference between the perceiving being and the perceived being accounts for why the perceiver only attains the changeable appearance of an essential being, even if this is a difference from oneself. As well, the shared participation of the perceiver and the perceived in unchanging being is what allows the perceiver to perceive, and to at least somewhat veritably represent the perceived.⁴³ However, it is inconsistent to claim both that the perceiver and the perceived are fundamentally the same from sharing in unchanging being, and that the

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), III.12.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, GS, §54.

⁴² Nietzsche, GM, III.12.

⁴³ Parmenides, B6.

limitations of perspective stem from the irreconcilable difference between the perceiver and the perceived. The apparent change of an unchanging being cannot be simultaneously derived from fundamental sameness and fundamental difference, since these are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Parmenidean ontology cannot account for the apparent change of beings without appealing to irreconcilable difference. In any case, being for Parmenides and the Eleatics would not appear to be, it would simply *be*; change would be that which is apparent.

These are the grounds on which Nietzsche dismisses the ontology of unchanging being as it is articulated by Parmenides. Because of this dismissal, one can infer a Nietzschean rejection of the transcendence that this ontology supports. As I show throughout the following section, Nietzsche embraces the ontology of immanent becoming. Nietzsche's ontology is heavily indebted to another presocratic philosopher, Heraclitus. This ontological view can coherently account for the appearance of unchanging beings as these arise from continuous change. Nietzsche additionally develops an ethics that is based on the values 'good' and 'bad', which can arise from the existence of beings within immanence. These values are presented as alternatives to the value 'good' that the Levinasian Other commands of the self.

III. THE ETHICS OF IMMANENCE

The work of Heraclitus, a presocratic philosopher, is incredibly important for Nietzsche's thinking, since it informs the latter's positions on the status of being and on ethics. Because several of Nietzsche's views can best be appreciated in light of Heraclitus' philosophy, I begin this section by presenting Heraclitus' ontology and the ethics it suggests. These positions are accompanied by Nietzsche's written references to Heraclitus. An outline of Nietzsche's ontological and ethical positions follows, while I highlight the similarities between Heraclitus and Nietzsche. While Nietzsche's ethics are presented as an alternative to the ethics of Levinas, their ontological foundations provide the basis for a Nietzschean critique of Levinas' ethics as being reactive, slavish, and life-denying.

Nietzsche expresses agreement with what he takes to be Heraclitus' ontology of immanent becoming: "Heraclitus will always be right in thinking that being [which does not change] is an empty fiction."⁴⁴ Heraclitus does actually seem to think this according to one of his most famous aphorisms: "[It is not possible to step twice into the same river] It scatters and again comes together, and approaches and recedes."⁴⁵ Here, the river's changing makes it impossible for it to be truly self-identical. Rather, the apparent unity or identity of the river is suggested to arise from its differing. Thinking of the

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, TI, "Reason' In Philosophy," §2.

⁴⁵ Heraclitus, in *A Presocratics Reader*, ed. Patricia Curd, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), §40. (B91).

river as the same, or as essential, is hence made possible only because of the river's difference. It is not the case that the river has a fundamentally unchanging identity, which would be that it is always changing. Instead, any identity that the river can be said to have arises from its changing. On Heraclitus' model, change underlies that which appears to remain the same, and not the other way around: "Changing it rests."⁴⁶

Like Heraclitus, Nietzsche thinks that unchanging being is an empty fiction, an appearance that emerges from becoming and change. Still, further explanation is required to account for how the appearance of unchanging being arises from the flow of change. Clues can be found in Heraclitus' philosophical fragments, as well as in Nietzsche's writings and references to Heraclitus.

In one of Heraclitus' fragments, he claims, "All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods."⁴⁷ Interpreting this passage does not require thinking that everything is always literally being an exchange for the sake of fire, and *vice versa*. It is true that fire consumes much of what it touches, and that new life grows from the organic and inorganic remnants of what fire burns. However, Heraclitus notes, "Fire is want and satiety."⁴⁸ Fire suffers want from its satisfaction because after satisfying, fire requires new material for fuel. Also, fire is the satisfaction of want when it burns fuel; the life of fire is satiety, too. While all fire is want and satiety, not all want and satiety are fire. Heraclitus acknowledges that other

⁴⁶ Ibid., §55. (B84a).

⁴⁷ Ibid., §49 (B90).

⁴⁸ Ibid., §50 (B65).

things appear to exist from want and its satisfaction: “For souls to become water is to die; for water to become earth is to die; but from earth, water comes to be; from water, soul.”⁴⁹ When fire is taken to be a non-exhaustive metaphor for existents, all of which are want and satiety, then the first passage becomes more comprehensible. In this interpretation, beings are an exchange for others insofar as one comes to exist from that which satisfies it, or from what is exchanged for it. Moreover, the being that appears to exist from what it is satisfied with is in turn an exchange for all things since, when an apparent being cannot satisfy its want, it may perish. This existent, whose essential identity is apparent, would thereby yield the opportunity for others to appear through their satisfying wants.

The account Heraclitus offers as to how unchanging beings appear to emerge from becoming involves the interaction of at least two ‘beings’ that want. Wanting is either satisfied, or it is not. If the second alternative obtains, then the unsatisfied wanting serves to satisfy the wanting of another being. Heraclitus thinks “everything comes to be in accordance with strife,” which he says happens at the level of inorganic material.⁵⁰ However, this hostile dynamic also extends to biological living things: “War is the father of all and king of all, and some he shows as gods, others as humans; some he makes slaves, others free.”⁵¹ Through strife, different wants compete for satisfaction over each other. The want that achieves satisfaction is free to the extent that it

⁴⁹ Ibid., §52 (B36).

⁵⁰ Ibid., §59 (B8).

⁵¹ Ibid., §58 (B53).

is able to be satisfied. Conversely, the want that is frustrated is slavish because, in being used to satisfy the first want, it is subordinated to the satisfying want. Two wants appear not to change through their competition; the one that finds satisfaction obtains the role of master in their relation, while the one that is used for the satisfaction of the first, and is hence left wanting, obtains the role of a slave. Humans are subservient to gods, who rule over the human world. Even among humans, some obtain freedom over their conquered slaves.

Nietzsche's thought consistently follows that of Heraclitus on these matters. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes, "'Cause' and 'effect' is what one says; but we have merely perfected the image of becoming without reaching beyond the image or behind it."⁵² Here, he claims that causes and effects are not beings that either cause change or are the products of change. Rather, causes and effects take on the appearance of being from the flow of becoming: "An intellect that could see cause and effect as a continuum and a flux and not, as we do, in terms of an arbitrary division and dismemberment, would repudiate the concept of cause and effect and deny all conditionality."⁵³ Nevertheless, it is not entirely accidental that we have come to represent becoming in terms of cause and effect relations. Here, one 'being' exerts force over another, whereby they both obtain the appearance of unchanging being.

This interpretation is further supported in the 'prelude in rhymes' that opens *The Gay Science*. One of Nietzsche's poems, titled *Heraclitean*, includes

⁵² Nietzsche, GS, §112.

⁵³ Ibid.

the line, “Only fighting yields / Happiness on earth.”⁵⁴ Nietzsche expresses his agreement with Heraclitus that through strife, happiness can occur as the satisfaction of want. This satisfaction, however, comes at the frustration of the want that proves weaker.⁵⁵ Though Nietzsche adopts Heraclitus’ dynamic account of masterful and slavish wants, Nietzsche terms these ‘active’ and ‘reactive’ forces. When two forces compete, the one that triumphs over the other takes on an active role, whereas the one acted upon becomes reactive.⁵⁶ Each of these forces, like Heraclitus’ wants, competes for supremacy; they achieve the appearance of being together only through contest, where one force becomes active and the other reactive. This drive of forces to compete with each other, which produces the appearance of unchanging beings, is what Nietzsche importantly calls the will to power. He writes that forces are driven to satisfy their want of power more fundamentally than all other wants, such as the want of knowledge, or even the want to preserve biological life.⁵⁷ Knowledge and conceptualization are for Nietzsche ways of exerting power over what is given in thinking; knowing is appropriating, where one says, “this is such and such.”⁵⁸ Biological life also arises from the assimilation of organic and inorganic materials digestively. It is further aided through crafting a dwelling place and fending off enemies. The drive to know and the drive to life are expressions of the will to power, though the will to power sometimes

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, GS, ‘Joke, Cunning, and Revenge,’ §41.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003), §19.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, GM, I.10.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, BGE, §6.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, GM, I.2.

favours remaining in ignorance, or urges the destruction of biological life.⁵⁹

Since, according to Nietzsche's Heraclitean ontology, nothing is ever twice the same, the will to power is not a universal category or commonality in which all of its instances participate. Rather, as Gilles Deleuze notes, the will to power is instantiated through the competition between forces; the will to power is never twice the same because of the fundamental difference of its component forces.⁶⁰

Through willing power, the triumphant active force satisfies their want and thereby attains "Happiness on earth."⁶¹ This happiness from satisfying want while depriving another force is the origin of the value 'good' for Nietzsche: "it was 'the good' themselves, that is the noble, powerful, higher-ranking, and high-minded who *felt* and ranked themselves and their doings as good, which is to say, as of the first rank, in contrast to everything base, low-minded, common, and vulgar [emphasis mine]."⁶² Nietzsche further writes, "the nobles *felt* themselves to be humans of a higher rank [emphasis mine]."⁶³ The feeling of power from satisfying want engenders the judgment 'good,' while the contrasting judgment 'bad' is "only an after-birth, a pale contrast-image in relation to its positive basic concept."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, GS, §344; GM, I.8.

