

The joy of Desire: Understanding Levinas's Desire of the Other as gift

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that if we understand Levinas's Desire of the Other as gift, we can understand it as joyful – that is, as celebratory. After presenting Levinas's conception of Desire, I consider his claim, found in *Otherwise than Being*, that the self is a hostage to the Other, and I contend that, paradoxical as it may seem, being a hostage to the Other is actually liberating. Then, drawing on insights Richard Kearney offers in *Reimagining the Sacred*, I argue for understanding Desire as a gift that is the condition of possibility for joy. If I offer hospitality to the Other, I thereby accept the gift that makes joy possible, and this joy is not egoistic but is the proper response to the gift. Finally, I conclude that even if a pure gift is impossible, the Desire of the Other still offers me the promise of future joy and the possibility of imperfect rejoicing in the present. Even imperfect joy is better than any solitary enjoyment I might experience in the total absence of the Other.

Keywords: Desire; gift; hospitality; joy; Levinas

1 Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas situates Desire¹ in my non-reciprocal relation to the Other, for whom I am absolutely responsible, and in *Otherwise than Being*, he goes so far as to claim that I am hostage to the Other. Given this understanding of Desire, does Levinas's philosophy allow us to conceive of Desire as joyful? If, however, we understand Desire as gift, then Desire is the condition of possibility for the promise of joy, and although Levinas does not discuss Desire in terms of joy or gift, this view of Desire is consistent with his ideas. After introducing Levinas's conception of Desire and explaining why it might seem necessarily joyless, I show that Desire is in fact liberating and argue for understanding the Desire of the Other as gift. A further exploration of what it means to receive a gift reveals that the gift is indeed a reason to rejoice. Finally, even if a pure gift is impossible, the Desire of the Other still offers me the promise of future joy and the possibility of imperfect rejoicing in the present. Whether or not my present rejoicing cannot attain the fullness of perfect joy, the rejoicing that is possible (be it imperfect) is better than the self-contained, egoistic happiness in which I would lose myself in the complete absence of the Other.

2 Levinas's Conception of Desire

To begin, it is necessary to briefly consider how Desire differs from need and how it arises within my relation to the Other. Desire, unlike need, does not result from lack. As Levinas explains, "[t]he metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth. . . . Desire that cannot be satisfied."² Because Desire does not arise in response to a lack

¹ As Levinas usually capitalizes "Desire," I capitalize it throughout this paper. In the case of quotations, when "Desire" is capitalized in the original French text but not in the translation, I have reintroduced the capitalization. When it is not capitalized in the original, I have left it uncapitalized. The same applies to "Other" and "Same."

² Levinas (2012, p. 22; 2013, pp. 33-34, translation modified). In all cases where I provide two sources for a quote, the first refers to the edition of the French text that I am consulting, and the second refers to the edition of the English translation that I am consulting.

that can be filled, it can never be satisfied, whereas needs can be satisfied, if only temporarily. Moreover, need is essentially concerned with the self: I want something, and I am satisfied if I obtain that thing. In contrast, Desire arises not from myself but from my responsibility to welcome the Other. Desire is precisely not the wish to assimilate the Other; rather, it respects and welcomes the alterity of the Other, and thus it exists apart from the economy of lack, acquisition, assimilation, and satisfaction. In contrast to objects that I can assimilate into myself, by comprehension even if not by physical consumption, the human Other is radically Other. Levinas explains that “[t]he movement to self in enjoyment and happiness marks the sufficiency of the ego.”³ Satisfying a need leads to happiness, and I enjoy that which fills a lack. Needs do not render me insufficient to myself, for their satisfaction occurs entirely within immanence: “Between the ego and *what it lives from* there does not extend the absolute distance that separates the Same from the Other.”⁴ Desire arises beyond the striving for happiness – for the pleasure of satisfaction – because the Other, unlike that which I need, transcends me. It is clear, then, that any association of Levinasian Desire with joy must understand joy as entirely distinct from happiness.

Any association of Desire with joy must also explain how joy is compatible with my responsibility to the Other. Levinas asserts that “[t]he Ego is infinitely responsible before the Other,”⁵ so we must ask how one who bears an infinite responsibility can be joyful. I can make no corresponding ethical claim on the Other, for he⁶ is radically Other and thus transcends me: Escaping the cognitive relation, he is never fully present to me and is in no way reducible to an object of my comprehension. As Levinas argues, “the being who speaks to me and to whom I

³ Levinas (2012, p. 152; 2013, p. 143, translation modified).

⁴ Levinas (2012, p. 152; 2013, p. 143, translation modified).

⁵ Levinas (1972, p. 54; 2003, p. 33, translation modified).

⁶ I am referring to the Other with masculine pronouns to follow Levinas’s usage.

respond or whom I interrogate does not offer himself to me, does not *give* himself so that I could assume this manifestation, measure it to my own interiority and receive it as having come from myself.”⁷ The Other calls me to ethical responsibility, summoning me away from my preoccupation with my own being, and as he transcends me and I therefore have no claim on him, my ethical relation to the Other is non-reciprocal. Moreover, even if I reject my responsibility, I am still subject to it, and my very rebellion against it testifies to it, for I cannot rebel against an obligation I do not bear. Yet the Other calls to me not from a position of power but rather from one of vulnerability: As Levinas explains, “[i]nfinity ... from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution. ... In *Desire* are merged the movements unto the Height and unto the Humility of the Other.”⁸ The Other is higher than I because he places an absolute ethical responsibility on me, yet also lower than I because he is in need. My ethical responsibility is so great because the poverty of the Other is great. Even if it is right for me to accept responsibility for the Other in his poverty, however, can I find joy in so doing, or is the ethical relation simply a burden that I must accept to live morally?

