

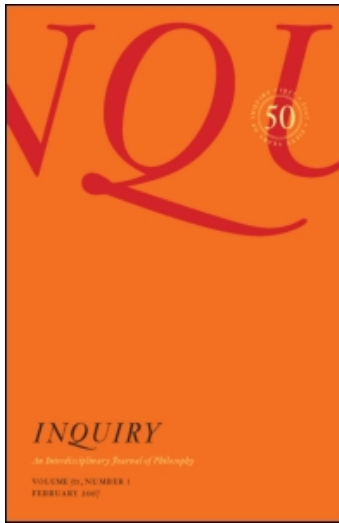
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Levinasian Reflections on Somaticity and the Ethical Self

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Levinasian Reflections on Somaticity and the Ethical Self

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ABSTRACT *In this article, I attempt to bring some conceptual clarity to several key terms and foundational claims that make up Levinas's body-based conception of ethics. Additionally, I explore ways that Levinas's arguments about the somatic basis of subjectivity and ethical relatedness receive support from recent empirical research. The paper proceeds in this way: First, I clarify Levinas's use of the terms "sensibility", "subjectivity", and "proximity" in *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. Next, I argue for an interpretation of Levinas's thought that I suggest is buttressed by recent experimental work in both developmental psychology and neuroscience. I provide examples of research that I suggest opens up Levinas's phenomenological analysis in new and interesting ways. I also urge the importance of Levinas's phenomenological analysis in contextualizing the ethical significance of these empirical findings.*

I. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas is at times a difficult writer. Part of the difficulty with Levinas's writing stems from the fact his work attempts to articulate a new way of theorizing the phenomenology of ethical relatedness, including, more precisely, what it means to be an embodied and situated ethical subject. Throughout the course of this project, Levinas finds himself compelled to move beyond many of the traditional categories and concepts of classical western ontology, which conceive of ethics as necessarily falling within the purview of Being. In making this move, however, Levinas approaches the outer limits of ethical discourse. His metaphors and elliptical modes of expression convey the strain of this linguistic exertion.

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Yet despite the occasional difficulty of his language, Levinas's thought exhibits an inner consistency and systematicity that reveals itself under a careful exposition—a consistency that sheds light on his project as a whole, as well as on the core themes animating this project.¹ Moreover, as this essay will work to show, several core themes in the later Levinas's ethical phenomenology receive empirical support from ongoing work in contemporary cognitive science. This is a somewhat startling convergence, perhaps, given the nature of Levinas's concerns and modes of expression.

I want to defend these claims by offering an exposition of Levinas on the bodily nature of subjectivity and ethical relatedness. I have two relatively straightforward aims in what follows. First, I hope to bring some conceptual clarity to several key terms and foundational claims that make up the later Levinas's body-based conception of ethics.² This is the primary intention of the essay. Thus, the bulk of what follows will be devoted to this task. Secondly, I want to explore some ways that Levinas's arguments receive support from recent empirical research. While this second intention is important, it will remain somewhat underdeveloped—necessarily so, due to considerations of space. Nonetheless, I hope to indicate how Levinas and cognitive science might enter into a fruitful dialogue with one another by touching on several shared topics. The structure of the paper, then, is this: I begin by clarifying Levinas's use of the terms “sensibility”, “subjectivity”, and “proximity” in *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. I argue for a particular interpretation of how it is that these terms interrelate within Levinas's body-based model of selfhood and ethical relatedness. Next, I argue that Levinas's body-based model of ethical relatedness is buttressed by recent experimental work in both developmental psychology and neuroscience. I provide examples of research that I suggest opens up Levinas's phenomenological analysis in new and interesting ways. I also urge the importance of Levinas's phenomenological analysis for contextualizing the ethical significance of these empirical findings, and thus hope to bring Levinas into an ongoing dialogue with relevant areas of contemporary cognitive science.

II. The prereflective structure of sensibility and subjectivity

I begin by looking at Levinas on sensibility and subjectivity. In *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*, Levinas speaks often of what he terms “sensibility”. Section seven of chapter one bears the title “Sensibility” and is devoted to an initial exposition of this idea. In this section, Levinas argues for a constitutive relation between subjectivity and sensibility. “Sensibility” thus assumes a certain technical significance for Levinas. As a first pass, we can say that, broadly construed, “sensibility” refers to the basic factors and conditions responsible for shaping our phenomenal life as conscious subjects. Levinas (1998b) writes that sensibility “is the subject's subjectivity...its subjection to

everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability” (p.14). Simply put, sensibility is the fact of our transmodal openness or receptivity to the world—our “vulnerability”—that enables us to have the sort of qualitatively significant phenomenal lives that we do.

Important to note immediately, however, is that sensibility does not here simply refer to our basic human capacities to receive information from and about the world through the channels of our perceptual systems. Moreover, Levinas is not concerned with the particular items populating our perceptual experience, or even the particular faculties responsible for these experiences. Rather, Levinasian sensibility is *deeper*, we might say, than either the items of perception or our individual perceptual faculties (if we can begin a bit obliquely). That is to say, when he speaks of sensibility, Levinas is concerned with the phenomenological structure of a process he thinks more fundamental than this kind of input sensibility or perceptual information-processing. In short, Levinas is probing a bedrock level of world-directed openness. He looks to explicate a transmodal “sensible” level of human reality operative prior to thought, reflection, and indeed even particularized perceptual experiences. Of this “transcendental function of sensibility”, Levinas (1998a) insists that, “Before thinking or perceiving objects, the subject is steeped in it” (p. 124). Ultimately, Levinas will situate the ground of both subjectivity and ethical relatedness at this prereflective sensible level. John Drabinski (2001) puts the point well when he writes that Levinasian sensibility is best understood “not [as] an aspect of intentionality...[but] the very possibility of intentionality—the nonintentional *Ur-impression*, the origin, without apriori and without foundation” (p.151).³

This somewhat opaque idea will be developed more carefully throughout this essay. However, jumping ahead for a moment, we can note that, for Levinas, sensibility is what first hooks up human reality to its world. Beyond this, sensibility is the source-dimension for both subjectivity *writ large* as well as the subject *as* ethical subject, according to Levinas. More simply, it is the prereflective locus of the self. (How this is so will come out more clearly in the discussion below). Sensibility is therefore summoned to do a great deal of philosophical work in the later Levinas. It is both the ground structure of human reality and subjectivity—coupling the subject to its world—as well as the source-dimension of ethical relatedness (i.e. intersubjectivity).⁴ It should be obvious, then, that clarifying this idea is of the utmost importance for understanding and assessing Levinas’s claims.