⁶⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugo Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 50.

⁶¹ Nietzsche, GS, 'Joke, Cunning, and Revenge,' §41.

⁶² Nietzsche, GM, I.2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, I.5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I.10.

The fundamentality of the will to power leads Nietzsche to claim that, in adopting the appearance of changeless beings, forces have a metaphorical life more primordial than biological life. To illustrate this, Nietzsche states, “Life—that is: continually shedding something that wants to die. Life—that is: being cruel and inexorable against everything about us that is growing old and weak—and not only about *us*.”⁶⁵ Nietzsche’s position here follows Heraclitus, who claims that the appearance of both organic and inorganic beings is produced from wants competing for satisfaction: “we are, all of us, growing volcanoes that approach the hour of their eruption.”⁶⁶ Similar to the power dynamics operative in volcanoes, Nietzsche writes that lightning occurs through a process of tension and change.⁶⁷ Electrical tension is suppressed until it grows to such a point that it overcomes its opposition, and is discharged as lightning.

Nietzsche’s analysis of the interaction of forces leads to the important insight that reactive forces can eventually become active forces through the heightened tension of their being acted upon. He remarks that this can happen to humans who overcome the social forces that act on them:

With the help of the morality of custom and the social straightjacket [humanity] was *made* truly calculable. If, on the other hand, we place ourselves at the end of the enormous process, where the tree finally

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, GS, §26.

⁶⁶ Ibid., §9.

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, GM, I.8.

produces its fruit, where society and its morality of custom finally brings to light that *to which* it was only the means: then we will find as the ripest fruit on its tree the *sovereign individual*, ...free again from the morality of custom.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, human societies are not exempt from the active and reactive structure of forces. Strong, healthy societies have commanding and obeying classes, comprised of members best suited either to act upon others, or to discharge action from being acted upon.⁶⁹ Becoming active is not something for every member of a social group, since this necessarily involves the subordination of others.⁷⁰ Thus, a society that holds the values ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as they originate from the feeling of power affirms life in its primordial sense.

Heraclitus can fairly be interpreted to acknowledge that forces can change from reactive to become active, and even the other way around. Such an interpretation comes from his comment that all things are exchanged for fire, and that fire is also an exchange for all things.⁷¹ That which is exchanged for fire is reactive to fire’s activity, while fire can become reactive when it is exchanged for something that comes to act upon it. Nietzsche also notices that formerly active forces can become reactive when what they acted on come in turn to act on them: a dam that acts upon a stream eventually forms a lake.

⁶⁸ Ibid., II.2.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, BGE, §19.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Heraclitus, §49. (B90).

But, once this lake rises high enough, the dam can break from the counter-force that it helped to create.⁷²

By now, it should be clear that Nietzsche espouses Heraclitus' immanence of becoming as an ontological foundation. This grounds each of their accounts for how beings come to appear through the struggle of wants competing for satisfaction. Furthermore, the necessity of struggle for 'life' yields the values 'good' and 'bad.' Both thinkers also agree that wants can change from satisfying to being deprived, and from being deprived to satisfying. However, existence threatens to unsettle beings in several ways. The necessity for beings to struggle might seem to upset even those victorious beings basking in the goodness of satisfaction. Moreover, the inherent meaninglessness of existence may prove troubling to beings. This is why, in the following section, I present Nietzsche's acknowledgement that beings must struggle and suffer in order to exist, and that doing so has no essential meaning. In spite of this, Nietzsche thinks that the value 'good', which can arise from an immanent ontology, may be used as a way to affirm existential meaninglessness and the necessity to suffer. Thus, Nietzsche contends, contrary to Levinas, that ontology is fundamental in furnishing beings with the resources to affirm their existence.

⁷² Nietzsche, GS, §285.

IV. THE VALUE OF SUFFERING FOR NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche acknowledges that it may seem as though existence is inhospitable to beings. According to the ontology of immanent becoming, existence threatens to dissolve beings into it. Forestalling the menace of existence depends on suffering the force of other beings through struggling for victory against them. Moreover, the requirement for beings to labour in order to exist and to live is itself suffered.⁷³ Why, then, exist rather than not exist when continued existence necessitates repeated suffering, and when the necessity to labour is suffered? Nietzsche believes that beings can affirm both kinds of suffering through the value 'good,' which emerges as the affect of mastery.⁷⁴ This pleasure of conquest comes as the culmination of a successful struggle, and is enjoyed all the more because of the difficulty involved in its achievement. Since all successful exertions of power yield happiness, and because all interpretations and determinations are exertions of power, all interpretations grant happiness. Additionally, Nietzsche claims that when beings sense and think of either the necessity they suffer of being required to labour, or the suffering internal to every labour, they interpretively exert power over these sufferings. Therefore, any awareness of the suffering from individual labours and of suffering the requirement to labour produces happiness. The being which has such awareness thereby generates positive, affirmative values

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), §3.

⁷⁴ Nietzsche, GM, I.16.

out of dominantly living from the suffering they exert interpretive force over.⁷⁵ Thus, Nietzsche writes, “At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down* upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *over* ourselves or weeping *over* ourselves.”⁷⁶ Despite the fact that existence does not furnish an intrinsic goodness that justifies suffering and makes existing valuable, Nietzsche concludes, “As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us.”⁷⁷

V. NIETZSCHE ON THE VALUES OF JUDAISM

So far, I have shown that Nietzsche’s commitment to the ontology of immanent becoming informs his ethical outlook. He also thinks that immanent ontology provides the resources to affirm the necessity to suffer. In Nietzsche’s work, especially in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he uses his ontological and ethical frameworks to mount a critique of Judaism. Because Levinas is Jewish, and since he thinks there are strong parallels between his philosophical work and the teachings of Judaism, this section consists in presenting Nietzsche’s assessment of Judaism. Nietzsche thinks the values that Judaism teaches are reactive, and seek to stifle active force. As such, they deny the necessity to exert force in order to live and to exist. Since Nietzsche thinks the affect of goodness arises from exerting power, and because Nietzsche

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, GS, §107.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

claims that Judaism seeks to limit the extent to which beings vent their strength, he thinks Jewish values make life less joyful for their adherents. Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that Jewish values have culminated in the crisis of nihilism in Europe. Because of the influence of Judaism in Levinas' work, formulating a Nietzschean critique of Levinas will do well to include Nietzsche's assessment of Judaism.

Some of the most sustained attention that Nietzsche gives to Judaism's contribution to European thought can be found in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Here, he claims that Judaism accomplishes an inverted revaluation of the values 'good' and 'bad' that emerge from the ontology of immanent becoming.⁷⁸ This revaluation, which Nietzsche calls "the *slave revolt in morals*," begins with the creation of the Jewish God.⁷⁹ Jewish values enter Europe through a complex process that effectively seduces the Romans. Nietzsche notes that the Romans succeeded the Greeks as a regional power in Europe, and like the Greeks, they also initially embraced a noble, life-affirming ethic.⁸⁰ However, Jewish values were nevertheless able to entice the Romans because, through Christianity, reactive Jewish values are made to appear similar to the life-affirming, noble values.⁸¹

On the origin of the Jewish God, Nietzsche writes that most gods originate through the spiritualization of a group's tribal ancestors. Many

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, GM, I.7.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, BGE, §195.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, GM, I.16.