Before proceeding further, it is important to note that Levinas himself does not associate joy and *Desire*; on the contrary, he remarks that “the incarnate ego ... can lose its signification, affirm itself, like an animal, in its *conatus* and its joy.”⁹ Thus he links joy with a preoccupation with one’s own being rather than with the *Desire* of the Other. I will argue, however, that his philosophy does suggest a connection between *Desire* and what I will call joy, as distinct from enjoyment and happiness. I have chosen the word “joy” because Levinas uses this term less often than either “enjoyment” or “happiness,” so it is more suited to reinterpretation in terms of *Desire* as gift. Joy, as I understand it here, does not depend on my assimilating an object into myself;

⁷ Levinas (2012, p. 328; 2013, p. 295).

⁸ Levinas (2012, p. 218; 2013, pp. 199-200, translation modified).

⁹ Levinas (2011, p. 127; 1981, p. 79, translation modified).

rather, joy is celebration. I will more fully explore the nature of celebration in the sixth section of this paper; for now, suffice it to note that celebration, as it is an essentially communal activity, implies an openness to the Other. I cannot celebrate, in any meaningful sense of the word, if I am alone, absorbing everything into myself. To celebrate is to invite others in – to extend hospitality to others – so that we may rejoice together while remaining essentially distinct. To seek to absorb another is a hostile act and so is contrary to the hospitality that is necessary for celebration. Thus asking whether Desire, as understood by Levinas, is joyful means asking whether my relation to the Other gives me cause for celebration. How, in my absolute responsibility to the Other that takes precedence over all concern for myself, can I rejoice?

3 Myself as Subject to the Other

To fully answer these questions, it is necessary to reckon with the harsh language Levinas sometimes employs, especially in *Otherwise than Being*, to characterize my relation to the Other. Richard Kearney describes the Desire of the Other as portrayed in *Otherwise than Being* as “a modality of abduction by the other to the point of becoming, through subjection, a hostage or victim. ... An impossible, terrifying love, not embraced but suffered, not offered but inflicted. A ‘psychosis’ bordering, at times, on theo-erotic masochism.”¹⁰ A brief examination of passages from *Otherwise than Being* will show the basis for this description.

In that work, Levinas does indeed paint a harsh portrait of my relation to the Other, asserting that it is

[v]ulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implication, in the hostage, of the identity substituting itself for others: Self – defection or defeat of the Ego’s identity. This, pushed to the limit, is sensibility. Thus sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. Substitution for the other – the one in the place of the other – expiation.¹¹

¹⁰ Kearney (2001, p. 69).

¹¹ Levinas (2011, p. 31; 1981, p. 15, translation modified).

Such words do not suggest joy; to the contrary, Levinas seems to be describing a wretched self that sacrifices itself for the Other. Although the Other is vulnerable, my encounter with him still leaves me wounded and undone, a result that appears to leave no room for joy whether or not the Other himself treats me violently. Levinas insists, moreover, that “[t]he more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the effect of the trauma of the persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am.”¹² Unlimited responsibility for the Other, then, seems to require that I wallow in guilt, even expiating the guilt for the Other’s sins.

Not only is the self subordinated to the Other, it does not choose to be thus subordinated. Consider another passage: “Condition of being a hostage – not chosen: if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his as-for-me and the exits of interior life, whereas this subjectivity, his very psyche, is the for-the-other, whereas his very bearing of independence consists in supporting [*supporter*] the other – in expiating for him.”¹³ Hence it seems that I find myself forced to be a hostage for the Other, for and to whom I am entirely responsible – and should I protest that this arrangement is unfair, Levinas can reply that such a protest is a refusal to face the ethical obligation that I bear whether or not I wish to respond. It thus appears that I am condemned to a life of self-abnegation – and, worse, of self-harm. Could joy found in the relation of substitution be anything other than the joy of the masochist? On a first analysis at least, Kearney’s phrase “theo-erotic masochism” seems an apt description of the Desire of the Other.

Thus an initial consideration of these passages suggests that the responsibility for the Other plunges the self into a self-obsessed masochism – yet this statement already indicates that

¹² Levinas (2011, pp. 177-178; 1981, p. 112, translation modified).

¹³ Levinas (2011, p. 214; 1981, p. 136, translation modified).

the case is not as simple as that. The self must be open to the Other, and therefore it cannot be self-obsessed. Inflicting guilt on oneself out of masochism is simply another way of rejecting alterity and returning to interiority. If I respond to the call of the Other by violently accusing myself and using the Other as an instrument by means of which I harm myself, then I am in fact subordinating the Other to my own self-harm and so responding unethically. Whatever Levinas means when he proclaims that I am the hostage of the Other, he cannot mean that I turn away from the Other – and hence from my responsibility to welcome him – to injure myself or to focus on my guilt. Thus we must consider Levinas’s account of the relation to the Other more carefully to see whether the Desire of the Other can indeed be joyful.

It is, of course, possible that Levinas is not fully consistent, condemning egoism on the one hand and portraying the relation to the Other as a form of self-obsessed masochism on the other. Furthermore, even if the word “masochism” is too strong, Levinas may still not leave room in his ethic for joy, as his insistence on my absolute responsibility to the Other suggests that I must not care whether or not I experience joy. Consider Merold Westphal’s charge that “by failing to notice that the interests of the self are not necessarily interests for the self and that one who finds satisfaction in being fair and happiness in being generous is not an egoist, Levinas gives to his own ethics a grimness it does not need.”¹⁴ To understand Desire as the promise of joy, it is necessary to respond to this claim as well as to Kearney’s harsher assessment of *Otherwise than Being*.

