Levinas on Separation:

Metaphysical, Semantic, Affective

Bernardo Andrade
Emory University

In this paper I argue that, to conceive transcendence, Levinas retrieves the Platonic concept of "separation" and deploys it in three ways: metaphysically, semantically, and affectively. Levinas finds in the interaction between being and the Good beyond being of *Republic* VI 509b a certain "formal structure of transcendence"—one in which a term is conditioned by another while remaining absolutely separated from it. This formal structure is subsequently deployed *metaphysically*, in the relation between creator and creature; *semantically*, in the relation between meaning and sense; and *affectively*, in the relation between the desiring self and its desired aim.

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> *One can only wonder whether Western philosophy has been faithful to this Platonism.*[1]

Levinas presents himself as first and foremost a philosopher of transcendence. In a footnote to "God and Philosophy," he insists that he is looking, not for ethics, but for "the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence."[2] Transcendence has a very specific meaning for Levinas. It indicates a conditioning relation between two terms that remain absolutely separate. One term (the Same) is conditioned by another (the Other) that shares nothing in common with it; and it is conditioned, not *in spite of*, but precisely *on account of*, this absolute difference or separation.[3]

This is what Levinas finds so appealing in Plato's references to the "Good beyond being" (*epekeina tês ousias*) in *Republic* VI 509b. The Good, as the principle of all being, lies nonetheless beyond it. The Good conditions being precisely by sharing nothing of it. Jean-Marc Narbonne, in *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*,[4] has already argued that Levinas finds in Plato the formal lineaments of a radically transcendent relation, wherein one term ('being') is conditioned by another (the 'beyond being') while remaining *separated* from it. Separation (*chorismos*) is therefore seen as the core Platonic ingredient of Levinasian transcendence.

My goal in this article is to argue that, in order to conceive transcendence, Levinas deploys Platonic separation in three ways: *metaphysically*, in the relation between creator and creature; *semantically*, in the relation between meaning and sense; and *affectively*, in the relation between a desiring self and its desired aim. In each case, Levinas is enacting the formal structure of transcendence inherited from Plato. In his reading of creation *ex nihilo*, a creator conditions a creature which remains 'atheistic,' independent, and separate from its creator. In his account of unique sense, meaningful content is shown to rely on a one-way address or orientation to the Other without, however, reducing to it. And finally, in his discussion of metaphysical desire, the Other awakens a longing in the subject which will never be satisfied through possession or consumption. We find here three deployments of separation.

Each of these deployments belongs to a key moment of Levinas's thought in the first half of the 1960s. Metaphysical separation proceeds from Section I.D of *Totality and Infinity*; semantic separation from Section I.B; and affective separation from Section I.A. All of them also appear in the essay "Meaning and Sense," albeit to varying degrees. These cases of separation make up some of Levinas's most iconic concepts from that period and, together, they illustrate why Levinas repeatedly calls his thought in the 1960s a "return to Platonism"—as he does in "Résumé de *Totalité et Infini*" (1961), "Signature" (1963), and "Meaning and Sense" (1964).[5]

To shed new light on Levinas's Platonism, this article will proceed in two steps.[6] It will start by presenting Narbonne's claim that Levinas conceives transcendence through a retrieval of the Platonic concept of separation (*chorismos*), especially through a reading of the relation between being and the Good beyond being of *Republic* VI 509b (§1). Then, it will lay out the formal structure of this relation (§2), showing how Levinas deploys it in three ways: metaphysically (§2.1), semantically (§2.2), and affectively (§2.3). The upshot of this analysis is that Levinas's Platonism is not merely accidental or extrinsic, but rather integral, to several of his key conceptual developments in the first half of the 1960s. We therefore start at the beginning, with Levinas's retrieval of Platonic separation (*chorismos*).