⁸¹ Ibid., I.8.

groups honour their ancestors for creating a secure society.⁸² The ones who are honoured create social order by exerting force: “the oldest ‘state’ accordingly made its appearance as a terrible tyranny, as a crushing and ruthless machinery, and continued to work until finally such a raw material of people and half-animals was not only thoroughly kneaded and pliable but also *formed*.”⁸³ The ones who accomplish this creation are “a race of conquerors and lords, which, organized in a warlike manner and with the power to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible paws on a population enormously superior in numbers perhaps, but still formless, still roaming about.”⁸⁴ Thus, the honoured ancestors are an active force against the reactive population that they shape; civil founders are honoured for their power.

The spiritualization of those who found social order comes about partly from their descendants thinking that they stand in relation to their ancestors as debtors to a creditor:

Here the conviction holds sway that it is only through the sacrifices and achievements of the ancestors that the clan *exists* at all,—and that one has to *repay* them through sacrifices and achievements: one thereby acknowledges a *debt* that is continually growing, since these ancestors,

⁸² Ibid., II.19.

⁸³ Nietzsche, GM, II.17.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

in their continued existence as powerful spirits, do not cease to use their strength to bestow on the clan new benefits and advances.⁸⁵

Imagining that one's ancestral social founders endure as spirits requires that they be thought of as unchanging beings.⁸⁶ This assumption, made on the part of the reactive herd who are bound by the "morality of custom," likely extends to the social founders even while they are alive.⁸⁷ The herd is so reactive that they cannot imagine life without being acted upon. From the standpoint of reactive force, it is thought to be required that something remains, unchanging, to act upon the reactive types. Consequently, the changeless power of those who found social order, and of their spiritualized form after death, is imagined by the reactive social majority to give itself value. Each spiritualized ancestor is, furthermore, "necessarily transfigured into a *god*," and these spirits are believed to have the highest value. The spirits, and eventually gods, inhabit a world of true being and value; it stands apart from the world where the descendants live.⁸⁸

Judaism claims that God has absolute value, and that God comes from beyond the world of human existence.⁸⁹ It is God who sees "that [His creations are] good."⁹⁰ The Jews describe a profound debt to God because of the order He gives to the human world: when Job speaks angrily against God for

⁸⁵ Ibid., II.19.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., II.2.

⁸⁸ Ibid., II.19.

⁸⁹ Genesis 1:1-2:2 (The Schocken Bible, Volume I, trans. Everett Fox (SB)).

⁹⁰ Genesis 1:4 (SB).

inflicting misery upon him, God rhetorically asks, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”⁹¹ Here, God demands humility and respect for all that He has given humankind. Moreover, Judaism does honour the human patriarchs and prophets of its tradition, including Moses and Abraham. Moses is honoured for securing Jewish society, since he leads the Jews to the land that God has promised them, while he also delivers the most important laws which the Jews are to obey.⁹²

However, Nietzsche’s attribution of a god’s invention to the spiritualization of ancestors might appear not to fit with the Jewish account. In contrast to Nietzsche’s account, the Jews claim that while their human founders, like Abraham and Moses, do not have prior faith in God, they come to know Him through revelation.⁹³ If such is the case, then they themselves could not then be transfigured into God. Nevertheless, God is the creator of Adam and Eve, whose generational offspring beget Abraham, whose offspring in turn beget the twelve tribes of Israel. God could perhaps be a more distant ancestor who became spiritualized. As well, the Torah and other segments of Jewish scripture were formally completed after the Jews settled in the land of Israel: Finkelstein and Silberman, archaeologists trying to establish the veracity and historical placement of events in the Torah, state, “the Exodus narrative reached its final form... in the second half of the seventh and the first

⁹¹ Job 38:4 (English Standard Version (ESV)).

⁹² Exodus 32:15 (SB).

⁹³ Genesis 22:8 (SB).

half of the sixth century BCE.”⁹⁴ The historical truthfulness of many other events in the Torah are also doubtful.⁹⁵ It is therefore plausible that the Jewish God, too, is the product of the Jews spiritualizing their ancestors into a single God.

The account Nietzsche offers about the creation of gods, including the Jewish God, involves reactive forces positing true being behind its appearance. The Jewish leaders, no longer active from having been seduced by the ‘real’ world, become a priestly caste.⁹⁶ The priestly aristocrats hold themselves and others responsible for exerting force, since an essential self is thought to exist behind its deeds.⁹⁷ Judaism is consequently a religion that begins from the standpoint of reactive force, and which demands that active force not express itself as such; it is against ‘life’ in the primordial sense. When active force does express itself, the Jews are hateful and resentful of it.⁹⁸

The original Jewish valuation comes from accusing active forces of acting when they supposedly should not. This is a hateful, resentful valuation, which corresponds to the value, ‘evil.’ In contrast to ‘evil,’ the reactive ones who ‘refrain’ from acting are deemed to be ‘good;’ in contrast to the life-affirming, noble value scheme, where ‘good’ is posited before the weak, ‘bad’ ones,

⁹⁴ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 68.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, GM, I.7.

⁹⁷ Ibid., I.7; I.13.

⁹⁸ Ibid., I.10.

Judaism interprets the noble 'good' as instead being 'evil.'⁹⁹ Within both the value schemes good/bad and evil/good, active forces are the source of the value dichotomies.¹⁰⁰

Besides being a reactive, life-denying belief system, the Jewish hatred of active force is accompanied by a special kind of self-punishment: while Nietzsche writes that, typically, "every step toward the atrophying of the clan, all miserable chance occurrences... *diminish* the fear of the spirit of the founder," the Jews punish themselves, and say, "I should not have done that."¹⁰¹ The idea that one deserves punishment is called guilt, or bad conscience. It arises because the Jews have the instinct to express force, because they are confined by the morality of custom in a social order, and because they feel indebted first to their ancestors, and later to God. These three things mean that when something bad occurs, the Jews attribute their misfortune to God, who is punishing them, and that they should feel bad for not having done enough for Him. The morality of custom, here interpreted as God's word, demands that the Jews not exert force against it, that doing so would be a sin: "the greatest and most uncanny of sicknesses was introduced, one from which man has not recovered to this day, the suffering of man *from man*, from *himself*—as the consequence of a forceful separation from his animal past, of a leap and plunge, as it were, into new situations and conditions of existence, of a declaration of war against the old instincts on which his energy,

⁹⁹ Ibid., I.13.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., II.17.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., II.19; II.15.

desire, and terribleness had thus far rested.” Through guilt, Judaism finds a channel for constrained active force to express itself: “All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn themselves inwards*.”¹⁰²

In the context of European history, Nietzsche claims that nobler natures, lustful for the happy good of life as contest, are initially wary of the hateful, reactive Jewish values: “Rome sensed in the Jew something like anti-nature itself, its antipodal monstrosity as it were.”¹⁰³ However, the Jews are able to seduce Roman nobles and gain a greater foothold in Europe through the instrument of Christianity.¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche claims that Christianity articulates the ‘good’ derived from the Jewish ‘evil.’ Jesus loves the ones who are weak and who do not act forcefully. By crucifying Jesus, the Jews make it appear as though there is a great distance between Christianity and Judaism, as though they hate Christianity.¹⁰⁵ This apparent distance deceives the Roman nobles into thinking that Christianity is an expression of the love of life, which they hold dear: “Rome has succumbed without any doubt.”¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Christianity maintains a belief in the kingdom of God beyond the apparent world, and that is the source of the apparent world’s value.¹⁰⁷ This leads Nietzsche to write, “out of the trunk of that tree of revenge and hate, Jewish hate—the deepest and most sublime hate, namely an ideal-creating, value-reshaping hate whose like has never before existed on earth—grew forth

¹⁰² Ibid., II.16.

¹⁰³ Ibid., I.16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., I.8; I.16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., I.8.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., I.16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., I.15.

something just as incomparable, a *new love*, the deepest and most sublime of all kinds of love.”¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Israel has “reached the final goal of its sublime desire for revenge precisely via the detour of this ‘Redeemer,’ this apparent adversary and dissolver of Israel.”¹⁰⁹ Through Christ, “as the embodied Gospel of Love,” Jewish values seduce the Romans, for whom value originates in contest, and especially triumph.¹¹⁰ To illustrate his point, Nietzsche rhetorically asks, “Which of them has been victorious in the meantime, Rome or Judea? But there is no doubt at all: just consider before whom one bows today in Rome itself as before the quintessence of all the highest values.”¹¹¹ Further, Nietzsche provides an example of the subterranean, Jewish hate that lurks behind Christianity with a quote from Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*: “The blessed in the kingdom of heaven will see the punishments of the damned, *in order that their bliss be more delightful to them.*”¹¹²

Nietzsche pays Judaism a backhanded compliment when he states that the Jewish slave revolt has been remarkably successful. This revolt and its revaluation of strong values were undertaken with the aim of obtaining revenge against strong beings. The spread of reactive values has achieved this aim, and beings who would lust after power now submit to the priestly caste.¹¹³ According to Nietzsche, the Jews have convinced Europeans that they must

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., I.8.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., I.16.