4 My Liberating Relation to the Other

First, it is important to note that it is not for the sake of unhappiness that Levinas calls us out of enjoyment to relation with the Other. As Catherine Chalié observes, “Levinas does not ascribe any particular virtue to poverty, sorrow, and privation. He shares on this point this

¹⁴ Westphal (2008, p. 1149).

distrust of the sages of the Talmud towards extreme asceticism.”¹⁵ Indeed, the argument that I must subordinate myself to the Other is very different from the argument that I must be unhappy for the sake of unhappiness: The former contention, that of Levinas, allows us to understand happiness as a good even though it is not the ultimate good. Adriaan Peperzak also draws on ideas from within Judaism to explore Levinas’s understanding of happiness and hospitality, pointing out that “[n]othing, in Judaism, despises or condemns the joys of life: eating, drinking, bathing etc. ... To become hospitable or a servant means, thus, to restrict my satisfaction to the extent necessary for the satisfaction of others’ needs.”¹⁶ But Levinas did not write simply that I must not allow my enjoyment to cause others to suffer and that I must sacrifice my enjoyment if I can thereby prevent another from suffering; he argued that the self is a hostage to the Other. It is important to understand that arguing for an infinite ethical responsibility is different from valorizing privation for the sake of privation alone, but we must still ask whether there is room in Levinas’s philosophy for a joy that is distinct from and greater than enjoyment.

It may seem impossible for a hostage to experience true joy, but the self must at least have agency to welcome the Other, which indicates that the self does not become a captive with no freedom. M. Jaime Ferreira emphasizes this point, arguing that “[Levinas’s] repeated references to ‘hospitality’ support a view of active and maintained agency – the sense in which I am to be ‘host’ to the other affirms my selfness.”¹⁷ If I am to substitute myself for the Other, I must be a self with sufficient agency that I can choose to substitute myself and that I can be held accountable to the Other. Thus the call of the Other does not rob me of my selfhood but rather requires it. According to Levinas, “the responsibility that empties the Ego of its imperialism and its egoism ... does not transform it into a moment of the universal order; it confirms the

¹⁵ Chalier (1998, p. 28, my translation).

¹⁶ Peperzak (1996, p. 135).

¹⁷ Ferreira (2001, p. 454).

uniqueness of the Ego.”¹⁸ Insofar as I am always already responsible for the Other, I do not choose to be a hostage, but I can be responsible for the Other only because I am a self with the freedom to decide whether to accept that responsibility or rebel against it.

Indeed, the relation to the Other is actually the foundation for my freedom. As Levinas argues, highlighting the nonviolent character of that relation, “[t]his presentation [of the face of the Other] is nonviolence par excellence, for instead of hurting my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it.”¹⁹ The Other cannot use violence to force me to welcome him, both because he calls to me from a position of poverty, not of power, and because hospitality is meaningless if it is not freely offered. Moreover, the Other founds my liberty by giving it ethical weight: The choice of what object to assimilate into myself has no ethical significance (in the absence of any Other), but the choice of how to respond to the Other does. In the total absence of the Other, there is no one to whom I am responsible, so it does not matter what I choose, but the call of the Other renders my freedom meaningful by demanding that I use it ethically. Peperzak observes that “[t]he autonomy of the human individual is not denied but shown to be demanded by the heteronomy of the metaphysical (or ‘ethical’) relationship. This constitutes the ego as a responsible subject, obsessed and taken hostage for the Other.”²⁰ Paradoxically, the ethical relation constitutes me as a free hostage, and the Other to whom I am a hostage also liberates me by calling me to a responsibility that I can choose to accept or rebel against.

Not only is the relation to the Other the foundation for my freedom, Desire frees me to be directed toward the Good. Because of my relation to the Other, I become capable of turning toward a Good that is better for me than are the goods I can enjoy. As Levinas explains,

¹⁸ Levinas (1972, pp. 53-54; 2003, pp. 53-54).

¹⁹ Levinas (2012, p. 222; 2013, p. 203, translation modified).

²⁰ Peperzak (1996, p. 143).

[t]he goodness of the Good – of the Good that neither sleeps nor slumbers – inclines the movement it calls forth to turn it away from the Good and orient it toward the other, and only thus toward the Good. Intangible, the Desirable separates itself from the relationship with the Desire that it calls forth and, by this separation or holiness, remains a third person: He at the root of the You [*Tu*]. He is good in this very precise eminent sense: He does not fill me with goods, but compels me to goodness, which is better than to receive goods [*meilleure que les biens à recevoir*].²¹

Thus Levinas does insist on the goodness of the ethical relation not only for the Other but for the self as well, which is crucial if we are to understand Desire as joyful. The Other “compels me to goodness,” yet that goodness is better than any goods I could receive. Thus Levinas makes it clear that in my responsibility, I find my own good as well. Here, then, is an “interest of the self” – to use Westphal’s phrase – and Levinas does not portray it as selfish. One should not see here a dominating Other forcing me to do what he knows is best for me regardless of what I want; recall that the Other calls to me out of his weakness. I see the Other in his misery and destitution, and in assuming his responsibility, I find not only his good but mine as well.

Thus far I have argued that Levinas does not valorize unhappiness for its own sake, that Desire is liberating, and that Desire is good for the self as well as for the Other. But does this evidence for the goodness of Desire outweigh the violent language with which he at times describes my relation to the Other? Is the joy I might find in my relation to the Other simply a case of metaphysical Stockholm Syndrome? It is true that if my substitution of myself for the Other is truly selfless, it cannot derive from self-hatred; rather, I accept guilt without caring whether I am guilty or not. Also, as explained above, the self does in fact choose how to respond to the call of the Other, and the Other does not use violence to force the self to be his hostage. But is the self that finds joy in substituting himself for the Other – that celebrates the very relation that constitutes him as a hostage – a sick, deluded self?

²¹ Levinas (2004, p. 114; 1998b, p. 114).