1. Levinas's Retrieval of Platonic Separation (*Chorismos*)

In *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*, Jean-Marc Narbonne argues that the Platonic *epekeina* or 'beyond' furnishes Levinas with his own conception of transcendence.[7] In *Republic* VI

509b, the Good is said to condition the immanent order of essences while maintaining its absolute *separation* from it. Separation, so Narbonne contends, becomes the core Platonic ingredient of Levinasian transcendence.[8]

Now, the term "separation" (*chorismos*) often refers to the distinction between the forms and their sensible instances. Plato's reality is *layered*, divided between a sensible realm of becoming and an unchanging, eternally abiding realm of being which houses the forms. Above these two realms towers the Good, understood as a creating and nurturing power over both being and becoming. Plato presents us, then, with a double transcendence, going from becoming to being, and from being as a whole to the absolute, to 'something' which cannot be integrated within the horizon of what surrounds us, and which is thereby absent from its economy.[9]

Between these two kinds of Platonic separation—the separation of sensibles from forms, and of forms from the Good—Levinas prioritizes the latter. This is not to say, of course, that Levinas entirely dismisses what we may call the "eidetic separation" between forms and sensibles. He uses it, for instance, in "Meaning and Sense" (1964) and "Resumé de *Totalité et Infini*" (1961) when distinguishing between ethics and culture. Ethics is, for him, "the first intelligible, before all cultures."[10] Cultures may express or embody ethical meaning, however imperfectly; but this meaning lies *before* culture; it is invariable. Like the relation between forms and sensibles, ethics is "presupposed by all culture" but "does not belong" to it.[11] It remains separate, unchanging.[12]

However, the structure provided by the separation between forms and sensibles is not enough for Levinas. This is because the ethical commandment comes, not from a form, but from an absolute alterity. The relation between the self and this otherness, then, cannot be analogous to that between self and form, since forms are still items of knowledge, hence attainable by a knowing self. It must be a relation with something that resists any kind of integration, something *absolutely* separate. Levinas thinks that he can discover this relation in Plato's 'Good beyond being':

> Greek metaphysics conceived the Good as *separate* from the totality of essences, and in this way... it caught sight of a *structure such that the totality could admit of a beyond*.[13]

Michael Morgan concurs with this assessment when he indicates that Levinas is primarily concerned, not with the separation "of the Forms from the phenomenal world," but with

the separation "between all that is part of our lived world, our ordinary world, and what is genuinely transcendent, the Good."[14] Levinas is fundamentally concerned, then, with what we may call *absolute* separation.

Absolute separation is the name of Levinas's Platonic inheritance. It allows him to avoid two dangers associated with a description of transcendence. He avoids reducing the Other to the Same and dissolving the Same into the Other. The first mistake belongs to a philosophy of immanence such as Hegel's, according to which we "come into possession of being when every other… vanishes at the end of history."[15] The second mistake belongs to a philosophy of mystical transcendence which "situates elsewhere the true life to which man, escaping from here, would gain access in privileged moments of liturgical, mystical elevation, or in dying."[16] Neither alternative conceives transcendence radically enough. Real transcendence must preserve the relation between terms; it cannot culminate in a monism wherein one term swallows up another. For in that case, there would be no transcendent relation—consisting of both a transcending and a transcended term—but only a totalizing wholeness.

Levinas is thus dissatisfied with "the transcendence of [certain] religions," marked by a "submergence in the being toward which [one] goes."[17] Real transcendence consists not in losing or in dissolving the subject but, in direct opposition to mysticism, it consists in "maintaining the I in the transcendence."[18] It must address the following formal problem: "How, in the alterity of a you, can I remain I, without being absorbed or losing myself in that you?"[19] The 'You' must remain absolutely other, and the 'I' must remain itself, despite relating to each other.

