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Jacob Blumenfeld^a

^a The New School for Social Research, New York, United States of America

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Egoism, Labour, and Possession: A reading of “Interiority and Economy,” Section II of Lévinas’ *Totality of Infinity*

Jacob Blumenfeld*

The New School for Social Research, New York, United States of America

Lévinas is the philosopher of the absolutely Other, the thinker of the primacy of the ethical relation, the poet of the face. Against the formalism of Kantian subjectivity, the totality of the Hegelian system, the monism of Husserlian phenomenology and the instrumentalism of Heideggerian ontology, Lévinas develops a phenomenological account of the ethical relation grounded in the idea of infinity, an idea which is concretely produced in the experience with the absolutely other, particularly, in their face. The face of the other, irreducible to any ontological structure of being or any epistemological intentionality of representation, reaches out from on high across the abyss of the isolated ego, commanding respect all the while granting the possibility of murder. This experience overflows the subjective capacity of the separated ego, forcing it “beyond being.” This anarchic relation with the Other is the groundless condition of possibility for ethical life, that is, truly human life. The structure of the ethical relation can then be determined in hindsight as the ground of meaning for what it is to be an *I* at all.

This is a pretty uncontroversial reading of Lévinas’ work, especially *Totality and Infinity* (*TI*). And yet, there is one small problem. If this is what Lévinas is doing, then why does the largest section of *Totality and Infinity* – section II, “Interiority and Economy” – have nothing to do with ethics, the other, or the face at all? Why is it devoted to an arduous analysis of what he calls separation, egoism, economy, enjoyment, labour, and possession? In other words, why does Lévinas spend so much energy on writing about the egoist at the heart of his magnum opus, which is supposedly a text devoted to the Other? And furthermore, why is this section one of the least discussed in the secondary literature on Lévinas?

These questions motivate the present inquiry, which modestly seeks to understand what Lévinas is up to in this section. Once laying out the basic story, I will focus on the concepts of *labour* and *possession*, for I think these are the unrecognized pivots upon which the transition from ego to Other turns. I will also make some slight attempts to interpret Lévinas’ direct or indirect comments on Plato, Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. For although he distances himself from these giants, he stands on their shoulders as well.

Lévinas is the philosopher of the absolutely Other, the thinker of the primacy of the ethical relation, the poet of the face. Against the formalism of Kantian subjectivity, the totality of the Hegelian system, the monism of Husserlian phenomenology and the instrumentalism of Heideggerian ontology, Lévinas develops a phenomenological account of the ethical relation grounded in the idea of infinity, an idea which is concretely produced in the experience with

*Email: Blumj448@newschool.edu

the absolutely other, particularly, in their face. The face of the other, irreducible to any ontological structure of being or any epistemological intentionality of representation, reaches out from on high across the abyss of the isolated ego, commanding respect all the while granting the possibility of murder. This experience overflows the subjective capacity of the separated ego, forcing it “beyond being.” This anarchic relation with the Other is the groundless condition of possibility for ethical life, that is, truly human life. The structure of the ethical relation can then be determined in hindsight as the ground of meaning for what it is to be an *I* at all.

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The short version goes like this. Only a radical separateness of the I, a complete egoism, can allow for an infinite relation with the other. If it is not absolute, then the Other’s relation to me is *relative*, and hence, unethical. The task then is to explain how one goes from absolute separation to absolute relation. Lévinas does this through a series of transcendental descriptions. First, Lévinas describes life as fundamentally an experience of *enjoyment*, and not one of lack or need. Before representation, reflection, tools, language, or sociality, life is primarily the throbbing enjoyment of living from nourishment and alimentation. Second, Lévinas describes the world as primarily *elemental*, that is, nonconceptual, without form, a pure content which is inseparable from one’s own living. The elemental has no beginning or end, it comes from nowhere; it is everything natural which we live within and from. We cannot control it, only enjoy it. Third, we experience the elemental through *sensibility* and not representation. Sensibility, the realm precluded from Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas and separated from Kant’s understanding, is the mode of enjoyment, the relational structure mediating between the solitude of the ego and the abyss of the elemental. Sensibility is our *home* amongst homelessness. Fourth, living from ... enjoyment in the sensibility of the elemental (to use Lévinas’ jargon), contains an anxiety embedded within it. This is the *uncertainty* of the future. The elemental has no beginning or end; it is always beyond one’s grasp. The frightening dependency one has in living from the unpredictable, uncertain, undifferentiated elements propels one to *secure* their existence against its autonomous, anonymous rhythms. This security against the future is precisely the *home*. Not a tool, but the ground for tools, not a possession but the ground for possession, the home or *dwelling* is where the ego is *welcome*, secure, and independent. Inhabitation inaugurates economy. Fifth, the dwelling is the cause for *labour*, for once the home exists, there is place in which labouring activity can bring its fruits to bear. Labour sutures the gap between the uncertainty of the future elements and the security of the present home. It is the first step towards representation. By