5 Desire as Gift

Treating the Desire of the Other as metaphysical Stockholm Syndrome is unfaithful to Levinas's concern that we be allowed no excuse for denying the ethical relation to the Other, which leads him to emphasize the non-reciprocal nature of that relation and the fact that it derives from the Other and does not depend on the self. As Ferreira points out, "If I am taught to think of the other as my equal, I am likely to think of the other as someone who is commanded to regard me as I regard her," which "allows us to put the spotlight on the other's responsibility ... and, thus, to begin to compare and calculate obligations."²² Determined to avoid any hint of a justification for mistreating the Other for my own sake, Levinas insists on my subordination to the Other, even going so far as to assert that I am the hostage of the Other. In this section, I will show, however, that as the ethical relation precedes joy, joy results from that relation without my responsibility thereby becoming contingent on my joy.²³ If we conceive of the Desire of the Other as gift – that is, as an unneeded excess of which I can never have too much – then understanding the ethical relation as joyful does not give the self an excuse to evade its responsibility.

To establish that it is possible to thus conceive of Desire, I will draw on Kearney's insights concerning the gift, which make it clear that receiving Desire as gift is a choice – indeed, it is a wager on ethics over egoism. Kearney argues that "[i]f one does make a faith commitment – with the shadow of nonfaith, uncertainty, and mystery always in the background – one chooses to construe the stranger, who gives to you from beyond your own limits and possibilities, as a giver of gifts."²⁴ The key point here is that I do not *know* that Desire is a gift, and I certainly need

²² Ferreira (2001, p. 448).

²³ As I noted earlier, Levinas does not distinguish between joy and enjoyment as I do here, but my usage of the word "joy" fits with my association of Desire and gift.

²⁴ Kearney (2016b, p. 32).

not receive it as such. I can decide that the Other is a threat and therefore reject Desire along with my ethical responsibility. But if I wish to properly receive the Other, to offer hospitality and accept my responsibility to him, I must receive Desire as gift. Receiving it as a burden in fact amounts to refusing it: If I tell the Other, in essence, that I will be responsible for him but do not want to be, my reluctance indicates that I have not truly given myself to the Other. Begrudging the ethical relation reveals that I ultimately believe that the Other is violating my rights and that I should not have to be responsible for him. But is it indeed possible to receive Desire as gift, or is the claim that I can choose to do so a mere delusion? To answer this question, we must further examine the structure of gift and Desire.

For Kearney, the gift emerges within the context of the sacred. He links the two with the observation that “the sacred, at its most basic, involves a deep sense that there is something ‘more,’ something radically Other, uncanny, transcendent, impossible for us to imagine until we reimagine it anew, until we make the impossible possible through a leap of faith.”²⁵ Levinas’s account of the relation to the Other corresponds excellently to this analysis of the sacred (and indeed, Kearney cites “Levinas’s ‘epiphany of the face’”²⁶ as an example of the sacred).²⁷ My choice to welcome the Other is precisely an act of faith: By accepting my ethical responsibility, I step out beyond the limits of my knowledge and put myself at risk for one who is always a stranger in the sense that he is outside my comprehension. Yet this stranger who is absolutely Other, this sacred stranger, is the one who, in a sense, gives me the world: “[T]he *persona sacra* is the stranger who surpasses the notion of law and logic [...]. It is the ‘other’ in the other person

²⁵ Kearney (2016a, p. 16).

²⁶ Kearney (2016a, p. 16).

²⁷ One should note that in fact Levinas rejects the term “sacred,” writing that “[t]he ethical relation is defined, in contract with every relation with the sacred, by excluding every signification it would take on *unbeknown* to him who maintains that relation” (2012, pp. 77-78; 2013, p.79). It remains, however, that Kearney’s characterization of the sacred bears a strong resemblance to Levinas’s characterization of the Other, who is indeed absolutely Other and who transcends me. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether gift (in Kearney’s sense) and Desire (in Levinas’s sense) can be linked.

who precedes and exceeds us – and thus, as Ricœur says, *donne à penser*, gives rise to thought, provokes more reasoning, and amplifies our understanding.”²⁸ Thus it is through hospitality that I encounter the sacred and receive from it that which transcends the narrow sphere of my own ego and which I could never, therefore, derive from myself. The gift received through hospitality draws me out of myself and into a world that is greater than I alone could ever imagine.

Moreover, Kearney maintains that

[t]he experience of gift can come, potentially, in our encounter with any person or thing – it is a giving that goes all the way down, down to the lowest of lowercases. No one is excluded from the horizon of the gift, unless one opts for hostility over hospitality. The gift of the stranger is something given to you. It is not something you make or make up.²⁹

In short, any stranger may be sacred, for the encounter with the stranger always has the potential to free me from the bonds of my own interiority. To embrace Desire is to open oneself to the sacred.

Although Levinas does not refer to the gift or share Kearney’s understanding of the sacred, the ideas laid out above are not alien to his philosophy, as Desire does have the structure of a gift. Consider, for example, this account of Desire: “This is Desire: burning with a fire other than need extinguished by saturation, thinking beyond what one thinks. Because of this inassimilable surplus, because of this *beyond*, we call the relation that attaches the Ego to the Other – the idea of Infinity.”³⁰ Thus he portrays Desire as a transcendent excess that arises without regard for the economy of need and saturation – that is to say, as a gift. Desire arises within a relation with one who, to take up Kearney’s phrase, comes “from beyond [my] own limits and possibilities.”³¹ Moreover, to embrace Desire and my ethical responsibility is precisely to embrace the fact that the Other does give me a world that exceeds my own interiority. As

²⁸ Kearney (2016a, p. 16).

²⁹ Kearney (2016b, p. 33).

³⁰ Levinas (1972, p. 54; 2003, p. 33, translation modified).

³¹ Kearney (2016b, p. 32).