This non-reductive relation contrasts with the transcendence commonly associated with mysticism. Mystics *unite* with the transcendent. They become like the dewdrop which "slips into the shining sea."[20] When the dewdrop slips into the shining sea, nothing is left of the dewdrop; yet the sea gets no bigger. Just as a dream vanishes upon awakening, or as the sun eclipses the moon, so also the dewdrop loses itself in the oneness of the sea. This kind of transcendence is not radical enough for Levinas. It turns transcendence back into immanence insofar as it fails to uphold the polarity between self and other. It privileges *one* of these poles at the expense of the other. In this way, "immanence always triumphs over transcendence."[21]

What is required is a transcendence of separation, rather than one of integration. There must be separation between transcended and transcending terms. Levinas makes this clear when he claims that the relation between the Same and the Other must neither "cut

the bonds a relation implies"—that is, make the terms so separate as to dissociate them entirely—nor "unite the same and the other into a Whole," which would likewise implode the relation by erasing their duality or polarization.[22] The Same must be conditioned by the Other—have its principle *in* the Other—without reducing to it. To describe this relation is Levinas's task.

Now, it is Levinas's conviction that Plato provides a model for understanding how such a relation is possible. Formally speaking, Plato outlines "a specific structure of terms in relation,"[23] one in which one term (the 'beyond being') conditions another ('being') but is not "included in the count with it."[24] The two terms do not belong together. The relation between 'being' and the 'beyond being' in *Republic* VI 509b presents Levinas with what Narbonne calls a "differentiation of levels" (*dénivellation*): a difference different from all other differences, an alterity that is "resistant to any synthesis":[25]

> For the idea of totality, in which ontological philosophy reunites—or comprehends—the multiple, must be substituted the idea of *a separation resistant to synthesis*.[26]

Narbonne argues that Levinas finds this "separation resistant to synthesis" in Plato, despite the totalizing tendencies of his thought.[27] In fact, Narbonne claims, it is not *just* Plato, but Plato "in his Neoplatonic filiation"—especially through the filter of Plotinus—who offers Levinas the tools to resist a univocal thinking of sameness.[28] In Plato himself we still find an ambiguity concerning the status of the Good. Sometimes it appears as "beyond essence," and sometimes it is placed *within* the realm of essences as its last or ultimate item.[29] Only later will Neoplatonists resolve this ambiguity by insisting on the absolute transcendence of the Good. Levinas's reading would therefore surpass the conception of the beyond found explicitly in the *Republic*.[30]

What we find in the *Republic* is a series of salient metaphors indicating the special status of the Good, a status which could still be intra-intelligible, no matter how elevated. Plato's Good is different from other forms since "we do not know [it] exactly"; it "seems too high" to be attained; and it "surpasses in beauty" even knowledge and truth.[31] But the Good is still placed "at the last limits of the intelligible world" as its "most brilliant" or "most excellent" item.[32] In fact, Plato never says of the Good that it is "beyond being" in an unqualified sense. Rather, he says that the Good is beyond being *in majesty and power*. This could mean that the Good rules like a king in the realm of being.[33] For just as a king 'exceeds' ordinary people yet belongs to them, so would the Form of the Good—as the

cause of all other forms—transcend them yet belong to them. That is to say: the Good is not a form *in the same sense* as those caused by it.

Levinas recognizes just as much. In *Otherwise than Being*, he betrays a suspicion as to the less radicalized sense of transcendence implied by Plato's famous formulation from *Republic* VI 509b: "The beyond being, *being's other* or the *otherwise than being…* has been recognized as the Good by Plato. It matters little that Plato made of it an idea and a source of light."[34] By framing the Good as an idea—as a form *among* other forms in a *continuum*—Plato would have momentarily annulled the radical transcendence that, for Levinas, constitutes the true core of his teaching.