I have just offered a brief initial characterization of sensibility, which I will flesh out more carefully in a moment. Again, Levinas is quick to argue that sensibility (in his technical sense of the term) is constitutive of the “subjectivity of the subject”, as he puts it. Sensibility (whatever it ultimately proves to be) shapes the initial contours of subjectivity. But before exploring sensibility in more detail, some more terminological clarification is needed. What does Levinas mean by “subjectivity”? When Levinas uses the term

“subjectivity”, he is generally speaking in *originary* and *relational* terms. In other words, Levinas is not explicitly concerned with subjectivity at the level of personal consciousness.⁵ Nor is Levinas looking to pinpoint some metaphysical or physiological thing, or even an intrinsic property of experience or awareness, that *is* subjectivity, strictly speaking. Rather, Levinasian subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* is situated, like sensibility, at the bedrock level of human reality: the locus or place of contact where self and world, interiority and exteriority, meet and interpenetrate. (Sensibility, as a basic, precognitive openness or world-directedness, is what allows this interpenetration to occur). Subjectivity thus emerges from this ongoing interpenetration of self and world at the level of the animate body. In other words, Levinasian subjectivity is not reducible to the intentional structures of consciousness or some sort of rational principle therein—an intellectualist view about the nature of subjectivity, or “reduction of subjectivity to consciousness [that] dominates philosophical thought” (Levinas, 1996, p.83). Rather, subjectivity for Levinas is, at least initially (to return to a familiar metaphor) *deeper* than such intellectualist views allow. Again, it originates at the prereflective level of the animate body. Furthermore, subjectivity at this level is not *given* but rather *emergent*: a dynamic and temporally-extended process, continually in-the-making via the body’s active engagement with the world. This is the “locus and null-site” (Levinas, 1998b, p.14) of subjectivity, according to Levinas.

Admittedly, this characterization is, in its present state, rather abstract. But given this prereflective and somatic characterization of originary subjectivity, we can already discern the following central claim in Levinas: subjectivity and selfhood are first constituted within the primordial dimensions of our situated somaticity, the various forms of our prereflective, bodily-perceptual relatedness to the world and, most importantly, to others. In other words, we are first and foremost situated bodily subjects. In an earlier essay, “The Ruin of Representation”, Levinas (1998a) expresses the idea this way:

Sensibility and sensible qualities are...the situation in which the subject already places itself in order to accomplish a categorial intention...The horizon implied in intentionality is thus not still the vaguely thought context of the object, but the *situation* of the subject. A subject in *situation* or, as Heidegger will say, in the world, is announced by this essential potentiality of an intention (p.117).

Subjectivity is thus not exclusively or even primarily an intellectual or cognitive phenomenon but rather something emergent on a more fundamental and prereflective sensorimotor level.⁶ It emerges from the structures of our embodiment and embeddedness, and the worldly relatedness that our embodiment and embeddedness affords. But this world in which the bodily

self always finds itself is not a neutral world populated exclusively by Heideggerian instruments or, even more primitively, perceptual affordances opening up different forms of world-directed agency. The world in which the bodily self is rooted is, according to Levinas, from the start a thoroughly *human* world saturated with intersubjective significance and affective valence.⁷ Sociality is a phenomenological primitive. The self emerges from an irreducible and originary contact with human otherness, which saturates every form of our encounter with the world.

In characteristically difficult language, Levinas (1998b) continues to explore this idea by insisting that sensibility, construed in this way, involves the “breakup of identity, [the] changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution...” (p.14). Again, this “breakup of identity” is actually the “subject’s subjectivity” (Ibid., p.14). And this “broken” subjectivity, he writes, signals “a defeat of the ego’s identity” that “when pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject” (Ibid., p.15). Clearly these statements are far from transparent. I want to now sharpen up the rather abstract preliminary interpretation of these claims offered above, and also begin clarifying more precisely what Levinas is saying here about the relation between sensibility and subjectivity (as well as the respective nature of each). This analysis will then set up a discussion of Levinas’s broader conception of the bodily-perceptual basis of ethical relatedness, taking us into a discussion of “proximity” in the next section.

To first return to the question of sensibility and subjectivity, we might recall that, despite the often difficult mode of expression and suggestive ambiguity of much of Levinas’s writing—of which the just-quoted excerpts are a prime example—the Archimedean point of his entire corpus can be simply put. For Levinas, *ethics is first philosophy*. Thus, a philosophy of the body (which Levinas develops) will always be a philosophy of the *ethical* body interacting with other bodily subjects. Levinasian ethics always trades in the currency of the flesh. His emphasis on the irreducibly situated or embedded nature of ethics means that both his prescriptive and descriptive claims are therefore necessarily underwritten by “a material phenomenology of subjective life” (Critchley, 2002, p.20). To speak of how the body lives its ethics (or *ought* to live its ethics), something must first be said of how the body *lives*. The discussion of sensibility and its relation to subjectivity is therefore the beginning of this task, for Levinas, a necessary component of his body-based conception of ethical relatedness.

Levinas’s material phenomenology of our embodied and embedded subjective life, first developed within his analysis of sensibility, is prominent in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.⁸ In the former, Levinas’s discussion of sensibility includes rich discussions of a host of bodily phenomena, including seemingly mundane observations about how we derive metaphysical enjoyment and nourishment from simple acts like eating and drinking. These activities have not traditionally been given much

philosophical attention. But for Levinas they are deeply significant. For, in order to establish a body-based ethics, one must begin first with the activities that *sustain* the ethical body. These acts of corporal sustenance mark the irreducible nature of our situatedness in the world, according to Levinas. They are continual affirmations of our embodiment. Moreover, they disclose our fundamental reciprocity with the material nature of the world and things in it, in that they highlight “a pre-established harmony with what is yet to come to us” (Levinas, 1969, p.145). This is their ethical significance. Though both his language and his focus have shifted somewhat by the time of *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*, we still find references to food and eating in this later work. Levinas (1998b) notes at one point therein that “only a being that eats can be for another”, and thus that this material “signification...has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood” (p.74).

Why is a single-minded ethicist like Levinas digressing into a discussion of eating and drinking? For Levinas, eating and drinking is an act of welcoming exteriority—that is to say, the world—into our interiority, an inviting of exteriority to dwell within and inhabit us, to use his terms. These acts are therefore one common example of how self and world interpenetrate. Bits of the world in this way come to inhabit the most intimate places of our interiority. They settle into the inner contours and recesses of our bodies—a secret topography folded away and hidden even from ourselves. Through eating and drinking, the world thus both enters into and actually *becomes* us. Echoing Levinas on this point, Robert Nozick notes that, when one becomes attuned to the intimacy and “holiness” of the simple act of eating and drinking, one experiences a powerful *affective resonance* with the world. According to Nozick (1989),

Eating with awareness also brings powerful emotions: the world as a nurturative place; oneself as worthy of receiving such nurturance, excitement, primal contact with the nurturative mother; the security of being at home in the world, connection to other life forms, thankfulness too—the religious will add—for the fruits of creation (p.58).