¹¹² Ibid., I.15.

¹¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), §24.

obey the will of God. In order to obey the will of God, Europeans must submit to the will of the priests.¹¹⁴ Judaism has therefore convinced the masses to submit to them, while nevertheless condemning anyone who tries to dominate another person. Nietzsche claims that the Jews sought to gain mastery over stronger types because of “the deepest instinct [for power], ...the most stubborn will to life that had ever existed in any people on earth.” However, Judaism spawned a rebellion against the mastery it gained. This rebellion was led by Jesus Christ: “It was a rebellion against the ‘good and the just’, against the ‘saints of Israel’, ...against caste, privilege, order.” In spite of this, the Christian resistance against the Jewish priestly caste is an intensification of reactive, life-denying values; it criticizes Judaism for not being meek enough.¹¹⁵

This slavish revolt is a *fait accompli* for 19th-century Europe, the time at which Nietzsche is writing.¹¹⁶ He claims that, “not only have the joy and innocence of the animal become repulsive but life itself has become unsavory.”¹¹⁷ Nietzsche states that the diminution of the belief in true being behind its appearance has provoked a crisis in Europe, the crisis of nihilism.¹¹⁸ From the belief in the ‘real’ world, people have come to think that all suffering is evil. After all, if there is an essential subject divorced from their actions, then they are free not to act and not to make suffer. Whereas the ‘real’ world (God in the Jewish and Christian context; unchanging Being or the Forms in

¹¹⁴ Ibid., §26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., §27.

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, GM, I.7.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., II.7.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., I.12.

the Greek context) previously gave meaning to suffering, the spreading disbelief in the 'real' world leads people to believe instead that suffering is meaningless.¹¹⁹ Nihilism is thus the belief that life consists in meaningless suffering, with no hope to make it meaningful.¹²⁰

VI. FORMULATING A NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE OF LEVINAS

The relevant aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy have now been presented such that a Nietzschean critique of Levinas can be formulated. Nietzsche might object in particular to Levinas' account of ethics as grounded on the transcendent Other. This account probably sounds to Nietzscheans as though the Other is a thing in itself, or an essential and unchanging being. If this were the case, then Levinas is committed to the ontology of unchanging being. A Nietzschean might think that this ontological commitment enables Levinas to ground his transcendence and the values that consequently arise. As well, a Nietzschean might claim that Levinas separates a doer from their deeds by positing a self who is free to respond to the Other's needs. The doer is a being who remains essentially the same despite their appearance through enacting various deeds. Thus, the doer, like the Other, transcends their deeds, in addition to transcending how the doer otherwise appears. Because of this alleged ontological commitment and the separation between doer and deed, a Nietzschean may claim that Levinas supposes that the doer can refrain from

¹¹⁹ Ibid., II.7.

¹²⁰ Ibid., I.12.

acting. Hence, when a self exerts force against the Other, or refuses to help the Other, then the Other can declare the self to be evil; the Other meanwhile might think themselves good for not causing suffering. A Nietzschean might point out that, similarly to the 'good' and 'bad' value pair, the first value in the 'good' and 'evil' set comes from a dominant, active force.¹²¹

Since Nietzsche thinks exerting force is healthy, its being required for life, he concludes that any ethical system advocating for the restraint of power denies life. Levinas' ethics, which argues against trying to dominate the Other, thus appears life-denying to Nietzscheans. A Nietzschean might think that Levinas is reluctant to encourage selves to enjoy the pleasure of triumph against the Other. If this is true, a Nietzschean could claim that living is made more miserable for adherents of Levinas' ethics. In spite of the wretched lives that a Nietzschean might think awaits Levinas and his followers, a Nietzschean might state that Levinas accepts this lot because he is motivated by revenge against the people who dominated him. After all, Levinas, who is Jewish, lived through a concentration camp during the Second World War. Furthermore, this supposed revenge could be driven by a deeper instinct for power, regardless of what Levinas purports to be the source of his values. A Nietzschean might say that because Levinas has insufficient strength to physically retaliate against his aggressors, Levinas instead undertakes spiritual vengeance through positing the ones who make suffer as evil, and the ones who suffer as good, or worthy of goodness. So, a Nietzschean might conclude,

¹²¹ See the preceding sections from Part Two.

not only is Levinas incorrect and incoherent in trying to think transcendence as the ground for ethics, but believing in his stated goodness also makes his life more miserable.¹²²

This Nietzschean critique of Levinas appears devastating to Levinas' philosophical project. It casts doubt on the viability of his notion of transcendence, while also calling into question Levinas' motivation for expounding the value 'good' that he does. Despite these strong objections, I spend Part Three of this project explaining Levinas' philosophy in greater detail, and formulating Levinasian replies to these Nietzschean objections.

¹²² Ibid.

PART THREE:

A LEVINASIAN REJOINDER AGAINST A NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE

I. INTRODUCTION TO PART THREE

While Part Two of this project ended with the formulation of a Nietzschean critique of Levinas, Part Three constructs a Levinasian reply to this critique. Part Three is structured so as to contrapuntally address each part of the Nietzschean critique. This begins with Levinas' dismissal, like Nietzsche's, of the ontology of unchanging being. Levinas' transcendence is therefore not grounded on the notion of an unchanging essence as the Nietzschean critique charges. This means that Levinas' notion of transcendence is not vulnerable to the Nietzschean critique. Next, Levinas' ontological immanence is described. The transcendent Other is, contrary to the Nietzschean claim, rooted in the immanent world while nevertheless exceeding the laws of immanence. A Levinasian reply to Nietzsche's affirmation of life is then outlined. While a Levinasian might think Nietzsche's attempts to affirm life as he does do not succeed, this does not amount to a Levinasian denial of life. Instead, this analysis underscores the importance of striving for ongoing existence in the service of the Other. Lastly, Levinas' assessment of Judaism is related to the values 'good' and 'evil' that he identifies. These values are shown to be completely different from the 'good' and 'evil' value dichotomy that Nietzsche describes. The Levinasian reply charges Nietzsche

with misinterpreting Judaism primarily because he does not conceive of a transcendence that is compatible with immanence. Part Three concludes with a summative conjunction of all the points from the Levinasian replies to the Nietzschean critique.

II. TRANSCENDENCE WITHOUT UNCHANGING BEING

At the beginning of the text *Existence & Existents*, Levinas questions what existence is as abstracted from the existence of individual beings. One pitfall Levinas identifies in undertaking this investigation is the error of treating being as a particular being. He claims many philosophers make this mistake; Levinas hopes to avoid doing so.¹²³

One way that philosophers end up treating being in general as an individual being is by supposing that being has an essence, which remains the same despite its apparent change.¹²⁴ When confronted with the objection that we only have perspectival access to being, and that being appears to change, such thinkers reply that being's essence can be known through its appearance.¹²⁵ The complete essence of being would hence transcend the

¹²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 1.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 42.

grasp of beings, where transcendence is the measure by which a thing's essence exceeds its appearance.¹²⁶

If being has an unchanging essence, then so too do the beings that share in existence. Nevertheless, the individual existences of these beings are their own distinct essences. The essences of beings could, furthermore, be known at least partially through how they appear through a perspective.¹²⁷

Levinas remarks that the ontology of unchanging being treats being in general as a being. Such is the case because if being has an unchanging essence, then it has a quantitative dimension to it; it remains determined and differentiated, identified. However, it is beings that are differentiated, whereas being in general is undifferentiated; existence is abstracted from all determinate beings. Hence, claiming that being is one or is the same, even as the sum total of all beings, amounts to interpreting being as a being. As well, treating being as an individual being supposes that through our perspectival access to the essence of existence, being appears against the horizon of being; this is the undifferentiated general existence out of which beings appear.¹²⁸ Since it is incoherent to claim that being can be approached against, or in contrast to, the ground that it is, Levinas rejects the ontology of unchanging being.¹²⁹

Levinas also states that a commitment to unchanging being as the source of difference between beings makes their alterity unthinkable. If alterity

¹²⁶ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 2.