The true teaching of Platonism, the one to which Levinas returns, is a teaching of *separation*. The Good is separated and detached from being while still bearing a *relation* with it. The principle is not of the same nature as that for which it is the principle; it does not belong to the order of what it determines. As a result, Narbonne thinks that we cannot speak here merely of an *ontological* separation—as we might when discussing forms and sensibles—since the principle precisely goes beyond the level of ontology. Rather, we can only speak here of a separation *in relation to ontology*.[35] This separation, though unfaithful to the *letter* of the *Republic*, coheres with Plotinian and Neoplatonic readings of the Good as absolutely transcendent of all being.[36] Such is the argument first advanced by Narbonne, and recently taken up by commentators like Michael Morgan and Sylvian Roux, who see in Levinas an anachronistic reading of Plato's Good along Neoplatonic lines.[37] What they have not yet shown is how Levinas's key conceptual developments from the first half of the 1960s are deployments of this same Platonic structure of transcendence. Our task is to show how this structure is deployed.

The structure at stake here, then, is one wherein two terms are related but without belonging to the same space where that relation could be drawn. The terms share nothing in common: they are not parts of a whole, members of a body, or instances of a form. They are accordingly understood neither in terms of a larger context nor in terms of each other. This means that they cannot be reduced to a mediating concept, nor can they be reduced one to the other. And yet, one term must still *condition* another term. This structure, which for Levinas has Platonic precedent, underpins any ethics of alterity, based as it is on the reception of a commandment from an absolute exteriority. But this Platonic structure seems highly aporetic; it leaves us in a state of puzzlement. Can this kind of relation really obtain between two terms? Levinas shows us how.

2. Three Kinds of Separation

Levinas inherits a Platonic problem, more so than a solution. He must describe a relation that abides by two formal features. First, the terms in the relation must be separated by a distance that cannot be bridged. There is no totality toward which their multiplicity tends. But second, and despite that, one term must serve as the principle (*arché*) of another, such that it conditions the latter. Levinas's challenge is to fulfill both requirements at once. How is it possible for one term to be conditioned by another while remaining entirely separated from it?

Levinas shows how this is possible through his analyses of creation, discourse, and desire. Each of these concepts articulates the formal structure laid out so far. Each of them accordingly leads to one of three kinds of separation: *metaphysical*, *semantic*, and *affective*. These different kinds of separation, in turn, enact different aspects of Plato's Good as that which *engenders*, *enlightens*, and *entices*. Like the sun in Plato's allegory of the cave, the Good engenders living beings, providing them with "creation, growth, and nourishment" (§2.1: metaphysical).[38] It also enlightens them, making them intelligible (§2.2: semantic). And finally, like the sunlight that attracted Plato's freed prisoner, it entices beings; it is an absolute *telos*, that for the sake of which "any soul does what it does" (§2.3: affective).[39] The Good is the principle of creation, intelligibility, and desire, yet it remains *separate*: it conditions but is unconditioned, makes intelligible but is unintelligible, awakens desire but is unattainable.

By deploying the formal structure of transcendence in his analyses of three distinct phenomena—that of creaturehood, of discourse, and of desire—Levinas seeks two things. First, he wants to show that a relation of absolute separation is not just an obtuse theoretical puzzle for historians of philosophy but has deep phenomenological relevance.[40] Secondly, by concretizing this purely formal structure metaphysically, semantically, and affectively, Levinas hopes to grant more intelligibility to it.[41] This is Levinas's usual mode of procedure: he concretizes the idea of infinity as the face, the *il y a* as insomnia, and so on.[42] Following Levinas's method, we will unpack these Platonic deployments one by one, beginning with his account of creation.