¹Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

labouring, one acts with concern for time; one *possesses* goods to store for later use. One distances oneself from the immediacy of the elemental. With this, separation is accomplished as dwelling life based on labour and possession. Sixth, a need for discourse arises to coordinate the exchange of goods within the newly acquired shared time. This discourse, if taken in the form of naming alone, is then nothing but the labour of representation extended to symbols for practical use; it is equivalent to money. However, if discourse is accomplished as *teaching*, then it can overcome its representational origin dependant on labour and possession, and allow for the transcendence of the separation which is the very ground of the ego. Teaching allows the other inside of me *as* other. It is the material leap across an infinite abyss. It is ethical life, society.

To begin again, in “Separation and Absoluteness,” the final chapter of Section I of *TI*, Lévinas justifies the upcoming detour through separation and interiority that comprise Section II. In short, “the idea of infinity requires this separation.” (TI 102) Why do we need “an idea of infinity” in the first place, why does it “require” separation, and what specifically does this “separation” mean? From the beginning of the text, we know that Lévinas is describing the separation between the same and other, the metaphysical separation that allows for the very possibility of an ego, subject or I. Separation for Lévinas describes the condition for willing, thinking, and acting in a way that is *mine*, unique and free, independent and autonomous. To be “separate” is to be a personality with a will, “atheist” in the sense that I take myself to be the cause of my own actions, and not some external power. Lévinas insists on the priority of separation and not unity in order to contrast his thought to what he calls “the philosophy of unity,” a broad term which covers Parmenides, Plotinus, Spinoza, and Hegel.² These disparate thinkers are nonetheless in agreement, according to Lévinas, that separation or difference is produced negatively out of the infinite wholeness of the one. The autonomous subject, the free ego, the thinking I – these are all deductions from the One as being, as substance, or as spirit. “But the philosophy of unity has never been able to say whence came this accidental illusion and fall, inconceivable in the Infinite, the Absolute, and the Perfect.” (TI 102)

For Lévinas, on the other hand, separation is absolutely prior. It is the very condition for wholeness, unity, and perfection, and not the other way around. Without separation, there is no need for an infinite relation. To be precise, this priority is not temporal, but logical. Yet, Lévinas does often use superficially temporal language, like *creation* and *event*, to describe this separation, which seems to blur the specificity of this concept. Lévinas frequently writes that we are, of course, always already born in society,³ but this only means that his analysis is not about an actual development of a particular person or people in time. Rather it is a phenomenological description of the necessary conditions of *actuality* for society at all. “What is at issue is society.” (TI 103) In society, the infinite is accomplished *as a fact*, and this fact needs to be explained. To answer our previous questions, society itself requires an idea of infinity, and the idea of infinity requires the event of separation. One exists already in relation to others, and yet, “the being that is in relation absolves itself from the relation, is absolute within the relationship.” (TI 110) Lévinas task is to investigate this absoluteness from within.

Jewish creation, and not Christian fallenness, is the principle allegorical paradigm for grasping the paradox of an infinity arising from separation for Lévinas. Creation leaves a creature absolutely separated from its creator, but with a “trace of dependence.” (TI 104) This creature

²Plato, Descartes, and Kant are not (explicitly) included in this broad category probably because Lévinas acknowledges some essential dualism in their thinking. Whether these dualities are between the good and being, sense-perception and thought, or sensibility and understanding, Lévinas does not say.