Similarly, Levinas (1969) is moved to write that “*The gnosis of the sensible is already enjoyment*” (p.145). Our felt connectedness to the world is a noncognitive sort of knowing—“affective knowledge” through which we know, or perhaps better, prereflectively *feel*, the world to be the sort of place we can inhabit and survive within, a world that affords us various action-possibilities in virtue of our having the sort of body that we do (and thus having the sorts of bodily relationships with the world that we do).⁹ Eating and drinking affirms this felt intimacy, which is a function of our bodily-relatedness to the world. According to Levinas (1969), this sensible affect-knowledge “is the *love of life*” (p.145). It is an at-home-ness in our body and

our body's connection to the world. But this "love of life, a relation of life with life, is neither a representation of life nor a reflection on life" (Levinas, 1969, p.145). Once more, it is more primordial than cognitive-intentional relatedness (which is what Levinas means here by the terms "representation" and "reflection"). It is neither content for a mental state nor an intentional object. Rather, this affective rootedness in the world—what I have been referring to as the body's *situatedness* or *embeddedness*—is our fundamental mode of knowingly inhabiting our environments. As bodily agents, we are affectively coupled to our lived world. The ease with which we eat and drink and allow the world to enter into us is merely one common example that highlights this fact. Importantly, this primitive affectivity, for Levinas, underwrites cognition and (as we'll see) is the locus of our ethical relatedness to others. Again, the larger point of Levinas's engaging in these sorts of discussions is made clear by remaining mindful of the claim at the heart of his work: human ethics are played out first and primarily within the sensuous, face-to-face transactions of the flesh. In short, ethics emerges from the prereflective structures of bodily affectivity. Even mundane acts like eating an apple and drinking a glass of water are thus deeply imbued with ethical significance.

Again, the source-dimension of ethical relatedness for Levinas is secured by the sensorimotor structures of our bodily relatedness to the world. Strictly speaking, then, according to Levinas there is no such thing as ethics, abstractly construed.¹⁰ Rather, there are only ethical *actions*: different forms of ethical *praxis* that unfold within the sensorimotor matrix of our embodied and embedded relatedness to the world and other people. His discussion of eating and drinking reminds us of the primacy of both body and affectivity within these encounters. For it is the body that is ultimately "the bearer of the world" (Levinas, 1998b, p.194 footnote 12). Sensibility for Levinas is therefore the fact of our embodied and embedded human reality. It signals that, to be an ethical subject, I must already be an embodied agency open and vulnerable (in very subtle, prereflective ways) to the material reality of other situated subjects—as well as the larger world in which these subjects are situated. (Again, this was the point of his discussion of eating and drinking). This transmodal openness thus signals a "breakup" and "defeat of the ego's identity", as he put it earlier. I am only an embodied and embedded subject insofar as I exist *not* as a self-contained and autonomous ego, but rather as a world-directed openness ready to allow the world into the relational structure of my body. In short, my interiority already harbors exteriority within itself. The nature of sensibility, as the bedrock dimension of human reality, makes sure that this is so. I will return to this idea a bit later.

More pointedly—and this is a point that will eventually take us from sensibility to proximity, considered in the next section—Levinas will insist that my ethical relatedness to others is not something I first grasp via discursive reasoning, calculation or inference. Rather, it grips me with an

affective resonance that, in virtue of my embodied and embedded nature, strikes my “sensibility on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves” (Levinas, 1998b, p.15). Like my prereflective relationship to the world more generally, my ethical relatedness with others is therefore always *affectively charged*. Levinas insists that “Subjectivity is vulnerability, is sensibility” (Ibid., p.54). Moreover, “sensibility...cannot be reduced to an experience that a subject would have of it, even if it makes possible such an experience” (Ibid., p.54). Rather, it is an originary “exposure to the other, it is [a] signification” (Ibid., p.54) that pre-exists any cognitive-intentional or conceptual representation of it. It is something *felt*, in other words, and it exceeds tidy conceptual articulation. Given this characterization, we can conclude with Simon Critchley that, as I’ve been arguing thus far, “The Levinasian ethical subject is a sensible subject, not a conscious subject” (Critchley, 2002, p.21). Sensibility means that ours is a ruptured subjectivity fundamentally open to the physical and social world, and thus capable of becoming an ethical subjectivity.¹¹

Levinas’s claim here is important and subtle, and it is crucial to get clear about both the claim itself as well as what is at stake in this characterization of situated agency. (To what extent Levinas’s claim can be said to be *right* will be considered later). Therefore, to further assist the explication of this claim, I want to make a brief digression into the thought of John Dewey.¹² Dewey’s notion of a transmodal “pervasive unifying quality” of a situation—which he claims founds all thought and experience—is similar to what Levinas is speaking of with his notion of sensibility. Looking briefly at this idea will therefore further clarify Levinas’s characterization of prereflective sensibility.¹³

According to Dewey, all forms of cognition emerge from a more fundamental, precognitive qualitative connection that humans enjoy with the world. “All thought”, he writes, “in every subject matter begins with just an unanalyzed whole” (Dewey, 1931, p.100). Every situation we encounter stands out for us as being significant in some way in virtue of a pervasive unifying quality that melds the disparate features of that situation into a cohesive, experienced whole.¹⁴ Put differently, the *meaning* of situations (and the world more generally) emerges from these pervasive unified qualities that strike us as the prereflective level of the animate body. The world is opened up for us as a whole at this level. And (conceptual and propositional) thought is therefore not the primitive interface between human organism and world. Rather, these more fundamental pervasive unifying qualities are what support later conceptual and propositional structures. They are immediately *felt*, and articulate more than can be captured by conceptual or propositional discriminations which, arriving after the fact, are necessarily selective and discriminatory.¹⁵ In other words, we are affectively caught up in encountered situations because, before we know it, we *feel* the significance of these encountered situations. They are

charged with bodily meaning: affective valence and possibilities for action. Dewey (1931) therefore insists that

The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is preeminently a qualitative world. What we act for, suffer, and enjoy are things in their qualitative determinations. The world forms the field of characteristic modes of thinking, characteristic in that thought is definitely regulated by qualitative considerations (p.93).

In this way, Dewey claims, I immediately recognize a painting by Picasso or a piece of music by Arvo Pärt, for instance, not by focusing on any of the work's individual properties, but rather by being affectively gripped by the "Picasso quality" or "Pärt quality" that permeates the work—even if I can't say what this quality consists in. I am struck by this quality which "externally demarcates it from other [works of art], and which internally pervades, colors, tones and weights every detail and every relation" that makes up the piece (Dewey, 1931, p.96). And "the same thing is true of the 'quality' of a person or of historic events" (Ibid., p.96). Similarly, I enter into my office at work or bedroom at home and can unthinkingly navigate it and do things in it, precisely because the lived space as a whole is permeated with a unifying pervasive quality of familiarity that opens it up to me as affording certain possibilities. These pervasive unifying qualities enable our bodies to exhibit an adaptive, affective intelligence that takes us through the course of our days. We prereflectively know both our bodies and how our bodies hook up with their world. As Dewey (1922/1988) puts it, "we walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking about them" (p.124) precisely because the pervasive unifying qualities of situations enable the intelligent body to do these things for us. This affective rootedness is the situated body's fundamental way of inhabiting the world from the moment of birth. Therefore, according to Dewey, all the discriminations of conceptual and propositional thought originate from this more primordial experienced whole. Since "'feeling' and 'felt' are names for a *relation* of quality", he insists, these pervasive unifying qualities are what weave the situated subject into the fabric of its world (Dewey, 1931, p.99).