¹²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

¹²⁸ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 2.

¹²⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 72.

is grounded in the fundamental sameness of beings, which share in the unchanging essence of existence, then their alterity from each other is merely illusory; the sameness of beings would instead be more real. Additionally, the sameness of being makes communication unthinkable. Communication can only occur between separate beings. Alterity, meanwhile, is effaced with when one holds the view that unchanging being underlies the separation and alterity of beings.¹³⁰

Since Levinas rejects the ontology of unchanging being, he also rejects the transcendence that it supports. Contrary to the Nietzschean critique, then, the Other's transcendence as Levinas describes it is not based on the Other's unchanging essence. Rather, Levinas claims that the Other transcends being because they cannot be reduced to a being as it is understood ontologically. It is precisely the Other's irreconcilable alterity, and not their essential sameness, which is responsible for the Other's transcendence.¹³¹

Though the Other is irreducible to an identifiable being through ontological understanding from the first person perspective, the Other is certainly a being from a third person standpoint. Just what kind of being Levinas thinks the Other is, and what existential landscape they inhabit, are hence presented in the following section. Levinas ultimately commits, like Nietzsche, to the ontology of immanent becoming.¹³² This is why the Other has endless needs as long as they exist. But, as I discuss below, the Other's ethical

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

¹³² Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 23.

command ruptures the self's egotistic concern for itself as this unfolds according to an immanent ontology. This rupture in immanence transforms the self's body into a responsible body. It does so without their consent, and such that it defies the self's ability for power.¹³³

III. IMMANENCE AND THE RESPONSIBLE BODY

Levinas writes that since beings are differentiated from each other and from being in general, existence must be undifferentiated if it is not to be treated as a being.¹³⁴ He characterizes existence as a “rumbling” and as an “anonymous flow.”¹³⁵ Existence must flow and change, since it would become a being if, unchanging, it rested in identity. Thus characterized, Levinas' account of existence resembles the chaotic “wild and waste,” the “darkness” that God orders at the beginning of Genesis.¹³⁶ Levinas' ontology is one of immanence. He is thus in agreement with Nietzsche on this point.

After distinguishing existence in general from particular beings, Levinas is in a position to inquire about the relation between existence and existents. He claims that our relation to existence is revealed through the phenomena of fatigue and indolence.¹³⁷ Levinas points out the paradoxical starting point of his investigation: beings find themselves already existing; they are thus

¹³³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198.

¹³⁴ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 2.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³⁶ Genesis 1:2 (The Schocken Bible, Volume I, trans. Everett Fox (SB)).

¹³⁷ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 11.

differentiated from existence in general.¹³⁸ However, it is only from being differentiated from anonymous existence that a being can take up their being, thereby further differentiating themselves.¹³⁹ One takes up their existence, asserting sovereignty and making it their own, with the event of effort.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, all effort must begin.¹⁴¹ The necessity of having to begin in taking up one's being provokes indolence: "As in William James's famous example, it lies between the clear duty of getting up and the putting of the foot down off the bed."¹⁴² Having to begin prompts indolence because a being can begin, but the being is concerned that they could lose their beginning, and so the spoils that might come from realizing an end. It is hence that indolence does not arise from poverty, but rather from the possession of "riches which are a source of cares before being a source of enjoyment." The concern that prompts indolence, the concern for what one stands to lose, is itself the result of a beginning's inscription in being: "To interrupt what was really begun is to end it in a failure, and not to abolish the beginning." This observation leads Levinas to conclude, "indolence, as a recoil before action, is a hesitation before existence, an indolence about existing."¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the indolent shudder before existence cannot lead to a negation of existence. The "bitter essence" of

¹³⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴² Ibid., 13.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 15.

indolence “is due to the fact that it is a desertion which attests to the contract sealed with existence.”¹⁴⁴

Overcoming indolence marks the beginning of an effort, of labour. Levinas claims effort consists in moving to close the distance between a present that a being anticipates and the present that this being inhabits. The gap between these two presents, moreover, is the result of fatigue.¹⁴⁵ Levinas describes fatigue as “a constant and increasing lag between being and what it remains attached to;” in becoming fatigued, a being still holds onto what they are letting slip.¹⁴⁶ Hence, fatigue is a “lag that occurs between a being and itself,” since the present to which a being is committed yields to the weary present they are coming to inhabit. The lag of a being with itself, announced by fatigue and culminating in rest, enables fresh movement to close this lag. Herein consists the existence of an existent: a being takes up their existence through the free movement toward the anticipated present of some effort undertaken. However, the weariness that ensues from effort overtakes a being without its choosing. The cycles of an existent in its pact with being come from the fact that “there is fatigue only in effort and labour,” though labour depends on the lag opened by fatigue.¹⁴⁷ The importance of this cycle lies also in its founding an instant.¹⁴⁸ An instant, or some present as it is lived and endured,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.

consists in the interval between undertaking effort and the rest brought about by fatigue.¹⁴⁹

Levinas writes that our relation with the ontological layer of bare existence cannot account for our everyday being in the world. Effort is directed toward objects and goals, which appear only in the world.¹⁵⁰ As well, things, which are differentiated from general existence, appear against a horizon. This horizon is the ontological layer called the elemental; it is not as determinate as objects, yet not as indeterminate as general existence. Objects, Levinas claims, arise from elements and offer themselves to our enjoyment.¹⁵¹ I proceed now to present Levinas' account of how we live from things, and enjoy doing so. I also discuss the elemental layer of existence. These things are done with the aim of illustrating the considerable agreement between Nietzsche and Levinas with regard to their descriptions of life within ontological immanence. But most of all, this serves to foreground Levinas' claim that, while we live in an immanent world, this immanence is ruptured during the self-Other encounter.

Humans must labour in order to live: we gather material to construct a dwelling, forage berries, sow fields and plant crops.¹⁵² Living is also always a living from something.¹⁵³ We live from what we labour toward, but in turn, we are able to undertake labour because we live from things. Hence, life finds its place within the cycle of fatigue, indolence, and effort. What someone lives

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131.

¹⁵² Ibid., 111.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 110.

from makes up the content of their life. Furthermore, humans live from what they labour towards insofar as it nourishes them. We live from what nourishes, since “Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same.” Humans take what is other from them, like food, and render it the same as them, assimilating the food’s nutrients to be used as energy for future labour. Nourishment is required to live from things; it thus involves the exertion of power over and against the thing that nourishes.¹⁵⁴ Beyond food, humans live from and are nourished by whatever they exert force upon, transmuting it into the same. Included here are things that humans determine or identify as items of knowledge. These other things are rendered the same as identities, and are related to a system of knowledge whose items and their relations are comprehended as being of certain kinds.¹⁵⁵ Approaching things in this way, they are ‘left to be’ only after being grasped. Additionally, this “always consists in leaving behind the marks of [the] grasp.”¹⁵⁶

Living beings enjoy living from what nourishes them. Levinas claims the transmutation of the other—that is, the generic otherness of what is not me—into the same, accomplished through nourishment, “is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized... as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me.” Enjoyment, moreover, is an affect of happiness; it

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” §11.

arises not merely from a being's relation to what nourishes it, but is chiefly the being's relation to this relation. Happiness is hence a surplus value that emerges from the economy of nourishment: "Enjoyment is precisely this way the act nourishes itself with its own activity."¹⁵⁷ The existence of beings is affective, which is generated as value. Existing as a being depends on their living from things, taking nourishment from and enjoying these: "Life is *love of life*." The essence of life as living from something prompts Levinas to remark, "Life is an existence that does not precede its essence. Its essence makes up its worth [prix]; and here value [valeur] constitutes being."¹⁵⁸ Valuing that from which one lives comprises their relating to their relation with the things they live from. It is thus that the essence of life, living from things, constitutes a primordial source of value: this is the affirmation of life. In contrast, sorrow is the affect of having one's efforts frustrated; a being whose force has been repelled must wearily begin again.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, enjoyment often has its source in the sovereignty a living being exerts over the things it lives from. While a living being depends on what it lives from, it masters these, which yields happiness.¹⁶⁰ Levinas hence calls enjoyment "the original pattern of all independence."¹⁶¹

To the extent that Levinas claims that enjoyment is the affect of mastery, enjoyment is remarkably similar to Nietzsche's 'good' that arises from

¹⁵⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵⁹ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 114.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 110.

dominating another being. I am not suggesting that these are identical views. In fact, as I proceed to show, enjoyment departs from the Nietzschean 'good' in that it can occur not just actively, but also very passively when we bathe in the elements.