³See Lévinas, TI 139: “The description of enjoyment as it has been conducted to this point assuredly does not render the concrete man. In reality man has already the idea of infinity, that is, lives in society and represents things to himself”.

carries the possibility of freedom and thought, precisely because it is separate. "What is essential to created existence is its separation with regard to the Infinite. This separation is not simply a negation." By giving man the impetus to construct a space for protection, inhabitation, and labour, this separation is what guarantees the unrestricted development of an interiority, that is, a space for thinking and not just *living*. We will come back to this.

Creation is not the whole, unity, or one from which creatures emerge as partial, lacking, or defective. Creation itself arises *ex nihilo*, from the undifferentiated, indistinct, nonconceptual realm of the *elemental*. Separation is an ontological event in which I find myself as myself, unreflective, yet nourished, happy, enjoying life. In this primordial description of existence, life is lived not by a subject who confronts its objects as hostile, and neither is life lived by a reflecting ego which represents the world to him through categories of understanding. In this "moment" of existence, the being that Lévinas describes is *separated* and yet still wholly dependent on the world. The content of this ego is nothing but the nourishments of life, that is, "good soup," air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. These are not objects or representations. We live from them."(TI 110) It is strange to see natural elements like air and light juxtaposed with human phenomena like work and ideas, but for Lévinas, there is no differentiating here. The ego is nothing but the self-interested being absorbing the world around it, channelling everything into its earless stomach. And yet, the "self" that is self-interested is still unspecified. It is, as Lévinas says, "neither biological nor sociological." (TI 120) This self is not "seen" from the outside in relation to an "other," it is not totalized in a third-person perspective as a formal relation. The self does not *conceive* its other out of its mind, but *confronts* it out of its very egoism. It is within and without, a paradoxical relation that demands more explanation. The example for this confrontation, Lévinas notes, is the sexual relation, "accomplished before being reflected on." (TI 120) The other affects me not as my reversal, but as itself, and yet it would not affect *me* if I was not already sexed.

This obscure, indistinct self exists before and beyond the realm of clear and distinct ideas. It is the condition for such ideas, that is, sensibility and sense-experience. Yet this sensory relation to the world is not privative, defective, or unworthy of philosophical thought. It is the birthplace of thought and more importantly, ethics, in a nontrivial way. Lévinas calls this condition the *egoism of life*, and its purpose is simply put, happiness. "What I do and what I am is at the same time that *from which* I live. We relate ourselves to it with a relation that is neither theoretical nor practical. Behind theory and practice there is enjoyment of theory and of practice: the egoism of life. The final relation is enjoyment, happiness."(TI 113)

But what is Lévinas doing here with this language? Is he describing a newborn child, created from within the dark womb of life, separated yet nourished on "good soup, air, light," and joyfully innocent in its enjoyment of the world? Or is he picturing some historical stage in the development of Western civilization? Perhaps he is merely recounting a true but inadequate "shape" of consciousness as Hegel does throughout the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Or better, could this be a description of some basic pre-theoretical structure of experience of modern *Dasein*, revealed through the analytical tools of Heideggerian phenomenology? It's hard to say. Lévinas himself writes in the preface that the modest task of the book is to simply "recount how infinity is produced in the relationship of the same with the other." (TI 26) But he quickly qualifies the verb *produce* as both a material effectuation and an intelligible exposition. In a sense then, Lévinas' analysis of creation and separation, and the whole text in fact, will platonically "recount" a relationship that already exists (and hence can be "exposed," "brought to light"), and yet this relationship must bring itself into existence as well ("being produced"). In another register, one could say that Lévinas is describing how something *in-itself* comes to be *for-itself*, or how the existence of something is brought into accordance with its essence.

The happiness of the ego, Lévinas goes on, relates to the world not through the intentionality of representation, but through the mode of enjoyment. Lévinas makes this distinction to separate his method and project from Husserlian phenomenology. Lévinas is not interested in epistemology, in rendering intelligible that which is other to the ego. Rather, he seeks to explore the suspended exterior which drops out of Husserl's *epoché*, the richness of the material world which the transcendental method assumes yet does not explain. Lévinas' *enjoyment* is the relation of the body "living from ..." the world, and being overflowed by it. This experience cannot be reduced to a theme, representation or structure, but only described in its actuality.