I have taken this brief detour into Dewey to highlight similarities with Levinas's account of sensibility. Again, Levinasian sensibility is the fact of our situated, world-directed openness. Like Dewey, Levinas insists that self and world are woven together at this prereflective level of affectively-saturated sensibility. But again, this interlacement develops not through reflective processes or conceptual cognition but rather through the animate body's felt engagement with the world and other people. The world and things in it open up as meaningful through the sensorimotor structures of

the acting, feeling body. We feelingly know our world even before we *think* our world. And our responses to the ways that the world gives itself at this prereflective level are what begin to shape our subjectivity. Moreover, this affective resonance with the world and things in it, according to Levinas, is the source-dimension of our later, more refined forms of ethical awareness and interrelatedness—our sociality, in short. Discussing how, exactly, this primordial affective resonance receives a more refined ethical articulation is accomplished in Levinas by introducing his analysis of proximity. It is to a consideration of this notion, and how it connects up with sensibility and subjectivity, that I turn to next.

III. Proximity and the emergence of the ethical

I have spent a fair bit of time discussing Levinas's notion of sensibility, including a detour into Dewey on pervasive unifying qualities. The notion of sensibility is somewhat elusive, and it is important that we get clear about what Levinas is saying before proceeding. This is because the emphasis on the situated somaticity of human reality—its sensibility—lays the phenomenological groundwork for Levinas's discussion of proximity in *Otherwise than Being*. The development of the notion of proximity in the later Levinas is highly significant for at least two reasons. First, as I have already indicated, it is a companion concept to sensibility and assists our purposes in helping to explicate this latter concept's ethical-phenomenological import. Secondly, Levinas's focused discussions of proximity mark an important transition in his philosophical corpus. Gone is the language of radical alterity in *Totality and Infinity*, the strained grammar of an infinite difference made incarnate within the face of the Other. As Bernard Waldenfels (1998) notes, "compared with the earlier work, the motif of the face [in *Otherwise than Being*] loses its dominant place and gets much more tangled in different topics, mostly in the central topic of proximity" (p.74). With his analysis of proximity, buttressed by a sensorimotor-based characterization of sensibility and situated subjectivity, Levinas might be said to have *interiorized* alterity. Otherness is now built into the very structure of sensibility and, subsequently, the ethical subject. This is a crucial move. As we will see below, it is a move that is not as paradoxical as it perhaps initially sounds. If anything, this interiorization of otherness is one of the later Levinas's most important phenomenological and ethical insights—and it is, as will be discussed below, what brings Levinas in line with recent work in developmental psychology.

In his discussion of the relation between proximity and sensibility, Levinas (1998b) says first that "Humanity, to which proximity properly so called refers, must then not be first understood as consciousness, that is, as the identity of an ego endowed with knowledge..." (p.83). Like sensibility, proximity for Levinas is not a cognitive phenomenon. Rather, it is related to

our prereflective sensibility, rooted in the precognitive origins of our subjectivity. Thus Levinas (1998b) insists that “Proximity, which should be the signification of the sensible, does not belong to the movement of cognition” (p.63). Nor is proximity “reducible to the spatial sense” of the term (Ibid., p.82). Levinasian proximity is not a matter of physical or measurable distance. But it is a human phenomenon. Proximity is not static geometrical space but rather *lived* space: the dynamic, affectively charged phenomenal space that specifies the unique quality of human interrelatedness. It denotes a bodily relationality “prior to consciousness, an implication, a being caught up in fraternity”—and this “fraternity which proximity is we call signifyingness” (Ibid., p.83). Proximity therefore signifies “an approach and a contact” (Peperzak, 1993, p.221). It is the phenomenological dimension in which our sensibility, which is the *fact* of our sensorimotor embeddedness in the world, according to Levinas, begins to take on an ethical signification—and importantly, is *recognized* as taking on this ethical signification. Prereflective sensible subjectivity blossoms into ethical agency within the phenomenal space of proximity. We first become aware of ourselves as participatory members of a human community, as creatures engaged with and reliant upon other creatures to whom we have an obligation and for whom we are responsible.¹⁶ If sensibility is the somatic origin of subjectivity, according to Levinas, a transmodal, world-directed openness, proximity is the blossoming of this subjectivity into a robust *intersubjectivity*. Therefore, proximity is the uniquely human quality of Levinasian sensibility. Thus “Proximity is communication, agreement, understanding, or peace” (Levinas, 1998b, p.166). The self-other relation, already a constituent feature of my sensibility, is cast in an ethical hue within the experience of proximity. And our embodiment and embeddedness are in this way not neutral features of human reality, for Levinas, but are instead affectively and ethically charged structures that knit us into living communities alongside other bodily subjects.

I would now like to move from conceptual clarification to a bit of substantive interpretation, which will prepare us to then look at empirical support for Levinas’s main phenomenological claims here. We can do this by returning to a question that we’ve already (tentatively) broached: What exactly does Levinas mean when he says that sensibility is the “breakup of identity” and that this “broken” identity is really the “subject’s subjectivity”? And how does proximity come into play?

First, as we’ve already discussed briefly, Levinas seems to be drawing attention to the fact that, whatever else subjectivity is, it’s not exclusively an *inner* thing, property or process. In other words, the conventional tendency to conflate human subjectivity with interiority—and then to further assume that these terms both refer to some autonomous inner realm of experience or cognitive principle of identity—is a mistake. This is because human subjectivity—which, as we’ve seen, first emerges from our “sensibility”,

for Levinas, our precognitive bodily openness to the world—*is always co-given with reference to exteriority*. In other words, phenomenologically speaking, interiority always arises with exteriority as one of its “enabling conditions”. Subjectivity is always outside of itself, out into the world. As Adriaan Peperzak (1997) notes, “I discover my body—mouth and hands, eyes and legs, brain and heart—devoted to service” (p.175). Initially, infants discover their somaticity within their halting, exploratory service to the world itself—the world first apprehended by the neonate as an arena for situated action. By experimenting with bodily movement and feeling, the neonate simultaneously apprehends its nature as both an embodied and embedded subjectivity, woven into a world populated with other bodily subjects. Almost immediately, it responds to the expressive dynamics of other human agents by mimicking and engaging with facial expressions of various interlocutors. These responses teach the infant about different aspects of its bodily subjectivity. In short, infants immediately feel the affective pull—involving possibilities for service and response—within their first encounters with the exteriority of the human other. (More on this below). Later, this primordial somatic phenomenon deepens and takes on an ethical cast as the body is disclosed to itself as the vehicle for ethical *praxis*—a bodily agency that can reconfigure the world through its actions within that world. Human proximity is gradually apprehended. Once more, however, it is the social world (or exteriority) that arises simultaneously with subjectivity. Interiority and exteriority are mutually specifying. The two are co-determinative. Levinas puts the point this way when he writes that “the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The sensible—maternity, vulnerability, apprehension—binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body” (Levinas, 1998b, p.76).