Levinas observes, “[t]he presence of the Master who by his word gives meaning to phenomena and permits them to be thematized is not open to an objective knowing; it is, by its presence, in society with me.”³² In the absence of the Other, it would be impossible to know anything of the external world; the world would in fact be void of meaning, as everything would reduce to my own ego. Desire is the gift through which I receive everything that is not myself – which means that, ultimately, Desire is also the gift through which I receive myself as a self, for in order to conceive of myself as an individual I must experience that which is not myself.

It is good, moreover, that Desire cannot end in happiness, for such satisfaction would be a return to interiority and the end of the gift. Levinas insists that Desire is infinite: “[T]here is no end, no term. The Desire of the absolutely Other will not, like a need, be extinguished in happiness.”³³ Desire is unending not because I will be forever lacking but because Desire is forever an excess. Desire is more than sufficiency: It can never be satiated because it exceeds satisfaction. I do not enjoy the gift, and it is not a source of happiness – that is, I do not consume it. As Desire does not come from lack, it transcends happiness and unhappiness.³⁴ It is precisely because I cannot assimilate the gift into myself that I never stop receiving the gift.

But how is an infinite responsibility a gift to the one who bears that responsibility? Being alone with my own need, with no escape from interiority, might appear better for me than bearing an infinite responsibility, but Levinas asks us to fully consider such a possibility:

In the understood [*compris*] universe I am alone, that is, closed up in an existence that is definitively *one*.

Solitude is accursed not of itself, but by its ontological significance as definitive.

Reaching the other is not justified of itself; it is not a matter of shaking me out of my

³² Levinas (2012, p. 102; 2013, p. 100, translation modified).

³³ Levinas (1972, p. 70; 2003, p. 44, translation modified).

³⁴ Levinas does state that “Desire is desire in a being already happy: desire is the unhappiness [*malheur*] of the happy, a luxurious need” (2012, p. 57; 2013, p. 62, translation modified), but he is emphasizing the distinction between Desire and happiness, not asserting that it is the unhappiness of having unsatisfied needs. Desire transcends the economy of need in relation to which happiness and unhappiness are possible.

boredom. It is ontologically the event of the most radical rupture of the very categories of the ego, for it is for me to be somewhere else than in myself, it is to be pardoned [*pardonné*], it is to not be a definitive existence. The relationship with the other cannot be thought as a link [*enchaînement*] to another ego, nor as a comprehension of the other that makes his alterity disappear, nor as a communion with him around some third term.³⁵

Only because of the existence of the Other am I not abandoned to my own existence. The Other breaks into my solitary existence and, unlike objects of cognition, resists assimilation into my interiority, thereby freeing me from the weight of my existence. Without the Other, it would not be meaningful to say that I am an individual, for in the complete absence of radical alterity, everything would reduce to my sameness, and there would be no point of comparison that would allow me to consider myself apart from the universal.

It might seem odd that Levinas here speaks of being pardoned, but although I have no right to demand pardon from the Other, there can be no pardon if I am alone. For there to be grace, there must be another who is radically Other; otherwise, any “forgiveness” I could obtain would be conferred on me by myself and would therefore be meaningless. Only if I am guilty before someone Other than myself is forgiveness possible. One might object that if there were no Other before whom I could be guilty, there would be no need for pardon, but whereas my guilt before the Other is a burden that can be forgiven, my solitary existence would be a burden I could never escape. Levinas explains that if I could assimilate everything into myself, I would lose myself in impersonal existence: If I am alone, then “[w]hat we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it.”³⁶ It is better to be guilty but forgiven than to be thus invaded by the totalizing presence of the *il y a*. I take on the Other’s burdens, but the trace of an Other whose burdens I can bear rescues me from impersonal existence. As Drew M. Dalton argues, “longing ... may ... offer a kind of promise – a promise of liberation from the

³⁵ Levinas (1998a, p. 144; 1978, p. 85, translation modified).

³⁶ Levinas (1998a, p. 95; 1978, p. 58).

constraints of being, a promise that our true fulfillment can be found, not by attending to our own being, but by attending to the ethical demands of the Other.”³⁷ Thus to the one who welcomes the Other, the Desire of the Other reveals itself as a liberating gift.

6 Joyful Desire: Beyond Levinas?

But granted that Desire is gift, does it follow that Desire is joyful? At the very least, it is clear that joy is impossible in the absence of Desire: Recall that I earlier defined joy in terms of celebration, and celebration is essentially communal. In the absence of an Other to welcome, I cannot celebrate; I may take pleasure in absorbing objects into myself, but this solitary, egoistic experience is anything but the convivial outpouring of joy that we typically associate with the term “celebration.”³⁸ In addition, as shown in the previous section, if nothing existed save objects I could assimilate, I myself would be lost in and burdened by the totalizing presence of the *il y a*, and, thus crushed, I would have no reason to even attempt to celebrate. Without Desire, then, joy is impossible.

It remains, therefore, to show not only that there is no joy without Desire but that there is joy with Desire. Indeed, the gift is an occasion for rejoicing: To refuse to celebrate the gift is to withhold some portion of hospitality, to fail to fully welcome the Other, and thus also to fail to genuinely accept the gift. Here it is crucial to understand that celebrating the gift is not an attempt to place the gift into an economy of exchange by giving a gift in return. Certainly, having received the world, I must give to the Other: As Levinas asserts, “[a]n order common to the interlocutors is established by the positive act of the one *giving* the world, his possession, to

³⁷ Dalton (2009, p. 261). For a fuller treatment of this theme and of the burden of existence in the total absence of the Other, see Dalton’s excellent *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (2009). Dalton does not, however, explicitly consider Desire in terms of the gift.