And yet, Lévinas does give words and concepts to these relations. First of all, the body lives off *alimentation*, nourishment. These are not "things" so called, for things only emerge with ontology, which is a result of labour, property, and possession. Alimentation is the name given to the process by which the egoistic body imbibes the elemental world. Lévinas captures this unthematizable relation in the following way:

This sinking one's teeth into the things which the act of eating involves above all measures the surplus of the reality of the aliment over every represented reality, a surplus that is not quantitative, but is the way the I, the absolute commencement, is suspended on the non-I." (TI 129)

Second, aliments come from the *elemental*. Again, we have a term placed on the unquantifiable, a name given to the undifferentiated. And again, it is a term used to distinguish Lévinas' account from another one, this time Heidegger's tools. The separated ego does not "use" food like fuel. Aliments are not tools, and equipment does not capture the nature of alimentation. As the word itself so nicely suggests, aliments are elements transformed into conditions for existence. The proper verb to describe the experience of the ego in relation to the elemental is *bathing*. Indeterminate, unpossessable, without beginning or end, the elemental seems to capture the unthematizable ground of the ego's material existence, *from the standpoint of that very ego*. This is one solution to the problem of grasping the ungraspable with a word or concept: these words are actually not concepts at all, granted by the understanding through representation, but descriptions from within the enjoying ego. And yet, one can ask, *how is that possible?* Introspection? If so, one is led back to a Lockean empiricism, but if not, then one is caught explaining something deemed to be unexplainable, and hence stuck in transcendental illusions.

Lévinas' answer is that the elemental can be grasped non-conceptually by means of our *sensibility*. Sensibility is a *mode*, not a faculty; it is the "affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates. One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset." (TI 135) Sensibility brings in objects as finite contentment, and hence sensibility is just this experience of the finite. "To sense is to be within," Lévinas writes. But within what? The elemental. "Sensibility establishes a relation with a pure quality without support, with the element. Sensibility is enjoyment." (TI 136) Sensibility does not locate the objects and experiences of my world in a comprehensive system of relations, rather, "it is they that ground me. I welcome them without thinking them. I enjoy this world of things as pure elements, as qualities without support, without substance." (TI 137)

The elements, however, are not always so easily tamed. The very nature of the elemental, according to Lévinas, is to be beyond not just our mental but physical grasp too. All the qualities that make up the content of life are not controlled by the ego, only enjoyed by it. There is, as Lévinas puts it, a *lag* between sensibility and the elements. The elemental, due to its indeterminacy, cannot be consistently counted on to satisfy the needs of life. Living from ... the elemental is living at mercy to the elemental, to its unpredictability, both in its bountiful gifts and violent indifference. In its faceless being, the elemental appears nocturnal and mythical. This horizonless void of nature receding into its own law is a cause for anxiety.

Without enjoyment, the ego evaporates. And yet, enjoyment is not up to the ego *per se*, the elements. The uncertainty of the future is the spark of discontent in the ego that catalyses the drive into itself, the carving out of an interiority for protection and reflection, the building of a home for possession, and the motivation to labour for life. In the gap between sensibility and the elements, *time* emerges as the possibility for labour, and *space* is grasped as the possibility for dwelling. In the practical consciousness of one's time to labour and space to reside, the overcoming of the uncertainty of the future is achieved, and one's enjoyment is secured. But this comes at the cost of losing one's naïve relation to the world, that is, losing one's pure enjoyment.

To restate where we are, the seemingly self-sufficient ego, happy in its world, "present at home with itself," is revealed to be in fact dependant on the non-I, the anonymous night of the elements. This insecurity toward the future is interrupted by an act of self-grounding, one which takes advantage of the very time between the now and the future, and turns that time into productive labour, a labour which will secure the fruits of nourishment in the present for the future. Lévinas, close to Arendt, calls this *action*. He writes, "The veritable position of the I in time consists in interrupting time by punctuating it with beginnings. This is produced in the form of action." This action of labour is not necessarily negative, as it is for Hegel. It is still life enjoying life, a "love of life," a life living *from* labour, and *for* labour. It is only the limit case of the *proletarian condition* which forces one to work for mere need and not enjoyment, and in which one can be said to exist in the "absurd world of *Geworfenheit*." (TI 146–7) We will come back to this.