Therefore, positing the idea of a pure inner subjectivity or interior “principle of identity”, as Levinas terms it, is a mistake. Insofar as I am both an embodied and embedded organism, situated within and open to the world, I am only aware of my subjectivity (or my interiority) through my encounter with otherness in all of its variegated forms: in short, through my sensorimotor engagement with the exteriority of the world and things in it. This fact is disclosed on a number of levels. To begin simply, that I can navigate, explore, and manipulate things in the world means that the things that I navigate, explore and manipulate continually disclose my exteriority to me *in* and *through* my navigation, exploration, and manipulation *of* them. Put differently, the world and things in it disclose me to myself as embodied and embedded. They reflect my situated bodily agency back on to me. The world furnishes various action-contexts in which I act, and in which I am disclosed to myself as embodied and embedded *in* my action. And this disclosure of my *exteriority*—my embodied and embedded nature, my situated sensibility or worldliness, we might say—is thus what allows for my

self-understanding (or *interiority*) to simultaneously arise. As Drabinski (2001) notes, “The subject is for-the-Other because difference precedes, genetically, the identity of the petrified I, the ego closed upon itself” (p.213).

To put the matter in more Levinasian terms: what all of this means, then, is that phenomenologically speaking, *alterity* (otherness, exteriority) is a constituent feature of my subjectivity (interiority). Otherness is always already in me, a constituent feature of my world-engaged subjectivity. James Mensch (2003) writes that, for Levinas, “I am a self insofar as I carry the alterity of the Other in me” (p.204). And therefore subjectivity for Levinas is always a broken interiority, as he puts it, because it is a world-engaged, world-directed process that harbors exteriority within itself. Because the subject is always a sensible subject—embodied and embedded, enmeshed within a worldly sensorimotor matrix—the world and things into it bleed into my sensible subjectivity. In other words, the animate body is a “matter [which] is the very locus of the for-the-other” (Levinas, 1998b, p.77).

The idea of a self-contained and wholly autonomous interiority is thus discarded by Levinas as both phenomenologically and ethically misguided. The fact that I am always already open to the world and things in it is what discloses me to myself as an *agent*, an agent capable of acting within the ethical arena of the lived world. This dawning of my self-awareness of myself as an ethical agent occurs within the affectively charged phenomenal space of my *proximity* to other ethical agents. I learn not only that I am an agent, but that I am an agent whose actions *matter*—and moreover, that these actions matter because they are always played out within the sensorimotor structures of my connectedness with other creatures, which are themselves part of a larger, pre-existent community of other ethical subjects. Thus, I am never alone and never without responsibility to others. The material structure of my body signifies that “In this plot [larger than the apperception of self] I am bound to others before being tied to my body” (Levinas, 1998b, p.76). Levinas (1998b) can rightly conclude, then, that “it is in proximity, which is a relationship and a term, that every commitment is made. And it is probably starting with proximity that the difficult problem of an incarnate subjectivity has to be broached” (p.86).

IV. Developmental and neuroscientific origins of somaticity, self, and ethical relatedness

The theoretical and interpretive analysis above can be summarized quite simply. Levinas argues that subjectivity is primordially a body-based sensorimotor phenomenon. It emerges from our prereflective, affective engagement with the physical and, more importantly, social world—our sensibility, in his sense of the term. And as otherness is built into the very structure of subjectivity, the subject is in a sense always already *outside* of itself, a broken subjectivity—or rather, *intersubjectivity*—distributed

throughout the various bodily-perceptual relationships coupling subject and world. Simply put, “we are constituted, affectively, by the other within and without” (Bergo, Spring 2007). In Levinas’s language, this characterization of an open-ended, internally ruptured subjectivity signals the defeat of egological axiologies and Cartesian conceptions of self. It is the necessary starting point for understanding how embodied human reality comes to live out its ethics. For ethical relatedness, Levinas insists, is ultimately a function of our situated embodiment and the primitive self-awareness that is an aspect of this embodiment. Now, I’d like to look at several recent strands of empirical research that I suggest buttress Levinas’s ethical-phenomenological claims discussed above. This research shows that Levinas’s work is very much in step with contemporary embodied views of self-awareness and consciousness, views which challenge the overly intellectualistic approaches to mind and intersubjectivity that, until recently, had framed the relevant debates. However, let me be clear from the outset that the discussion below is not offered as an exhaustive analysis of the topics mentioned. That undertaking is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, my relatively brief remarks are meant to be suggestive, hinting at possibilities for more in-depth collaborations between Levinasian phenomenological insights and ongoing empirical work in the cognitive sciences.

To begin, work in developmental psychology on neonate empathy provides strong empirical support for Levinas’s claims about the prereflective nature of sensibility and subjectivity—and, more precisely, about the co-originary nature of interiority and exteriority, and the way that both arise through our sensorimotor engagement with the social world. Traditionally, empathy has been thought to consist of a kind of high-level cognitive activity. The two dominant theories of empathy in developmental psychology and cognitive science retain this intellectualist emphasis. According to these theories, empathic awareness—or other-directed openness—arises one of two ways. Empathy is either (1) the product of a kind of quasi-scientific mindreading by which we form predictive theories about other’s mental states and their behavior (Baron-Cohen 1989), or (2) it is the result of our introspective scanning of our *own* mental states, which we then use to imaginatively simulate the inner states of another person (Goldman 1989). These two approaches empathy are called the “Theory Theory” and “Simulation Theory” of empathy, respectively.¹⁷ Importantly, both of these views of empathy model human empathy as a high-level cognitive achievement, located within the representational states, events and processes that occur within the empathic subject. Put differently, empathy is a cognitive or conceptual achievement that somehow hooks up an autonomous interiority with a conceptually represented exteriority. Empathic awareness is thus a specialized cognitive ability that allows us to predict another person’s mental states and motivations for their behavior.¹⁸ As Currie and Sterelny (2000) put it, “Our basic grip on the social world

depends on our being able to see our fellows as motivated by beliefs and desires we sometimes share and sometimes do not” (p.145).

Meltzoff and Moore’s (1977, 1983, 1997) influential work on neonate empathy challenges this intellectualist rendering of empathy. Furthermore, their work lends empirical support to Levinas’s assertion that empathic awareness of otherness is an originary phenomenon built into the very structure of our bodily subjectivity. Traditionally, infants were thought to be incapable of what the child psychologist Jean Piaget (1954) termed “invisible imitation”: a kind of skill-based bodily empathy that involves an infant’s ability to imitate another person’s movements using parts of their bodies currently invisible to them, such as their facial muscles. A newborn infant lacks both an experience and conceptual understanding of its face. Thus, Piaget and other theorists assumed that infants in fact cannot invisibly imitate. This is because

The intellectual mechanisms of the child will not allow him to imitate movements he sees made by others when the corresponding movements of this own body are known to him only tactually or kinesthetically, and not visually (as, for instance, putting out his tongue)... (Piaget, 1962, p.19).