2.1. Metaphysical

Creation names a conditioning relation which preserves the separation of the conditioned term. This is different from the models of transcendence most commonly displayed in the

philosophical tradition. Causality,[43] analogy,[44] and emanatory models[45] are all guilty of assimilating terms within totalities.[46] In causality, the effect is contained in the cause, reducible to it; nothing is in the effect which was not originally in the cause. As a result, the effect is not fully separate from the cause, not fully other. For Levinas, it is only in the "idea of creation *ex nihilo*" that we can find "a multiplicity not united into a totality"[47]:

> The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is that this creation is *ex nihilo*—not because this represents a work more miraculous than the demiurgic informing of matter [cf. *Timaeus* 30a], but because the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from the father but is absolutely other than him.[48]

Levinas stresses the *nihil* of creation *ex nihilo*. The created being comes *from nothing*; it is not explained by what has come before. In ordinary, demiurgic causation, by contrast, the created being comes from the arrangement of previously existing matter, coupled with an idea from a divine intelligence. In that case, the creature is an intelligent assembling, an ordering of prior parts, hence reducible to its constitutive causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. The result is that the created being is not truly separate, not truly different from its principle.

Creation *ex nihilo* is different because it walks a tight rope between causality and novelty. It signals a dual commitment. On the one hand, it names a conditioning relation: the creator conditions the created. But on the other hand, the created being is not made up of something which already existed. *It comes from nothing*. Something radically new emerges, something not already contained in a previous cause. Creation *ex nihilo* is thus capable of respecting "at the same time the absolute novelty of the I and its attachment to a principle."[49] It can fulfill the two requirements listed earlier: a conditioning relation between separated terms.

The problem, of course, is that this relation appears impossible. In the context of monotheism, the notion of creation *ex nihilo* describes the relation between the finite and the infinite. But the infinite is assumed in its limitlessness to be synonymous with totality. To be infinite is to be all-encompassing, and the finite conversely is allowed only to be a moment within the infinite. Levinas must thus rethink the infinite as admitting "a being outside itself which it does not encompass."[50] This is possible only if the infinite is seen, not as the complete extension of being, but as lying *beyond* being—hence allowing for a separate existent to take on being:

> Infinity is produced… in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being. Thus, relations that open a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension to leave a place for a separated being exists divinely.[51]

The infinite, of course, has no limit. But Levinas sees this limitlessness not in terms of an all-extensiveness, but in terms of an escape from every ontological limitation. The infinite "is produced," or becomes what it is, through a "contraction" away from being. This means that the infinite does not compromise its limitlessness by creating a separate being, as would happen if it were identical to an all-inclusiveness. Instead, by placing the infinite *beyond* the level of ontology, Levinas allows it to remain limitless even as something *else* takes on being.

Levinas's goal here is twofold. He must ensure that the infinite does not deplete itself in accommodating a separated being; and he must simultaneously conceive the separated being *positively*, in its own terms. The concept of creation *ex nihilo* fulfills both exigencies. On the one hand, it indicates a *creative infinity*, hence an infinity that admits a being outside itself. On the other hand, it refers to a separate being coming *from nothing*, hence irreducible to what has come before. When seen together, these two elements describe a transcendence which does not revert to immanence. One term is transcended by another—has its principle in another—while remaining separate from it, irreducible to it. We may thus "speak of creation to characterize entities situated in the transcendence that does not close over into a totality."[52]

Surprisingly, Levinas finds this relation prefigured in Neoplatonism. Commenting on the procession of being from the Good, Levinas says that "the concept of a Good beyond being announces a rigorous concept of creation."[53] This is due to the fact that "Plotinus conceived the procession from the One [or the Good] as compromising neither the immutability nor the absolute separation of the One."[54] So Levinas finds room to endorse a certain reading of the Plotinian emanatory model according to which one term (the One, the beyond being) is absolutely separate from another (the forms, finite being) while still serving as its principle. It is a question now of seeing whether this relation can be found in Plotinus's texts.