This historical act of the ego would however be meaningless without a place, dwelling or home in which the action can be situated, and in which the goods can be stored. In this interval of time, the constitution of labour is simultaneously the creation of a dwelling. A dwelling is not a property, but the condition for property. It is the creation of a separate sphere of life called economy, in which one manages their relationship to enjoyment and elements in a systematic way. Labour and home are co-constitutive – labour creates the home, yet one can only labour if a home exists from which to mark off the time of labour, and to store the goods of work. This paradoxical structure is the focus of the core section of Section II: Chapter D, *The Dwelling*. In summarizing his position up to this point, Lévinas writes:

In order that this future arise in its signification as a postponement and a *delay* in which *labour*, by mastering the uncertainty of the future and its insecurity and by establishing *possession* delineates separation in the form of economic independence, the separated being must be able to recollect itself and have representations. *Recollection* and *representation* are produced concretely as *habitation in a dwelling* or a Home. (TI 150)

In other words, (1) labour is the means by which one can master the insecurity of the future. It does this through (a) giving one an independence from the elemental, by (b) possessing what was previously unpossessable, through (c) separating one's economic existence into durable possessions. But, (2) to labour at all presupposes a being that can (a) *recollect itself* and have *representations*, which is only possible in (b) a *home*. Although we don't really know what labour or *possession* means for Lévinas, the first argument follows the story so far. But where does this second, deeper argument come from? Why must one be able to "recollect itself," and why is a home necessary so that this "future arise in its signification as a postponement and a *delay*?" It is to these questions we now turn.

What is a home? Or better, why would a home exist? To Lévinas, the home is a break from natural existence. It is a physical space, but what makes it unique is its metaphysical separation, its distance from elemental nature. This distance, initially set up by the temporal lag between sensibility and elements, becomes materialized as habitation and systematized as economy. It becomes

instituted. The institution of the home is the suspension of the world outside, one which gives man an inside. In this separation from the outer, a place for inner recollection occurs. One for working and thinking. But the home, as the spatial condition for interior thought, for subjectivity itself, must be phenomenologically different than the experience of the elements. This qualitative difference is what Lévinas calls the *welcome* of the home, its structural femininity. The welcoming is characterized by intimacy, refuge, and hospitality. It allows for “recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome.” (TI 156) The possibility of an infinite relation to an other is already broached through the appearance of a welcoming other in the home, and yet it is not accomplished. For this welcoming other within the home is already in relation to me; she – for it is She to Lévinas – offers a “language without teaching.” Transcendence, on the other hand, can only come from the relation to the other coming from *outside* the home.

The home welcomes not just the ego into itself for recollection, but also pushes the ego into the world to labour. But what is labour, phenomenologically speaking, to Lévinas? It’s not wage-labour, domestic work, or slavery. It resembles what Marx describes in Chapter 7 of *Capital*, Volume 1, where, in a rare ahistorical move, he considers “the labour process independently of any specific social formation.” Marx writes:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism [*Stoffwechsel*] between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature [*Naturstoff*] as a force of nature [*Naturmacht*]. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power. . . . Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials [*er verwirklicht im Natürlichen zugleich seinen Zweck*].⁴

What is striking about this passage, from our Lévinasian point of view, is how well it fits into the story. Labour is exactly that process by which the ego begins to control the forces of nature, adapting it to the home, possessing it. Changing the elemental, he changes himself. What arises in the transformation of natural forces by man is man’s “sovereign power,” his control over the previously uncontrollable. And this act is co-extensive with the fact of “realizing” one’s own purpose in nature, something perhaps done for the first time. “Realizing a purpose” is both physical and mental; it is the emergence of rationally determined action. In that sense, labour is not something mindless, but the birth of mind. For both Lévinas and Marx, I think this holds true.

The difference between the two comes in what exactly it is this description of labour is doing in their respective theories. For Marx, this description of labour is “independent” of all social formations. In other words, it doesn’t properly exist; it is only a description of what is abstractly common to all forms of labour. This ideal type of labour, although historically non-existent, becomes materially *effective* in the capitalist mode of production. This is because people sell their labour *abstractly* on the market, and capitalists buy it irrespective of its concrete form. Hence, the social formation of the present period historically conditions a labour process which appears to be independent of history. This appearance allows us to theorize about “labour in general,” and retrospectively recast the birth of modern labour from an ideal, rational perspective. This method is, of course, the Hegelian one, and yet its *meaning* is not Hegelian. For the rational core of modern labour is precisely its abstract, one-sided character.