Between the anonymous rumbling of general, undifferentiated existence and the objects that present themselves to the enjoyment of mastery, Levinas describes the ontological layer called the elemental.¹⁶² Several elements, "wind, earth, sea, sky, air," comprise this elemental layer.¹⁶³ Unlike things, which can be possessed, the elements cannot be: "The navigator who makes use of the sea and the wind dominates these elements but does not thereby transform them into things. They retain the indetermination of elements."¹⁶⁴ The elements cannot be possessed because all that can be possessed must have a form: "A form is that by which a thing shows itself and is graspable, what is illuminated in it and apprehendable and what holds it together."¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, elements have "no forms containing [them]; [they are] content without form."¹⁶⁶ Put slightly differently, Levinas refers to the elements as qualities that are "not a quality of something."¹⁶⁷ Levinas describes enjoyment as arising from gaining mastery over other beings, but enjoyment also comes from passively bathing in the elements.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Ibid., 131.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 132.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶⁵ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 39.

¹⁶⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 141.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 134.

The elements are the ontological medium or horizon of minimal differentiation that things appear against. Beings often emerge through dominating other beings that present themselves in the elemental medium; the dominant beings enjoy their dominance.¹⁶⁹ Elements also offer themselves to being enjoyed; it is pleasurable, for instance, to drink and to bathe in water. This enjoyment arises from our passivity to the elements. However, because the elemental “envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped,” our future enjoyment of the elements and of the things that arise from the elemental is uncertain. Levinas remarks, “The indetermination of the future alone brings insecurity to need, indigence: the perfidious elemental gives itself while escaping.” So, while the elements offer themselves to enjoyment, they further represent “menace and destruction” for the things arising from them.¹⁷⁰ In this sense, the elements and the general existence that they emerge from are inhospitable to beings.

Though Levinas thinks that beings exist within the ontology of immanent becoming, pursuing the satisfaction of their wants and enjoying their successes, a profound interruption of these cycles occurs during the self-Other encounter. To illustrate how this happens, I appeal to an illuminating article by Richard A. Cohen, titled, *Levinas, Spinozism, Nietzsche, and the Body*. In this piece, Cohen puts Nietzsche and Levinas in conversation through their relation to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza is a philosopher of immanence; he thinks everything is part of his immanent ontology. Nietzsche

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 130-131.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 141.

appreciates Spinoza's philosophy of immanence. Nietzsche likewise thinks that, while beings distinguish themselves with regard to existence and to each other, they are always subject to the laws of immanence. This means, for Nietzsche, that beings must try to satisfy their wants. Insofar as Nietzsche thinks that everything is subject to immanent laws, Nietzsche is Spinozistic.¹⁷¹

Conversely, Levinas considers the fundamental separation of the Other to be "at the antipodes of Spinozism."¹⁷² This is because the self's encounter with the Other interrupts the self's pursuits to satisfy their needs. Hence, this interrupts the laws of immanence.¹⁷³ In the self-Other encounter, the self becomes separated from the laws of immanence because they are commanded to respond to the Other's needs above their own. Moreover, the Other is separate from the laws of immanence since it is impossible to absolutely dominate them as one might do to other beings.¹⁷⁴ Cohen points out that Levinas thinks this is "a bodily event: an internalization of the suffering, needs, and destitution of the other person." As well, the ethical encounter transforms the immanent body "into the body for-the-other."¹⁷⁵ For further proof, Cohen cites Levinas' writing in *Otherwise than Being*: "It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But

¹⁷¹ Richard A. Cohen, "Levinas, Spinozism, Nietzsche, and the Body," in *Nietzsche and Levinas*, ed. Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 166.

¹⁷² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 105.

¹⁷³ Cohen, "Levinas, Spinozism, Nietzsche, and the Body," 179.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

for this one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it."¹⁷⁶

Against the Nietzschean position that all ethics unfold according to the laws of immanence, which in Nietzsche's case is the will to power, Levinas describes the ethical imperative from the Other as reaching the self within an immanent world. Levinas is able to make such claims about the Other because he conceives of transcendence that is rooted in immanence, but nevertheless exceeds the laws of ontological immanence.

IV. THE VALUE OF SUFFERING FOR LEVINAS

According to Nietzsche, the ontology of immanent becoming provides us with the resources to affirm suffering as a necessary part of life, and to affirm this necessity against the threat that beings may be dissolved back into the existential flux. In this way, Nietzsche thinks the uncertainty beings have about their continued existence can at least be borne. However, Levinas also addresses the necessity for beings to work, and so to suffer, in order to try to satisfy their needs for the sake of their ongoing existence. Through Levinas' phenomenological description of the inhospitality of the elements and of existence for individual beings, he claims that the necessity to suffer is precisely that which cannot be borne. Consequently, this section is devoted to Levinas' account of how suffering is unbearable for beings. Levinas'

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 181.

intensification of existential dread for beings can be interpreted to form a Levinasian challenge to Nietzsche's arguments in favour of the affirmation of life. This Levinasian critique amplifies the need for the Other to orient our existence. While suffering is inherently meaningless, suffering through existence is given direction in the service of the Other.

The elements can be enjoyed, and in fact they must be in order to live. Nevertheless, the specter of uncertainty about the future enjoyment of the elements and of the beings that appear in the elemental medium, an uncertainty arising from existence, necessitates that beings continuously undertake new labours to try to secure this enjoyment; beings thereby also try to secure their lives. Furthermore, exerting effort, or labouring, requires the being that does so to suffer. In exerting effort to try to dominate another being, to live from it, one must suffer the force of the opposing being. This occurs even if the other being is subordinated. Effort and its suffering are also required for taking refuge from the elements once these turn hostile: shelter must be sought from the sun, which was once pleasantly warm and now threatens to burn. One must also swim to shore when the same ocean that was cool and refreshing later turns stormy, menacing that being with the possibility of drowning them. Since beings are always required to undertake new labours, more suffering always awaits them. As well, because this effort may be either successful or unsuccessful, then the affective goodness of enjoyment is not guaranteed to vindicate this suffering.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 9.

In light of this, one may ask, why continue to labour, and to try to dominate other beings for the sake of living? Can any meaning or value be found that justifies either the suffering internal to labour or the suffering from the necessity to labour? With respect to the latter kind of suffering, Levinas answers in the negative: “There is no answer to Being... The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being. Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. There is a pain in Being. If philosophy is the questioning of Being, it is already a taking on of Being.”¹⁷⁸ Levinas states that inquiring into the meaning of existence presupposes a relation with existence. This relation, though pre-existing, is additionally taken up by a being who examines existence for meaning. However, existence always burdens beings with the necessity to labour, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. This existential requirement is something that beings suffer from being.¹⁷⁹

In one being’s struggle against another to live, each being suffers the force of the other as trying to limit their own. Still, the opposing force is perceived as such; one being’s powers are thereby brought against another being. Each being’s attempt to resist the other is also active rather than passive, as it is to accept a submissive role in relation to another being. All of these kinds of passivity or suffering retain active components.¹⁸⁰ In contrast,

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering” from *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 92-93.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 92.

Levinas claims that the requirement of existence for beings to labour is something that one cannot bring their powers against, to limit it or try to control it in any way. The fact that this necessity is always thrust upon beings, exceeding any capacity for it to be understood or mastered, makes existence and the life it grants absurd. The absurdity of existence is consequently suffered purely and acutely; there is no possibility for one's powers to act upon it.¹⁸¹ Thus, suffering the necessity to labour cannot be made meaningful, not even in the sense that the meaningless can be understood to be meaningful as such.

Levinas claims this extremely passive suffering is evil in the sense of it being profoundly bad, harmful, troubling, and sickening: "The evil of pain, the deleterious per se, is the outburst and deepest expression, so to speak, of absurdity."¹⁸² He further remarks that this evil is felt as the way in which suffering the existential requirement to labour is unassumable and excessive; it is "at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself."¹⁸³ The evil of this suffering unsettles order, since order is established through exerting force. Meanwhile, the existential requirement to labour resists force being brought against it. Because of this resistance, evil appears to beings in the form of "a backward consciousness, 'operating' not as 'grasp' but as revulsion."¹⁸⁴

Near the beginning of this section, two questions were asked: whether there is value or meaning to the suffering internal to labour, and whether

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 92-93.

¹⁸² Ibid., 92.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

suffering the existential requirement to labour is valuable or meaningful.