³⁸ It is true that we often also associate celebration with happiness and enjoyment. My sense of the word “celebration” is thus narrower than the common sense of the term, though it shares the usual emphasis on community and hospitality.

the other”³⁹ But although the Other gives me the world and I give it to him, this is not an exchange, for the Other’s gift to me always already precedes my gift to him, and while he constitutes me, I do not constitute him.⁴⁰ Celebrating the gift of Desire is not – cannot be – a repayment to the Other, though it is an essential dimension of the welcome of the Other.

Humility is necessary to receive a gift, as pride prevents one from accepting a gift as gift and insists rather on offering repayment, and one might argue that humility, without joy, suffices.⁴¹

In fact, however, joy and humility are inseparable. Refusing to celebrate the gift is an attempt to hide the gift, as though it were something to be received in shame, under cover of darkness. But any concealment of the gift – even passive concealment that simply passes over the gift in silence – amounts to rejecting the gift by endeavoring to maintain the prideful illusion of self-sufficiency. My humility must, therefore, extend to rejoicing in the gift; indeed, joy is the very height of humility. In celebration, I open myself entirely to the Other, saying, in effect, that I am humble enough to delight in a gift that I cannot repay.

Again, it is not a question of offering hospitality in return for the gift but rather of rejoicing in my very inability to repay the gift. Faced with the gift, humility becomes unselfconscious laughter crying from the rooftops that I have received a gift and am now (too late, of course, always too late) inviting the Other to celebrate it with me – absurdity of absurdities, for I cannot repay him and would not dream of trying to do so! And yet the very absurdity of extending an invitation to the giver whom I cannot repay (and am not trying to repay) only redoubles the joyous laughter of the self who receives the gift. In humility, I

³⁹ Levinas (2012, p. 282; 2013, p. 252).

⁴⁰ Arguing for understanding the face in Levinas as gift (though without discussing Desire specifically), Jeffrey L. Kosky also points out that I cannot enter into an economy of exchange with the Other: “my obligation to the face can never be fulfilled, never paid back in full. In obliging me to respond, the face does not institute a circle of exchange; for giver and receiver do not share a time in which gifts could be exchanged and the circle complete itself” (1997, p. 191).

⁴¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

proclaim the gift, offering a celebration of my very inability to repay it. If I do not celebrate thus, I withhold myself from the Other by seeking through inaction to conceal the gift I receive from him, thus letting it be believed that perhaps I did not receive a gift, that perhaps I am his equal. Humility cannot endure even such a lie by omission, nor can it proclaim the gift with anything less than exultant joy, for only celebration (though it seem mad) truly displays the gift as gift – not as an under-the-table transaction but as sheer gratuity that overflows too much to be hidden. It is the gift that in its excess calls forth celebration, and I humbly join in with joy and hospitality. The Other offers me the possibility of celebration, and I offer that celebration to him, laughing at my lateness to proclaim all the better my absolute obligation to him. Such celebration does not indicate any failure to take the ethical relation seriously; on the contrary, it is regret that would signify such a failure, for to regret that my response to the Other always comes too late would be to regret the ethical relation that, because of the priority of the Other, renders such lateness inevitable. Mere sorrow over my inevitable guilt, untempered by joy, would devolve into self-flagellation turned inward on the self, not outward to the Other. To fully embrace the ethical relation and welcome the Other, I must actively rejoice in that relation and all that accompanies it.

Moreover, my obligation to expiate the guilt of the Other in no way reduces my joy, nor does the guilt I bear as a result of my inability as a finite being to fulfill an infinite responsibility. One typically associates guilt with failure and suffering – the misery of feeling guilt as well as the implication of deserved punishment – but when I take on the infinite responsibility to the Other, I receive not misery and punishment but the gift. I am, as Levinas observes, forgiven. Thus Desire brings guilt, yet at the same time it nullifies guilt by making forgiveness possible. If I extend hospitality to the Other rather than trying to assimilate him into myself, I open myself to

the gift. As Kearney observes, “seeing the world as gift is wagering on grace over chance”⁴² I add that seeing Desire of the Other as gift is wagering on joy over enjoyment. Accepting the gift is a risk, as is any wager, for to accept the gift I must embrace my responsibility and guilt, but that risk is the condition of possibility for joy. Wagering against the gift, however safe such a bet would appear to one who seeks self-preservation above all else, would be to lose myself and to lose the possibility of joy. The self who substitutes himself for the Other is by no means a sick or deluded self, for only by welcoming the Other can I receive the liberating gift and rejoice therein. In substitution, I invite the Other to a celebration that would otherwise be altogether impossible, and I also partake in this celebration. Receiving the gift in humility is not reducing myself to abject servitude but rather becoming free of the egoism that would trap me in myself and, ultimately, in the impersonal *il y a*.

One might object that as all the quotes from Levinas that I have used so far in this and the previous section come from relatively early works, I have not fully addressed the problem his references to the hostage pose. Even in *Otherwise than Being*, however, he observes that in the total absence of the Other, “[t]he human subject . . . is submitted as a *being [étant]* to the concept which from all sides envelops its singularity and absorbs it into the universal and into death.”⁴³ Here again he argues that the only escape from being abandoned to one’s own existence and death and lost in the universal comes about through the encounter with the Other: “To open oneself like space, to free oneself by breathing from closure in oneself already supposes this beyond: my responsibility for the Other and my inspiration by the Other: the crushing charge, the beyond, of alterity.”⁴⁴ This “crushing charge” is actually a deliverance. As a hostage to the Other, I am free; without the Other, I am lost in the universal. Thus even in *Otherwise than*

⁴² Kearney (2016b, p. 44).

⁴³ Levinas (2011, p. 270; 1981, pp. 175-176, translation modified).

⁴⁴ Levinas (2011, p. 277; 1981, pp. 180-181, translation modified).

Being, we find an indication that my relation to the Other is liberating. Although Levinas does not speak of rejoicing in Desire, such an extension of his philosophy is faithful to his work.