⁴Marx, Karl, *Capital Vol. 1*, Trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 283–4.

For Lévinas, it is not clear whether the phenomenological account of labour he gives is something that shows itself in the present for the first time due to the specificity of the current historical epoch, or whether it is truly “independent” of all social formations, and can be deduced as such from a phenomenological account of the primacy of ethical relations. It is possible that this account is a historically situated retrospective reconstruction of the sensible, nontheoretical conditions for ethical relations in *modern society*. If that is the case, then although Marx and Lévinas are using an ideal type of labour for different argumentative purposes, they are working on such a level of abstraction in order to make sense of the abstract nature (to Marx) and ethical character (to Lévinas) of present social relations.

Having prefaced Lévinas’ account with Marx’s, let’s now turn back to Lévinas’ argument. Labour comes from the home to the elements, and back. But how? Lévinas describes this first step as the hand’s *grasp* or seizure across space, into the *apeiron* of the elements, toward something fixed. The hand, as it grasps, does not “find” separable goods to work with, transport, and consume. Labour, in its grasping, produces the determination of individual objects *out of* the indetermination of the elemental. This act denatures the fluidity of the elements, and makes them dependant on me, that is, *mine*. Lévinas writes: “The labour that draws the things from the elements in which I am steeped discovers durable substances, but forthwith suspends the independence of their durable being by acquiring them as movable goods, transportable, put in reserve, deposited in the home.” (TI 157) The home is the condition and goal for the labouring activity, an activity which makes “moveable goods” out of previously mythical forces. And yet before dwelling, labour and possession, man existed somehow through an interaction with such elements. Was this not labour and possession too? Lévinas says no, clearly separating labour from enjoyment. He writes: “Possession of things proceeding from the home, produced by labour, is to be distinguished from the immediate relation with the non-I in enjoyment, the possession without acquisition enjoyed by the sensibility in the element, which “possesses” without taking.” (TI 159) In enjoyment, the ego is inseparable from its own activity; it has no home to distance itself from its contents. With labour, the ego fixes things all around it, structures them, makes them *property*. This mastery of the elemental blocks its original substancelessness, its unforeseeable futurity, its abyssal hold over me. Labour, as the fixing of the world in relation to me, brings ontology to bear on what was previously without being. “The way of access to the fathomless obscurity of matter is not an idea of infinity but labour.” (TI 159)

Like Hegel in the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*, Lévinas describes the kinds of “taking-possession” which realize one’s freedom *objectively* for the first time.⁵ Lévinas’ version, although non-juridical, is also a metaphysical story. For Hegel, private property is emphasized above and beyond labour, whereas for Lévinas, property as such is inexplicable without reference to labour. Both see property as one-sided yet necessary relation which, for Hegel leads to the true experience of freedom in civil society and the modern state, and for Lévinas, leads to the true experience of infinity in the ethical relation to the other. Lévinas’ taking-possession is an act of separation of *things* out of the elemental. The things that are brought forth from the elements, what Lévinas calls “movables” [*meuble*], are stored in the home. They are possessions, things formed from the formless for my use. Labour is movement of the body in the elemental toward a need or goal that “masters the indefinite,” suspending the indetermination of the future. This is the power over time which labour allows. The hand, in its very act of seizure, comprehends substance. Abstraction would not exist except for the “primordial hold effected by labour”(TI 161) Possession grants things another meaning, one separate

⁵See Part One, “Abstract Right” in Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Ed. Allen Wood, Trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

from their substantiality. They are now “mine,” and can be exchanged, compared, valued. “Things” don’t exist outside the relations of property, for property is what allows one to rationally compare things in a system, and hence all property is latently *money*. The anonymity of money replaces the anonymity of the elemental, but we can call this anonymous force *ours*. Our possession can be contested by other possessors, violently or not. Discourse is the mechanism by which possessors adjudicate claims. Discourse – or the “command and word” – opens up onto a field of action beyond labour, one that can end in a transcendent ethical life, or a separated violent murder.