Regarding the second kind of suffering, Levinas answers that it has no positive value. To the contrary, Levinas claims that the impossibility of assigning value to this existential necessity through mastering it makes it eminently negative: this suffering is “the *not* of evil, a negativity extending as far as to the realm of un-meaning.”¹⁸⁵ However, the value of the suffering internal to the work of labour, and not its completion, warrants further investigation.

The suffering of the work of labour consists in suffering the force of an opposing being against which labour is undertaken. This suffering is temporary if the opposing being is overcome, or else is more longstanding when an opposing being dominates oneself. As well, the suffering of labour is comprised of the dissatisfaction from not yet being satisfied through successful labour; unsatisfied wanting is suffered. Since at least as early as Aristotle, and through Marx, Sartre, and Camus, philosophers have tried to affirm the value of labour’s work by appealing to what it might accomplish. Because the end is desirable, then so too is the work as a means to this end. In spite of this reasoning’s promise, Levinas is sceptical of its veracity. He acknowledges that happiness surges forth as a positive value from successful labour, which is mastery. Nevertheless, Levinas does not think this happiness is sufficient to give affirmative value to labour: “every labour mystique, which appeals to themes of joy or freedom through labour, can appear only above and beyond effort properly so-called, in a reflective attitude to effort. It is never in the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 92.

labour itself that joy resides. It is fed with other considerations—the pleasure of duty fulfilled, the heroism of the sacrifice and difficulty involved.”

Enjoyment comes from the successful exertion of force; this is synonymous with successful labour. As well, Levinas states that finding joy in the activity of labour, and not in its completion, requires determining labour to be joyful.¹⁸⁶ But since all determinations are successful exertions of force, judging labour to be a happy enterprise requires that labour already have been successfully undertaken about labour.¹⁸⁷ Thus, the joy of labour’s struggle lies in the knowledge of labour, not in the labour itself.

Levinas claims that the suffering internal to the work of labour is not positive, though a positive attitude can be adopted toward it. However, the success of labour required for such enjoyment is guaranteed neither in the pact between beings and existence, nor through one’s reliance on the elements. This uncertainty, to the contrary, unsettles even the enjoyment that has already been attained. Furthermore, the insurmountable resistance to mastery of the necessity to labour, defying the ability for power, yields a situation where beings cannot even reflectively take joy from this existential requirement. Therefore, the process or work of labour cannot find positive value in the suffering internal to it, nor can it find positive value in the ontological necessity of having to labour. Likewise, the requirement to labour continuously is not a source of positive value, but instead of the eminently negative value, which is evil.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 20.

Levinas' arguments about how suffering is unbearable can be interpreted to form a Levinasian criticism of Nietzsche's affirmation of life. Nietzsche thinks that existence yields biological life as well as the metaphorical life of beings striving to satisfy their wants. Moreover, Nietzsche claims the existence of beings *qua* either kind of life requires beings to undertake effort to try to satisfy their wants, and to continue existing. Effort involves suffering the force of an opposing being, which one attempts to dominate and to live from. Nietzsche thinks the suffering of individual struggles can be affirmed through a being's awareness or interpretation of these struggles. This is because interpretation is a form of mastery, and mastery can yield the affect of goodness.¹⁸⁸ A Levinasian would agree with Nietzsche on this point, but would insist that there is no joy internal to individual struggles; joy comes from an attitude towards them. However, while Nietzsche thinks we can affirm the necessity of having to suffer through the same interpretive act, a Levinasian might point out that this cannot be done. This is because for us to take the affective pleasure of goodness from something, we must be able to have mastery over it. But the necessity to suffer is precisely that which cannot be mastered; it always burdens beings, and they cannot decline to suffer as long as they exist. Hence, a Levinasian might charge Nietzsche with being unable to affirm life in this way. Instead, this inability to bear the necessity to suffer is felt as what Levinas describes to be evil. The inhospitality of existence and our inability to affirm life with the resources afforded to us by immanent existence

¹⁸⁸ See Part Two, section IV.

therefore intensifies the need for the Other. The encounter with the Other calls forth a goodness from the self that orients the self's existence in the service of the Other's needs. Like the need to suffer, the command to try to satisfy the Other's needs cannot be declined. Levinas' description of evil is therefore not a condemnation of life within immanence, but rather underscores the highest value that there is in life: the good of the Other.

In *Existence & Existents*, Levinas writes, "if [philosophy] is more than [the question of being], this is because it permits going beyond the question, and not because it answers it. What more there can be than the questioning of Being is not some truth—but the good."¹⁸⁹ Clearly, Levinas thinks the ethical goodness that the Other commands can be related to the evil of our inability to bear the necessity to suffer. Nevertheless, since the Nietzschean critique I formulated in Part Two accuses Levinas of subscribing to a reactive slave morality, where evil is vengefully posited before its corresponding good, the precise nature of the connection between Levinas' evil and ethical goodness is presented in the following section. Since Levinas is Jewish, and because the Nietzschean critique accuses Judaism of creating the 'good' and 'evil' value dichotomy, Levinas' interpretation of the values Judaism teaches will also be presented. Through doing so, I show that a Levinasian rejoinder can succeed against a Nietzschean critique regarding the teachings of Judaism, and the values 'good' and 'evil'.

¹⁸⁹ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 9.

V. GOOD, EVIL, AND JUDAISM

Contrary to the Nietzschean critique, evil does not precede ethical goodness for Levinas. Indeed, the values 'good' and 'evil' that Levinas discusses are completely different from the ones described by Nietzsche. Levinas' notion of ethical goodness may orient our existence in the face of the necessity to suffer. However, the command to try to do good for the Other makes no necessary reference to evil. This is why, rather than ontology being fundamental for the self through the necessity to suffer, Levinas claims that ethics is foundational for the self.

Throughout this section, I present parallels between Levinas' ethical philosophy and the teachings of Judaism. Levinas' work is indebted to Judaism, while he frequently makes reference to stories from Judaism as examples for his philosophical points. This goes to show that Judaism does not teach a reactive and resentful ethics, where the accusation of evil precedes the ascription of goodness. Instead, Levinas claims, and faithful Levinasians would claim, that the goodness commanded by the Other cannot be vengeful. The imperative to do good for the Other calls for a goodness that is profoundly loving.

Levinas' claims that the Other is human and has the trace of the Infinite in them accord with the teachings of the Jewish bible. However, connecting Levinas' account with the Jewish scripture requires examining Levinas' interpretation of the monotheistic God. Levinas states that God is the Infinite.

God hence exceeds ideation, and is irreducible to a being that could be grasped consciously or otherwise in one's power.¹⁹⁰ The fact that one receives the idea of the Infinite prior to trying to grasp it leads Levinas to write, "The idea of God is God in me, but it is already God breaking up the consciousness that aims at ideas, already differing from all content."¹⁹¹ The radical difference of God from created beings while His trace is nevertheless in them conditions and constitutes their relation with God.¹⁹²

The Torah can be interpreted to suggest that God is the Infinite. When God appears to Moshe as the burning bush, He commands Moshe to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.¹⁹³ Upon hearing this order, Moshe remarks, "Here, I will come to the Children of Israel and I will say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they will say to me: what is his name?—what shall I say to them?"¹⁹⁴ In answer to Moshe, and as a statement of his name, God says, "I will be-there howsoever I will be-there."¹⁹⁵ God's name is the promise of His presence, which He presents as irreducible to determination in the present. God, as He expresses Himself in giving His name, transcends identification as a being; God is Infinite. Moreover, Moshe's question is a loaded one: in Moshe's historical setting, the knowledge of a being's name is

¹⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), §10.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Exodus 3:10 (The Schocken Bible, Volume I, trans. Everett Fox (SB)).

¹⁹⁴ Exodus 3:13 (SB).

¹⁹⁵ Exodus 3:14

supposed to yield power over it.¹⁹⁶ God's refusal to give His name as something that can be identified and possessed further reveals His resistance to the powers of beings.

In the Jewish scriptures, God is at once the Wholly Other (that is, the Infinite) but also associated with the other human being, that is, the Other. God defines Himself in several places as the God of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. In the ancient world, these would be the most marginal figures in society, truly one's other. In one's relation with God, the Other "does not play the role of a mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by [their] face, in which [they] are disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed."¹⁹⁷ Thus, in Judaism, one does not relate to God directly. If one has 'contact' with God, it is always and only through their interactions with the Other. That the trace of the Infinite is in the Other, who is human, is attested to in the Torah when it states that God created humankind in His image.¹⁹⁸ Non-human animals are not presented as having the trace of the Infinite, but instead as objects of enjoyment through their being dominated.¹⁹⁹ Though Levinas thinks God creates the Other in His image, the Other differs absolutely from God: "The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is that this creation is *ex nihilo*—not because this represents a work more miraculous than the demiurgic informing

¹⁹⁶ Everett Fox, "At the Bush," commentary in *The Schocken Bible, Volume I: The Five Books of Moses*, trans. Everett Fox (Schocken Books: New York, 1997), 270.