Meltzoff and Moore’s (1977, 1983, 1997) findings seem to refute this claim. Their experiments demonstrate that normal and alert neonates (one as young as 42 minutes old) *can* successfully and repeatedly imitate expressions and facial gestures. Newborn infants are thus capable of invisible imitation. They can recognize another’s bodily gesture both *as* imitable, and also recognize the gesture as imitable *by them*. Moreover, neonates can imitate *a wide range of* expression and gestures, do so *after a delay*, and actually *improve* their imitating performance over time—all features that indicate that this imitation is more than mere reflex. Given that neonates lack the conceptual mechanisms required for empathy according to traditional intellectualist renderings (such as Theory Theory and Simulation Theory), how is this empathic exhibition possible?

It is here that Levinas’s phenomenological descriptions of the co-originary nature of interiority and exteriority within the sensorimotor structure of our sensible subjectivity offers a plausible interpretation of these empirical findings. Affirming Levinas’s insistence on the coupling of sensibility and subjectivity, it seems that empathic awareness, or a body-based world-directed openness, is an invariant structural feature of experience, present from the very onset of consciousness. In this sense, it “comes to pass as a passivity more passive than all passivity”, as Levinas (1998b) puts it (Levinas, p.14). More precisely, empathic awareness is an invariant structural feature of embodied and embedded experience: in other words, it is the sensorimotor structures that underwrite phenomenal consciousness (or for Levinas, “sensible subjectivity”). We are literally born empathizing.

What all of this means is that neonates seem to possess a nonconceptual self-awareness of themselves *as* embodied—and in virtue of this bodily self-awareness, *as* possessing certain action potentials. Neonates possess an immediate proprioceptive awareness of their interiority. The body is nonconceptually known in its agency, as something that can be made to do things: a “superlatively concrete and quasimuscular ‘I think’”, as Levinas (1998a) writes in “Intentionality and Sensation” (p.148). Hands can be clenched, and legs contracted and extended. Tongues can be made protrude from all sorts of angles. Lips can be pursed, and mouths opened.

But the crucial question is: what leads from an immediate awareness of one’s interiority to an empathic awareness of otherness, an awareness of exteriority? Again, it’s not conceptual cognition—theory-making or representational simulation—since infants lack the necessary conceptual mechanisms needed to formulate theories or simulations that enable us to enter into other minds in this round-about way. Rather, building on my reading of Levinas, I suggest that the nonconceptual bodily self-awareness discussed above—*interiority*—itself harbors *exteriority* as one of its enabling conditions. Meltzoff (2005) speaks similarly when he writes that “metaphorically speaking...exteroception (perception of others) and proprioception (perception of self) speak the same language from birth” (p.72). Via proprioceptive, exploratory action-perception feedback loops, infants systematically gain an inner understanding of the body’s agency as they engage with their immediate surroundings. This includes what Meltzoff and Moore (1997) aptly term “bodily babbling”: dynamic patterns of repetitive bodily play that build up an infant’s proprioceptive monitoring of their body’s sensorimotor possibilities. But phenomenologically speaking, inner and outer are arbitrary designations, since at this early stage both arise together and mutually inform the other.

The infant thus implicitly knows (nonconceptually, in a prereflective bodily-perceptual sense) both that it is an embodied agent and that it is an object for *other* embodied agents. Thus, the child is neither born a “solipsist” (Piaget 1954) nor in a state of “normal autism” (Mahler et al. 1975). The child is not born lacking awareness that others inhabit a worldly realm distinct from the child’s experience of them (Piaget and Inhelder 1969). Rather, to again quote Meltzoff (2005): “The findings from developmental science suggest that infants already register the equivalence between acts of self and other. It is innate. This equivalence colors infants’ very first interactions and interpretations of the social world and is foundational for human development” (76).¹⁹ Sensibility is the vehicle for entering into the social proximity of the human community—the felt relationality that discloses our shared humanity to one another. In Levinas’ terminology, I am both “exposed” and “vulnerable” to the other from the very onset of consciousness. The bodily-perceptual nature of this intimacy again affirms Levinas’s insistence that this foundational proximity to

otherness “is not a modality of cognition” but rather a prereflective *somatic* relatedness (Levinas, 1998b, p.48). The infant learns both about itself and its world, including its immersion in the social world, in and through its earliest exploratory bodily actions. Put differently, these exploratory actions, which draws the neonate into an immediate encounter with the expressive faces and gestures of other embodied agents, brings the neonate an awareness of its situatedness—a bodily rootedness not just in a physical world but, additionally, within an affectively-contoured intersubjective world. In terms of the infant’s developmental psychology, self and other, interiority and exteriority are in this way mutually disclosing.

Murray and Trevarthen (1985) have provided additional empirical work that supports Levinas’s contention that subjectivity and intersubjectivity first emerge on a prereflective and affective level. Additionally, their work highlights the unique phenomenological status of the concrete encounter with *human* otherness, above and beyond our encounter with the otherness of the physical world more generally. In Murray and Trevarthen’s experiment, 6- to 8-week-old infants were able to interact with their mothers over closed-circuit television. Both infants and mothers each saw a life-sized, full-faced image of the other, and the infants could hear their mother’s voice. This real-time interaction, despite being mediated through closed-circuit television, was entirely natural. The infants smiled and gestured appropriately in response to their mothers, and appeared quite happy overall. However, after a few minutes, real-time communication was abruptly interrupted and replaced by a videotaped recording of the mother, essentially a rewind that had been recorded a few minutes earlier during the previously live interaction with the infant. When this happened, the infants’ behavior changed abruptly. They looked away from the TV, became deeply unhappy, and began to fidget and fuss—this despite the fact that, moments earlier, these same behaviors by their mothers had elicited happy coos and smiles. In other words, the infants recognized that the video recordings were a qualitatively different sort of otherness and they responded accordingly. What was the difference? Given Levinas’s discussion above, it would seem that the infants prereflectively knew that the bodily responses they had anticipated from their mothers, based on their own bodily gestures, were no longer in sync. The affective resonance or proximity that had governed their previous exchanges was abruptly disrupted, and their agitated responses showed that they were aware of this disruption of both temporality and affective proximity. In other words, the lived immediacy of their prior encounter was compromised. Despite the fact that they were presented with a video representation of their mother’s face, the expressive dynamics and felt tempo of real-time interaction was thrown off, and this felt disruption was registered in the infant’s agitation. Clearly the infants lacked a conceptual understanding of either the cause or nature of this disruption. Again, it was rather something known at the felt level of their bodily

engagement with their mothers—the primitive level that, according to Levinas, is the source of our ethical relationality.

Another brief example, this one from neuroscience. One of the most important discoveries in recent neuroscientific research has been the discovery of the “mirror-neuron system”: a class of visuomotor neurons that discharge both when an agent performs an intentional goal-directed action as well as when the agent watches someone *else* perform that same action (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004). These neurons were initially discovered in the premotor cortex of Macaque monkeys. However, there are indications that the human brain itself has multiple mirror-neuron systems. And there is much speculation in the rapidly-expanding mirror neuron literature that these mirror neuron systems potentially bear upon many of the rich features of human social and moral cognition, including imitation, empathy, and language learning.