Lévinas is at pains to distance his reading of labour from Heidegger’s tool analysis. For Lévinas, tool-use already presupposes a hold on things, a hold only made possible from a dwelling which grants time and reason to labour. The home is not a tool, and neither is the hand. Things don’t presuppose a world for Lévinas, rather, it is “things” that make up one’s world, things formed out of the *apeiron* of the night. Labour interiorizes the elemental both into home as things, and into the self as representations. The meeting point between the separated ego at home and the labouring being outside is the body. Corporeal existence, or bodily life, is a Bergsonian “center of action” for Lévinas.⁶ Labour, the delay of expiration, “is possible only in a being that has the structure of the body, a being grasping beings, that is, recollected at home with itself and only *in relation* with the non-I.” (TI 166) This corporeal lived consciousness of the ego “opens the very dimension of time” (TI 165) by overcoming material necessity. Freedom, Lévinas writes, is a by-product of life. To be free is to have distance with regard to the present, which is the same thing as consciousness. But freedom and consciousness aren’t just given. In an Arendtian manner, Lévinas claims that, “To be free is to build a world in which one could be free.” And yet in the next sentence, in a very un-Arendtian manner, Lévinas claims that this freedom is built *through labour*, and not outside it. Freedom is produced “not in the ether of abstraction but as all the concreteness of dwelling and labour.” (TI 166) Labour *is* the process by which freedom is built; it is the material existence of a will. “Labour characterizes not a freedom detached from being, but a will: a being that is threatened, but has time, at its disposal to ward off the threat.” (TI 166) What is the threat mentioned here? The indetermination of the element, its power of the ego. Labour fixes the danger into a task, one in which a disposal of time is produced. This disposal of time lets subjectivity, freedom, spontaneity and the other right into my home. For although one is necessarily warding off the threat of anonymous death in the disposability of time, one is doing it in a unique, freely self-determined way. It is within the disposal of time that the possibility of ethical relations arises, that is, the possibility of society.

Lévinas maintains that the home is the place whereby I can recollect myself apart from the things I possess. But how is this possible, if life in the home is structured by possessions acquired through labour? In order to overcome both enjoyment and possession, “I must know how *to give* what I possess.” (TI 171) Only by being able to *dispose* of one’s possessions could I “situate myself absolutely above my engagement in the non-I.” In other words, to break one’s attachment to possessions, to truly begin recollecting oneself to oneself, to be free from the dependency on things, property and money as opposed to the previous dependence on elements, alimentation and enjoyment, one must separate oneself from one’s separated existence. But how could this ever happen from within the logic of the home and labouring-possession? It can’t. Only something completely other can call this I into question. I will quote a long passage here, for it is the culmination of the journey through egoism:

⁶See Bergson, Henri, *Matter and Memory*, Trans. Nancy Margaret, Paul and William Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1988).

The Other—the absolutely other—paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face. He can contest my possession only because he approaches me not from outside but from above. The same cannot lay hold of this other without suppressing him. But the untraversable infinity of the negation of murder is announced by this dimension of height, where the Other comes to me concretely in the ethical impossibility of committing this murder. I welcome the Other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him. The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language. The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching. (TI 171)

To become conscious of myself as free from the properties and possessions that constitute me, I must be willfully forced to call myself into question. This coercion without violence is the appearance, almost out of nowhere, of an Other into my home, which I have the choice of welcoming or closing. Without the choice, there is no ethical moment. “The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows.” (TI 173) Lévinas describes this fundamental situation of man – poised at the entrance to his home, capable of letting a stranger in, or robbing and murdering him – as that of *Gyges*, the myth which Plato recounts early in *The Republic*.⁷ The story of Gyges captures the import of Section II of *Totality and Infinity* as a whole, for it is the story of radical egoism. If the choice is made to welcome this other into the home, the closed circle of totality can be broken. For the welcoming of the other is made through *language*, the non-possessable relation to an Other beyond my control, and yet fully at home with myself. Teaching is the production of an asymmetrical relation of height, one which commands respect with no foundation. In tying this section back to the whole project of discovering the infinite in the exteriority of the other, an infinite identified as ethical, Lévinas writes, “teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced, to then teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical.” (TI 171) But why teaching? Because teaching allows me to gain something from the exterior which I didn’t have before, something above and beyond my capacity to contain it, beyond my dwelling home of recollection, representation, and possession. This “gift” of teaching is precisely the *idea of infinity*. But the complete and total disavowal of the Other, the ego’s complete and total separation, the complete and total forgetting of the idea of infinity must be a real possibility at all times. Only if one is capable of rejecting the other and forgetting infinity can this transcendent relation be accomplished and *owned*, even if that ownership is based on one’s ability to let it go. Egoism is not a side-affair, a bad memory or a thought-experiment. It is