Everything hinges on understanding the Plotinian dictum that the One "makes what it does not have" (*poiei ha mê ekhei*).[55] For Plotinus, the One is the *maker* of the forms in which reality is shaped (*eidopoiei*); but it is, in itself, shapeless and formless.[56] The forms could not be said to exist without the One, since the One grants them their

unity and definite nature; but Unity itself is not definite, since it cannot be delimited by otherness. Any limitation on the One would indicate that it has a beginning and an end; that it has multiple parts and is not absolutely simple. To remain simple, the One must be formless, undefined. It can be the principle of forms only if it is not itself a form. *It makes what it does not have*. Or differently put, the One conditions all forms not *in spite of*, but precisely *owing to*, its not having form.[57]

As a result, the One is radically other than the beings it conditions. They are "as far apart as creator and creature must be."[58] Plotinus explicitly denies that the One is a totalizing unity within which everything else abides. He says that if the One were simply a collection of all things taken together, it would be their effect rather than their cause.[59] But since the One is the cause and principle of all things, it must be different from any one of them, and from all of them put together. "All things will be other than it, and it will be other than all things."[60] The One is thus other than beings, separate from them, precisely by serving as their principle.

Levinas has thus found a way to deploy or articulate the Platonic formal structure laid out above. He does not follow Plotinus in describing the first principle as an absolute unity admitting of no otherness. But he does follow Plotinus in saying that this principle conditions another term because of its absolute separation from it. "The absolute gap of separation that transcendence implies," Levinas says, "could not be better expressed than by the term creation."[61] Creation is now brought closer to Plotinian emanation in this one sense: they both allow for radical transcendence.

Beyond understanding the relation between creator and creature according to the model provided by *Republic* VI 509b, Levinas is also interested in the semantic nature of this Platonic relation. The realm of intelligibility is conditioned by a supra-intelligibility beyond knowledge and speech. Plato says that even Socrates is at a loss for words when asked to give an account of the Good; he has to revert to images and likenesses instead of speaking of the Good 'in itself.'[62] The conditioning relation between separate semantic realms is what, for Levinas, must be present in a correct account of meaning and discourse.

2.2. Semantic

Meaningful discourse, according to Levinas, relies on an Other who is *not* intra-discursive. The Other *to whom* I address my words is not a content expressed by my words; rather, it is its condition of intelligibility. A semantic separation arises between interlocutor and

content, albeit one that does not preclude their relationality. Discourse is only meaningful if I am oriented towards an interlocutor who lies beyond all meaningful content. As we will see, this is a reenactment of the structure of transcendence inherited from Platonism: one term (the interlocutor) conditions another (meaningful content or discourse) without ever reducing to it.

Levinas employs a few expressions to name this relation: signifier and signified,[63] meaning and sense,[64] and saying and said.[65] Each conceptual pair is a reformulation of the same structure of semantic separation. The first pair comes from *Totality and Infinity* (1961); the second from "Meaning and Sense" (1964); and the third from *Otherwise than Being* (1973). Since this paper deals with Levinas's "return to Platonism" in the first half of the 1960s, it will focus on this semantic relation exclusively as it appears in *Totality and Infinity* and "Meaning and Sense."

In "Meaning and Sense," Levinas argues that there would not be any meaning if it were not for the other person, for the interlocutor; there would be no sense in expression if there were no one *to whom* the expression was directed. 'Meaning' relies on 'sense,' on directionality, that is, on a relation of self to otherness. Such is the significance of its title. Levinas is here exploring the ambiguity in the French word *sens* as both 'sense' and 'direction.'[66] This becomes clear in his use of the expression *sens unique*, "unique sense" or "one-way street." Meaning, for Levinas, is produced only through the asymmetrical and unilateral relation that goes from the self to the Other as a kind of one-way traffic.[67] He claims that we can only understand a *signified*—the meaning deployed by the signs of a proposition—if we orient ourselves to the face as a *signifier*: "The meaningful refers to a signifier."[68]

The reason for this is simple. Any proposition that is simply 'floating in the air' is inherently equivocal. I can always project different contexts in which the proposition will acquire different meanings. The question then is: how do I determine the right context for a proposition? Unless I defer to your commentary as authoritative for setting the context in which I hear what you say to me, the range of possible contexts I could myself project for it will open a range of potential meanings. Nothing will ever have a univocal meaning.