Furthermore, if we understand Desire as gift, we can see why one's self-substitution for the Other is not masochism. If I reject the gift – if I respond with hostility, tell the Other to keep his sufferings to himself, and refuse to dirty myself with his guilt – it is then that guilt truly stains me, for then I am rejecting my responsibility and refusing the gift. If I rebel against my responsibility to the Other, I will never experience the more-than-satisfaction that results from the gift, the gift that is the condition of possibility for forgiveness and hence for purification beyond all guilt. Thus in substituting myself for the Other, in taking on his wretchedness and expiating for him, I do not become wretched myself; on the contrary, I receive the infinite gift. Despite his criticism of *Otherwise than Being*, Kearney, referencing *Totality and Infinity*, observes that for Levinas, “[d]esire here again reveals itself not as deficiency but as positivity. Not as *manque-à-être* but as grace and gratuity, gift and surplus.”⁴⁵ I do not choose to be responsible for the Other, nor do I choose the gift, for a gift is less a gift if it is chosen: The true gift is a gratuitous excess. Being a hostage to the Other is, I suggest, rightly understood as being a hostage to the possibility of the gift. I speak only of the possibility of the gift because the self can choose to respond with violence instead of accepting the gift. I can refuse the injustice of taking on another's guilt, or I can accept my responsibility, embrace my substitution of myself for the Other, and thereby discover my own good. Only by renouncing my right to happiness do I find joy, and this joy is a celebration of the gift, not a masochistic pleasure found in pain.⁴⁶

It is crucial to note that I am not asserting that I should be responsible to the Other because doing so will give me joy. My responsibility to the Other does not derive from my joy in

⁴⁵ Kearney (2001, 64).

⁴⁶ Note that I cannot accept my ethical responsibility once and for all and thereby receive the gift for all time; rather, I can lose the gift by turning my hospitality into hostility. I must continue to be hospitable in each moment.

that responsibility; rather, my responsibility to the Other is primary and is also the source of joy. Thus connecting Desire and joy is consistent with Levinas's emphasis on the Other, for finding joy in my ethical relation to the Other is not egoism but the appropriate response to the gift. Indeed, if I make my ethical actions conditional on a prior experience of joy, I will not experience joy, for I am refusing the absolute, selfless responsibility from which joy arises. I find joy only if I seek first to fulfill my obligation to the Other for the sake of the Other. Only then does the call of the Other reveal itself to me as grace and gift.

7 The Promise of Impossible Joy

Now that I have shown that Levinas does provide reasons to understand the Desire of the Other as gift and that the gift is the condition of possibility for joy, it is necessary to address a final question: Must pure gift and perfect hospitality⁴⁷ be possible historically, rather than only as originary conditions, for joy also to be possible historically? It might seem that the answer is yes: If the gift inevitably becomes contaminated by the economy of exchange, in which I find myself indebted to the Other, then the supposed gift could never be a pure gift, and in such a case, how could I receive either joy or the grace of forgiveness? Moreover, if I can neither offer perfect hospitality nor receive the grace that pardons my failures of hospitality, then those failures seem to be an unconquerable obstacle to my joy. In short, if Desire must be gift to be understood as joyful, and if I must respond with hospitality to receive the gift and hence to experience joy, it appears that pure gift and perfect hospitality must be possible in practice in order for Desire to be joyful. A closer examination of Desire will reveal, however, that even if pure gift and perfect

⁴⁷ By "pure gift," I mean a gift wholly untainted by the economy of exchange. "Impure gift" (a term I use later in this section) is that in which the trace of the gift remains, although it is contaminated. By "perfect hospitality," I mean hospitality that is entirely uncontaminated by even a hint of hostility. This article ultimately does not take a position on whether pure gift and perfect hospitality are possible; the crucial point established in this section is that one cannot refute the preceding analysis – which does implicitly assume pure gift and perfect hospitality – by arguing that they are in fact impossible, as Desire is the condition of possibility for joy regardless.

hospitality are impossible, Desire still offers me joy, for even an imperfect celebration is still a celebration.

Let us suppose that neither pure gift nor perfect hospitality are possible, and that the best one can do is to endlessly strive for them. Even such striving, which carries with it the promise of joy, is better than the loss of the self to the *il y a*, in which the self is out of reach even of the promise of joy. Not only does enjoyment exclude joy, absolute, totalizing presence excludes promises for the future, for when all is present to me, it is senseless to speak of something that is always future. As Levinas observes, considering the self in the total absence of the Other, “to the horror of death is added the horror of fatality, of the incessant bustling of the *there is [il y a]* – horrible eternity at the bottom of Essence.”⁴⁸ To have only the promise of joy may at first glance appear painful, but to be trapped in a futureless eternity that is necessarily devoid even of the promise is far worse. This analysis of the burden of existence without the Other does not depend on the possibility of pure gift; whether or not pure gift is possible, it would be horrible to be absorbed into the totalizing presence of the *il y a*, and the call of the Other frees me from thus losing myself.

Yet one might object that even if the Desire of the Other is less painful than the absolute, eternal presence of the *il y a*, it does not follow that Desire can be joyful if the gift is impure. It is possible, however, to celebrate the impure gift, even though that celebration must be imperfect. An imperfect celebration is not a non-celebration; imperfect joy is not the total absence of joy.⁴⁹ By calling to me, the Other does break into the *il y a*, and I can either strive to repair that break by seeking to absorb the Other into the totalizing presence he cracked open, or I can seek to

⁴⁸ Levinas (2011, p. 271; 1981, p. 176, translation modified).