¹⁹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78-79.

¹⁹⁸ Genesis 1:26 (SB).

¹⁹⁹ Genesis 1:28 (SB).

of matter, but because the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolutely other than him.”²⁰⁰

Just as Levinas thinks the Other commands ethical responsibility by communicating the trace of the Infinite in them, so too does this appear to be taught in Jewish scripture. An example of the Other communicating the trace of the Infinite can be interpreted from Exodus, “when Moshe [comes] down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in Moshe’s hand.”²⁰¹ Since he has been talking with God, Moshe’s face is “radiating.”²⁰² When “Aharon and all the Children of Israel [see] Moshe” with his radiating face, “they [are] afraid to approach him.”²⁰³ However, “Moshe call[s] to them, and then Aharon and all those exalted in the community [come] back to him, and Moshe [speaks] to them.”²⁰⁴ Moshe tells the others “all that YHWH [has] spoken with him on Mount Sinai.”²⁰⁵ This is an instance of Moshe communicating the trace of the Infinite in him: while Aharon and the others initially try to interpret Moshe as something fearsome, he calls them, investing them with an ability to respond and compelling a response. Even Aharon’s turning away is a response before Moshe verbally communicates anything. This irrecusable responsibility is given through the trace of the Infinite in Moshe. As well, what Moshe says can only be learned from him, and not through the attempted interpretation made by Aharon and the others. This communicates the dimension of height

²⁰⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63.

²⁰¹ Exodus 34:29 (SB).

²⁰² Exodus 34:30 (SB).

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Exodus 34:31 (SB).

²⁰⁵ Exodus 34:32 (SB).

stemming from the trace of the Infinite in Moshe. These things suggest the trace of the Infinite in Moshe because, above all, he is irreducible to the interpretive powers attempted upon him by Aharon and the Israelites.

Levinas thinks the book of Job teaches that the ethical goodness demanded by the Other orients the suffering of their interlocutor. Here, God, who is the Infinite, has ordered the world. This establishes the existential necessity that beings labour from their ongoing insecurity.²⁰⁶ Additionally, God has made Job suffer continuously and without purpose, taking away that for which he has worked piously and with dedication.²⁰⁷ Job responds to this, asking, “Why is there evil rather than good?”²⁰⁸ He further “allows himself to judge the Creator” by calling into question why God makes Job suffer.²⁰⁹ In response, God “recalls to Job his absence at the hour of Creation,” asking in turn, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?”²¹⁰ Levinas claims that God’s question reveals that Job is responsible for God simply because God is Infinite; because He may ask things of Job, even to suffer, Job must obey. This infinite responsibility extends unto other humans, whom Job must do good toward, even in spite of Job’s friends turning on him through their belief in theodicy. In other words, God reminds Job that he is beholden to obligations that are anterior to him despite Job’s own suffering.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Evil,” from *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 133.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 130.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 133.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

It should now be clear that Jewish scripture can be interpreted to accord with Levinas' philosophical teachings. The comparisons I have just outlined, furthermore, serve as a basis for repelling Nietzsche's critique of Judaism, as well as the Nietzschean critique of Levinas. Nietzsche claims that Judaism imagines God to be unchanging and therefore as having an essence. He makes the same statement about Judaism's interpretation of other people, which gives the Jews license to claim that others are evil for either not helping the Jews, or for harming them.²¹² However, Levinas claims that both the Infinite God and Others, who have the trace of the Infinite in them, are irreducible to essences. This irreducibility is, moreover, conceived within an immanent world. The transcendence that Levinas describes does not appeal to a more perfect, unchanging reality, such as Plato's Forms, but instead is a site of excess or surplus over which the self cannot gain mastery.

Nietzsche also states that Judaism teaches obedience to God, and that people must obey the Jews in order to obey God. This, Nietzsche claims, is a way for the Jews to take spiritual revenge against stronger beings, thereby making them subservient to the Jews.²¹³ Though Levinas does think Judaism teaches that humans must obey the ethical imperative commanded by Others in order to obey God, a Levinasian would disagree with Nietzsche's claims about Judaism's vengefulness. This is because Nietzsche states that the Jews begin to undertake vengeance against their masters through a revaluation of values, where they proclaim their masters to be evil. However, the Jews' ability

²¹² See Part Two, section V.

²¹³ Ibid.

to do this depends on their ability to gain at least an interpretive mastery over their dominators.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, Levinas claims that the Other is irreducible to any identity. As such, Levinasians must reject the Nietzschean charge that the Other can be interpreted as being either evil or good. Instead, the goodness that Levinas thinks the Other commands binds the self to responsibility without any exercise of the self's powers. This responsibility is unchosen, and reaches the self through the transcendence of immanent being. Consequently, there is no possibility for the values arising from the self-Other to be motivated by vengefulness from the Levinasian standpoint.

Whereas a Nietzschean might draw from Nietzsche's assessment of Judaism's slave revolt in morality to critique the 'good' and 'evil' values that Levinas identifies, a Levinasian rejoinder succeeds against this Nietzschean critique. The ethical value 'good' that Levinas identifies is not the contrasting result of deeming some being to be evil. Rather, the imperative of this goodness penetrates the self without reference to ontology or to evil. Furthermore, the 'evil' that Levinas describes refers to the impossibility of bearing the necessity to suffer; it comes from existence, and is not a judgment about another being. The 'good' and 'evil' values that Nietzsche and Levinas each identify are therefore nothing alike.

In the section below, I connect the Levinasian replies to a Nietzschean critique as these have been formulated in Part Three. This is done in order to construct an overall Levinasian rejoinder to this Nietzschean critique.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

VI. FORMULATING A LEVINASIAN REJOINDER TO A NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE

Part Three of this project has undertaken a point-by-point Levinasian response to the Nietzschean critique I mounted in Part Two. I have argued that, like Nietzsche, Levinas is skeptical of otherworldly thinking; Levinas does not commit to the ontology of unchanging being. Levinas' transcendence is based on the Other's irreducible alterity, not, as a Nietzschean may think, on a perceiving being's partial access to the Other's essence. Thus, Levinas' notion of transcendence is not vulnerable to a Nietzschean critique. Moreover, the Other's transcendence is compatible with the ontology of immanence. Both Nietzsche and Levinas commit to this ontology. Because the Other is rooted in immanent being, Levinas can successfully argue that the laws of immanence are ruptured through the self-Other encounter, and the command for the self to be ethically responsible for the Other. A Levinasian rejoinder against Nietzsche also claims that Nietzsche's attempts to affirm life fail. This is because the necessity to suffer cannot be borne or mastered. Existence does not provide the resources to affirm life. But, rather than this being a denial of life, the Levinasian position underscores the highest value of life, which is the good of the Other. Finally, because Nietzsche does not conceive of transcendence that is compatible with immanence, he interprets Judaism as propagating the vengeful, reactive values of 'good' and 'evil'. However, the Levinasian rejoinder considers Nietzsche to misinterpret Judaism. Nietzsche's

view of evil is completely different from the existential malaise that Levinas identifies. As well, Levinas' ethical goodness makes no reference to evil. The command to try to do good for the Other reaches the self without the self's consent. Since this ethical imperative transcends the laws of immanence, vengefulness cannot be a motivation for ethical goodness.

CONCLUSION

This project is motivated by the question of whether there is merit to the ‘ethical turn’ in continental philosophy, or if this is simply a repackaging of old, debunked ideas. Because Levinas is largely responsible for this ethical turn, and since Nietzsche’s followers are the chief sceptics of this philosophical movement, this project has sought to construct a Nietzschean critique of Levinas’ thought. Nevertheless, I also construct a Levinasian rejoinder against this critique.

The conversation between the Nietzschean and Levinasian camps centers on whether Levinas offers a viable account of transcendence as an ethical foundation. While Nietzsche thinks that all transcendence presupposes an ontology of unchanging being, Levinas shows that transcendence can be conceived as compatible with ontological immanence. Therefore, Levinas’ account avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and the faith in a world beyond the one in which we live.

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