Research in this area is still young and the significance of its preliminary findings cannot be adequately distilled into a few sentences. Nor can the explanatory scope of mirror neurons be accurately predicted at this time, despite the excitement their discovery has generated. However, the salient point is that mirror neuron research again seems to initially confirm, on a fine-grained neurological level, Levinas’s claim that exteriority is a constituent feature of interiority, and that empathic awareness is first and foremost a modality of bodily-perceptual, somatic relatedness. When I perceive the actions of others, the discharge of mirror neuron systems in my pre-motor cortex triggers what has been termed “motor resonance” (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004): a kind of non-mentalistic felt understanding that, as embodied and embedded, I, too, can do the sorts of actions that I am perceiving. I don’t conceptualize or represent these action-potentials. Rather, others’ actions affectively resonate within the somatic space of my own motor possibilities. Therefore, my empathic understanding of the other at this level is a product of the prereflective sensorimotor structures of my embodied subjectivity (or again, Levinas’s “sensibility”). I experience the world as an arena for live motor possibilities—and importantly, I experience *myself* as someone capable of *enacting* these motor possibilities, given that I have the kind of body that I do.

However, and this is the second and more important point, Levinas’s phenomenological analysis opens up the experiential significance of these neurological facts. For, it is not mirror neurons *themselves* that experience another person as an embodied, ethically significant agent. Rather, it is *the whole person*—the embodied and embedded agent—living through its face-to-face encounters with other people as these encounters play out within different ethically and pragmatically significant contexts. Motor neurons only discharge in proximity to other bodily subjects. Once more, this is not a literal reference to their spatial position, but instead to their embeddedness in the neurophysiology of an embodied, ethical subject who is herself

embedded in encompassing human contexts saturated with meaning and significance. The ethical significance of mirror neurons can thus only be grasped by remaining mindful of the human proximity, in Levinas's special sense of the term, that *gives* them ethical significance. In this way, Levinas's material phenomenology of our subjective life can be seen as receiving support from several areas within cognitive science.

Of course, a body-based account of the sensible and affective origins of ethical relationality is not the whole story. Our experiential encounter with human otherness is a necessary, but surely not sufficient, condition for robust ethical maturity. For as Shaun Gallagher notes:

Perceptual access to the other person's contextualized bodily movements, gestures, and facial expressions, and so forth does give us a partial sense of what is going on with them, what they mean and what they feel. This, together with our interactions with others in pragmatic and social contexts, where those contexts and situations enrich our understanding even further, gives us a relatively stable, but still relatively elemental understanding of them (Gallagher, 2007, p. 363).

Nonetheless, Levinas is primarily concerned with a phenomenological excavation of the elemental origins of ethical relationality. The empirical research just surveyed offers another means of exploring and validating some of his most important phenomenological descriptions of the birth of the embodied ethical subject.

Conversely, we can see that Levinas's insights allow us to situate the significance of these empirical facts within a broader phenomenological-ethical context. By taking his analysis seriously, we safeguard against the possibility of categorically collapsing the phenomenological back into the neurological, assuming that the former is ultimately reducible to the latter. Again, Levinas's phenomenology opens up the lived meaning of the neurology in a way that cannot be accomplished within the explanatory resources of neuroscience itself. To do so would entail an unwarranted collapse of levels of description. At the same time, however, we also find that Levinas's phenomenological claims can be mapped onto important empirical findings in developmental psychology and neuroscience in illuminating and mutually-informing ways. In conclusion, Levinas's influence continues to make itself felt in any number of different disciplines. There's no reason that cognitive science should remain immune to his distinctive voice.²⁰

Notes

1. John Drabinski (2001) notes that "Levinas's work works according to a definitive logic, but the particular items of that logic are left, for the most part, to the reader's appropriation of scattered and enigmatic remarks" (p. 170).

2. Most of what follows will be concerned with *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. However, I will discuss a few ideas from *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, and thus establish something of a thematic continuity between these two texts—at least on a few points relevant to this discussion—despite the theoretical shift that takes place between the writing of these works.
3. I want to qualify Drabinski's remarks somewhat. The bedrock level of human reality I am working towards (and which I am arguing that Levinas is concerned with) can indeed be thought of as exhibiting intentionality of some sort—insofar as we construe “intentionality” to here denote a kind of global openness to or directedness towards the world and things in it, or a generalized comportment or poise that allows the world to give itself to us *as being* a certain way in our experience of it. Nothing in this rather vanilla characterization of intentionality-as-openness entails that intentionality be thought of exclusively as a mental phenomenon, however, or an intrinsic feature of mental states (and only mental states). If Drabinski is arguing that Levinasian sensibility is rather the very possibility for *cognitive* intentionality, than I am in agreement with him. For as I will argue, cognitive intentionality—intentionality as an intrinsic feature of mental states—is a *derived* form of intentionality, according to Levinas. “Sensibility” is a more primitive structure that, phenomenologically speaking, not only exhibits its own sort of openness and world-directedness but is additionally (and importantly) *prior* to cognitive intentionality. Therefore, as Drabinski notes, sensibility in fact provides the conditions of possibility for (cognitive) intentionality and is more basic than the latter.
4. This way of putting things might be somewhat misleading, since to *be* a subject (or to *have* human subjectivity of some sort) is to already be an *ethical* subject, for Levinas. One is not first a subject and only later an ethical subject. Rather, subjectivity is always already suffused with ethicality, both in terms of how human subjectivity relates to itself as well as how it relates to others (its *inter*-subjectivity, in other words).
5. By “personal consciousness”, I am referring to the experiential states and processes that comprise the unified manifold or flow of phenomenal awareness *as given* to a subject. Subjectivity is thus the articulation of this flow in the subject's personal experience of it. Subjectivity, at the level of personal consciousness, is constituted by the mental phenomena—the stream, if you like—at any moment making up the subject's qualitative experience of both itself and the world. In contrast, Levinas's conceptions of sensibility and subjectivity (under this reading) are situated at a level beneath or prior to personal consciousness as I've here defined it—though we'll see as the discussion unfolds that Levinasian sensibility is not, strictly speaking, *sub-personal* or *unconsciousness*. It manifests subtly at the level of personal consciousness. But it is not articulated with the same directness and immediacy that differentiates experiential states such as *seeing a red apple* or *remembering that I need to turn the oven off*. Both Levinasian sensibility and subjectivity are therefore situated at an originary or prereflective dimension of human reality, beneath the flow of personal consciousness *and* cognitive-intentionality, since the latter is operative at the level of personal consciousness.
6. Though he does not explicitly argue for the existence of nonconceptual content, Levinas's characterization of sensibility seems to presuppose that subjects can, in fact, have different sorts of experiential states (or subpersonal states that may *potentially* be articulated at a conscious experiential level) which ultimately outstrip the conceptual capacities of the subject. For contemporary treatments of the issue of nonconceptual content, see Gunther (2003).
7. This analysis of the somatic origin of subjectivity anticipates much contemporary work in cognitive science, and thus places Levinas in step with current empirical research. I return to this connection in the final section of the paper.
8. In *Totality and Infinity*, as is well known, the ethical relation for Levinas is always a matter of encountering radical *alterity*: an external relation to otherness constituted by