an ontological event, an effective rending, and not a dream running along the surface of being, negligible as a shadow. The rending of a totality can be produced only by the throbbing of an egoism that is neither illusory, nor subordinated in any way whatever to the totality it rends. Egoism is life: life from ... , or enjoyment. (TI 175)

We are back to the beginning, but now conscious of the reason for the earlier tour through enjoyment. “Interiority and Economy” is the self-constituted closed world of the enjoying ego, whose true purpose, for Lévinas, is in its breaking. And yet this purpose cannot be automatically accomplished, one cannot skip over the ego. The home is our home, and labour is our lot. Until it is interrupted, we are stuck with our possessions and properties, incapable of even noticing a

⁷See Lévinas, TI 173. Briefly put, Gyges ring allows him to be invisible, to see without being seen. The question posed by the Gyges myth is whether or not someone should for any reason still be just if there are absolutely no consequences for being unjust. See *The Republic of Plato*, Trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

knock at the door. Labour itself can never break one from this circle. As Lévinas writes about “the worker” at one point, “the worker does not hold in his hands all the threads of his own actions. He is exteriorized by acts that are already in a sense abortive.” The alienation of the worker can be deciphered in the product he produces, but this does not cure the alienation nor does it reveal the essence of the worker. For “the product of labour is not an inalienable possession, it can be usurped by an Other. Works have a destiny independent of the I... they can be exchanged, that is, be maintained in anonymity of money.” (TI 176) Lévinas has the same diagnosis of the relation between the state and the ego, when he claims that “the State awakens the person to a freedom it immediately violates.” (TI 176) If the ethical rending of the totality of separated existence cannot occur through labour or within the state, then what is the point of accomplishing a transcendent, ethical, infinite relation to an Other within a state based on labour? The ego can be called into question by the language of the face, but it must return to work the next day, and its neighbourhood is still patrolled at night by police. Lévinas grasps this problem as well, earlier in the text noting that a purely proletarian life is absurd and hopeless, *geworfen*. He writes, “In reality this pessimism has an economic infrastructure; it expresses the anxiety for the morrow and the pain of labour, whose role in metaphysical desire we shall show later. The Marxist view retains here their whole force, even in a different perspective.” (TI 146) What is this different perspective? It is Lévinas’ own phenomenological account of the closed circle of possibility from within the proletarian condition. Just as Marx knew that labour cannot make one free, but only the overcoming of labour could birth freedom, Lévinas knows that such “discontent still remains within the horizons of a totality, as an indigence which, in need, anticipates its satisfaction. Such is a lower proletariat that would covet but the comfort of the bourgeois interior and its fleshpot horizons.” (TI 179) In other words, the misery of proletarian life has only bourgeois contentment as its horizon, not ethical infinity. The sadness of this condition can only be toppled in the marvel of teaching, which happens when the separated being “leaves the plane of economy and labour.” (TI 181) But what could this concretely mean? Leaving “the plane” of economy and labour cannot just be a subjective choice, for economy and labour are objectivities that confront the separated ego as “natural laws,” alien forces existing independent of him. Would it not be the case that to “leave the plane of economy and labour” would require an objective, social rending of the closed totality of economy in the first place? Not the economy of the one single separated ego – for there is no such thing as an economy of one – but the economy of the whole society of separated egos living together in their separateness. How can Lévinas end his treatment with the view that “society is the presence of being,” (TI 181) when society is nothing but the collection of separated economic actors into one abstract ego as such? The ethical relation, if it is to truly come from outside labour and the state, from “above,” if it is to truly place an idea of infinity within the separated economy of labouring-possession, then what else can the face of the other be then revolution? And what is its language but the strike? And what is its teaching but anarchy? And what is the idea of infinity but communism?

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