⁴⁹ By “perfect joy,” (or “perfect celebration”) I mean the fullness of joy that I would experience if I could receive the pure gift and offer the Other a perfect welcome. “Imperfect joy” (or “imperfect celebration”) is that in which remains the trace of joy that arises when I receive the impure gift and offer the Other an imperfect welcome. (I will clarify the idea of a trace of joy later in this section.)

welcome him. If I seek to welcome him, I seek to embrace – and even rejoice in – the cracks he makes in the *il y a*. In response to the call of the Other, I can say, “Come in, celebrate with me.” Perhaps my invitation cannot be perfect hospitality: Inviting the Other in may come dangerously close to attempting to absorb him into myself, and asking him to join the celebration that he makes possible may risk appropriating the celebration for myself or trying to repay him for the gift. But even so, I do, crucially, receive his call as a reason for rejoicing, and I do invite him in to celebrate instead of attacking him. The cracks in the *il y a* are at least large enough for an impure gift, imperfect hospitality, imperfect forgiveness for my failures of hospitality, and thus also imperfect rejoicing. As Kearney observes, “the sacred is the stranger at the door of every instant, the promise of something more, the surplus, the extra, the impossible beckoning the possible.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the pure gift is impossible, but it is not *only* impossible: It is also a promise, and that promise of pure rejoicing frees me from absolute pain. Provided I seek to welcome the Other instead of abandoning the attempt as impossible and therefore falling into hostility, Desire, impure gift though it may be, reveals the possibility of impossible joy, offers me a promise instead of leaving me in despair, and frees me by cracking open, be it ever so slightly, the totalizing presence that would otherwise crush me. Nothing – neither any sense of indebtedness nor the ever-present possibility of hostility – fully closes those cracks through which I receive, paradoxically, the possibility of an impossible gift. The impure gift, which I receive with imperfect hospitality, offers me imperfect forgiveness and imperfect joy – and that suffices to free me from the *il y a*. The gift is such a surplus that, even impure, it cannot but overflow, and with and because of the Other to whom I seek to offer hospitality, I rejoice, though imperfectly, in this overflowing.

⁵⁰ Kearney, (2016b, p. 34).

To clarify the point that the impurity of a gift would not nullify it as a gift, it is useful to consider Levinas's distinction between the Saying and the Said. According to Levinas, "[t]hat the ontological form of the Said could not alter the signification of the beyond being which shows itself in this Said devolves from the very contestation of this signification. How would the contestation of the pretension beyond being have meaning if this pretention were not heard? Is there a negation in which the sense of which the negation is a negation is not conserved?"⁵¹ The absolute alterity of the Other exceeds linguistic expression, yet the Saying is undeniable and is not bound by the Said. The very act of denying my responsibility to one who is absolutely Other than myself presupposes that I have heard the call of the Other. Similarly, even attempting to repay – and thereby denying – the gift that is the Desire of the Other presupposes the gift, for I cannot try to place the gift into an economy of exchange if there is no gift at all.⁵² Thus the attitude that betrays the gift testifies to the gift and affirms that I do have cause to celebrate. Even the trace of joy is better than the full presence of happiness and enjoyment.⁵³ Whether or not a pure gift is possible, therefore, Desire still offers joy.

8 Conclusion

By now, we have seen that the Desire of the Other is a reason to rejoice and that the joy of Desire is not the pleasure of the masochist. What of Westphal's suggestion that Levinas gives

⁵¹ Levinas (2011, p. 243; 1981, p. 156). I have added the capitalization of "Said," as Levinas capitalizes "Dit" in the original.

⁵² One might object that that which is never a gift certainly belongs in an economy of exchange, so the fact that I place something into an economy of exchange does not imply that it is originally a gift. But as I have previously argued that the Desire of the Other is originally a gift, that point is not in question here. The question is whether the gift is only originary and does not exist at all as a historical reality.

⁵³ One might ask how joy can leave a trace, as if it arises, it does so within specific historical situations. "Trace" is a suitable term, however, if joy is neither fully present (as is so if I cannot receive the pure gift and offer the Other a pure welcome) nor fully absent (because, as I argued above, I can receive the impure gift and offer the Other an impure welcome). That trace reveals itself within my imperfect joy, and because it does so, imperfect joy is still joy even though it is contaminated by my inability to receive the pure gift and offer perfect hospitality.

his ethics “a grimness it does not need”?⁵⁴ As Levinas does emphasize that the Desire of the Other is liberating and that it is good for the self as well as for the Other, this assertion does not fully account for his understanding of Desire. Still, his failure to speak of Desire as joyful renders him more vulnerable to such criticism than he would otherwise be. I have therefore drawn on Kearney’s insights to link Desire and the gift, contending that the Desire of the Other is not a burden but is rather the condition of possibility for joy. Conceiving of Desire as gift is an extension of Levinas’s philosophy, but because this view of Desire is, as shown above, consistent with and even implicitly supported by his texts, extending his philosophy in this way is a reasonable defense of Levinas against the charge that his thought unfairly burdens the self in favor of the Other. Thus extended, his ethic becomes entirely the opposite of grim, and conceiving of Desire as gift enriches our understanding of the ethical relation by making it clear that my responsibility to the Other is good for me as well as the Other, provided I embrace that responsibility by answering the call of the Other with hospitality instead of hostility. Moreover, this analysis holds whether or not the pure gift is possible: Even if the gift, and therefore joy, are always imperfect, claiming that joy is absolutely impossible because it is always imperfect is as absurd as claiming that there is no difference between hostility and hospitality because hospitality is always imperfect. Just as there is a difference between killing the Other and sheltering him, there is a difference between being absorbed in the *il y a*, which offers only enjoyment and is ultimately a burden, and rejoicing in the Desire of the Other, which liberates me and offers the promise of joy. Indeed, even an impure gift is an occasion for rejoicing, and the imperfection of that rejoicing does not transform it into sorrow and pain. The trace of a celebration made possible by the Other is better by far than solitary enjoyment under the burden of the *il y a*.

⁵⁴ Westphal (2008, p. 1149).

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