my encounter with the face of the Other, whose alterity or difference cannot be reduced to a concept, category, or content *for* me, immanent to my experience of this Other. However, by the time he writes *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas will argue that the alterity of the Other is always already an invariant structure of my *interiority*. In other words, my relation to alterity becomes an *internal* relation: otherness is built into the very structure of my subjectivity. The significance of this shift for Levinas is explored in more detail in section three of this essay. The point salient to present concerns is that, despite this shift in where he situates alterity, Levinas nonetheless remains deeply concerned with the nature of our bodily experience of otherness throughout his writings, and therefore continually devotes careful attention to developing a phenomenology of the body.

9. Levinas (1998a) writes in “Intentionality and Sensation” that “The world is not constituted as a static entity, directly delivered over to experience; it refers to “points of view” freely adopted by a subject who, essentially, walks and possesses mobile organs...The subject moves in the very space it is going to constitute...*Movement and gait are in the very subjectivity of the subject*” (p. 146–147).
10. In “Violence and Metaphysics”, Derrida (1967/1980) notes that Levinas is neither interested in formulating “moral rules” nor “determin[ing] a morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general” (p.111). For Levinas, this essence is found within the experiential structures, the lived immediacy, of concrete human encounters—especially their sensibility and affective valence, which draws me out of myself and into the encounter itself.
11. I have thus far been using “sensibility” and “affectivity” somewhat interchangeably. I want to be clear that sensibility, as I read him, is the broader term for Levinas, encompassing affectivity, more generally, as well as more particularized moods and emotions. Recall that sensibility in Levinas is not simply the passive reception of information about the world through the modalities of our senses (this would be a restricted use of the term). Rather, sensibility is his attempt to capture the holistic way that perceptual content, including information about both one’s environment (exteroception) and one’s environmentally-embedded body (interoception), always gives itself an affective valence. Levinasian sensibility *encompasses* affect, in other words. The experiential world is always saturated with feeling, and perception and affect intermingle all the way down through the most primitive forms of our body-world couplings. Bettina Bergo puts the point nicely when she writes that “Levinas will always insist on the ontological significance of the body and the flesh; these are always in relation with something, be it air or light. And sensibility consists of an indeterminate number of affectations, of which we become conscious only by turning our attention to them. Levinas’s ‘pre-conscious’ sensibility is thus the ongoing shadow of the intentional ‘I...the self of sensibility is the locus of relationality and transcendence...’” (Bergo, Spring 2007). For some of Levinas’s other attempts to think through the idea of prereflective levels of the bodily sensibility, see the essays “Intentionality and Metaphysics” and “Intentionality and Sensation” in Levinas (1998a). My thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.
12. My discussion of Dewey was greatly helped by listening to Mark Johnson’s excellent paper, “Dewey’s Zen: The ‘Oh’ of Wonder”, given at the 2007 meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in Columbia, SC.
13. With this detour though Dewey, I do not mean to imply that Levinas was at all familiar with or influenced by Dewey. He clearly was not. Rather, I simply use Dewey’s well-developed discussion of how a meaningful world is disclosed to the bodily-affective subject, on a primitive and preverbal level, in order to highlight Levinas’s similar treatment of this idea. Of course, Levinas was quite familiar with Husserl’s work—his published thesis, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology* was the first

- book-length introduction to Husserl in French, and he later translated Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*—and one might look to the fifth meditation within the latter text for a more direct line of influence (Levinas's essay "The Ruin of Representation" (in his 1998a) discusses how Levinas understands his debt to Husserl). That said, Dewey's account here is a clear and cogent antecedent to Levinas on this point, and it is therefore helpful for understanding what Levinas is trying to say.
14. By "situation", Dewey means the rich complex of physical, biological, social and cultural structures that comprise our lived environments. In addition, the situation also includes the organism's characteristic ways of interacting with its lived environments. A situation thus included both features of the environment *as well as* the living organism interacting with features of that environment in particular ways. Dewey writes that a situation "is a complex existence that is held together, in spite of its internal complexity, by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality" (Dewey, 1931, p. 97). See also (Dewey, 1958, pp. 249–297).
 15. Thus Dewey notes that, when we are stricken with it, a pervasively felt quality "speaks so completely for itself that words are poor substitutes—not that thought fails, but that thought so completely grasps the dominant quality that translation into explicit terms gives a partial and inadequate result" (Dewey, 1931, p.102).
 16. By putting things this way, I don't mean to imply that Levinas was endorsing a kind of ethical communitarianism. Rather, my point is simply that sensibility and proximity in Levinas both point to the *felt relationality* to the Other that underwrites our fact-to-face transactions with them—a primitive affective force that, in itself, does not entail any reduction of their uniqueness and alterity. This point will be explored in more detail as we progress. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for urging clarification here.
 17. For more on Theory Theory, see Baron-Cohen (1995) and Gopnik and Welkman (1995). For a version of radical simulationism, see Gordon (1996). For phenomenological criticisms of Theory Theory and Simulation Theory, see Gallagher and Zahavi (2007) and Gallagher (2007).
 18. According to both Theory Theory (TT) and Simulation Theory (ST), infants and young children are precluded from empathic awareness, as are nonhuman animals. This is because infants and nonhuman animals all lack the requisite conceptual capacities needed to formulate theories or simulation routines by which we enter into other minds. Again, both TT and ST see empathy as a relatively late, high-level developmental achievement—and not as a structural invariant of phenomenal consciousness, or a primary feature of bodily experience present from the very onset of consciousness. Rather, according to TT and ST, empathy rests upon domain-specific conceptual mechanisms that only begin to develop in early childhood. In order to understand, explain or predict another's behavior, as well as the beliefs and desires informing it, the empathic subject must come to possess a minimal conceptual knowledge enabling the classification of beliefs and desires, in addition to a conceptual understanding of what it means to actually *have* beliefs and desires. (This would also seem to entail a minimal conceptual knowledge of self-identity, self-other relations, social recognition, etc.).
 19. Meltzoff's (1995) research has also found that the nonconceptual body knowledge possessed by children seems to enable them to be able to recognize the intentions of others. In these studies, an experimenter pretends to have trouble completing a particular task with a toy. The child then takes the toy and completes the experimenter's incomplete action, indicating that she apprehends the experimenter's failed intention. In other words, the child immediately perceives the intentions of another agent—reading these intentions directly off the agent's bodily gestures and expressions—without assuming a theoretical stance or attempting to simulate their state of mind.

20. I would like to thank Claudia Welz for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I am also grateful for the insightful and thorough criticisms offered by two of this journal's anonymous reviewers.

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