So, to use an example proposed by Steven Hendley,[69] if I open a book at random and read, "It's a blue day," I will probably understand the phrase to mean that the day provokes sadness in some way. But this is not, of course, the only thing it could mean. It could also mean a cloudless sky. Or it could mean that the day is literally colored blue in

that everything, as far as the eyes can see, has somehow been rendered blue. The difference will depend on the context that I project for this phrase.

This is, however, only a matter of what answers a speaker would give in response to my questions about her phrase. I must either anticipate what the Other *would* say if I asked her to elaborate on her phrase or else hear it from her mouth. In any case, I can only understand a proposition *as* meaningful if it plays a role within a "field of questions and answers"[70] that is at least implicitly or virtually conversational, insofar as I must defer each interpretation to the commentary of a possible or actual interlocutor in order to establish the meaning of a phrase.

This is, in part, what Levinas means with his idea that meaning requires the face of the Other. Signs would be meaningless to anyone not already familiar with what it means to defer to an interlocutor. I cannot understand what Others say *as* meaningful without also appreciating the sense of deference that emerges insofar as I am their interlocutor. For even if I were oblivious to this fact, refusing to take somebody up as my interlocutor for several reasons, I cannot be *absolutely* oblivious—at least in principle—to this orientation to the face of the Other.[71]

Meaning is thus inseparable from the encounter with the face. But the face exceeds the system of signs since it *speaks* the signs. This leads to an astounding conclusion. The face or the interlocutor, the condition for the possibility of discourse, will always remain extra-discursive. At the end of "Meaning and Sense," Levinas acknowledges the Platonic character of this relation. He tells us that the "face" or the interlocutor "is beyond every disclosure, like the One of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*."[72] And yet, this does not preclude the interlocutor from relating to—and in fact *conditioning*—the domain of intra-discursive meaning. It does so without compromising its separation. "Plotinus conceived the procession from the One as compromising neither its immutability nor the absolute separation of the One."[73] The One has no share of being, despite conditioning all being. Similarly, the interlocutor *to whom* I address my words is not a meaningful content, but the condition *sine qua non* for all meaningful content.

The interlocutor, then, is comparable to the sun in Plato's allegory of the cave. It cannot be looked at directly, but it allows us to look at the things illuminated by it. We know that the eye cannot see visible objects such as a tree without light; analogously, the mind cannot know the forms without the One or the Good. But just as the sun—the source of light—is harder to see than the trees it brings to light, so too is the One or the Good less

knowable or meaningful than the forms it makes known, and which have their meaning through it.[74]

The conditioning relation between the Good and the forms is what Levinas adopts in his description of the relation between the interlocutor and meaningful content. But this relation to the Other as interlocutor, through which alone meaning is possible, is further qualified. Levinas views this relation *affectively*. The "absolute orientation" or "sense" is cast as "the Desire for the Other."[75] One term (the Desirable) conditions another term (the Desire) while preserving their separation. My Desire is awakened by the Desirable, but it will never unite with it. In what follows, we will qualify the orientation to the other person as interlocutor by means of this 'affective separation' between desiring and desired terms.

2.3. Affective

In the first chapter of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents a new account of desire as a desire that aims at an *absolute* otherness. As such, it desires the Other while respecting its remoteness and exteriority, its separation from the subject. This means that desire cannot attempt to possess or consume its object, reducing it to immanence. Any desire that seeks consumption does not aim at *absolute* alterity but merely at *relative* alterity—at something that, though initially exterior to me, will eventually become a part of me. Levinas therefore qualifies this desire as one that respects the Other's separation:

> Desire is desire for the absolutely Other. Besides the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches, and the senses one allays, metaphysics desires the other beyond satisfactions, where no gesture by the body to diminish the aspiration is possible… A desire without satisfaction which precisely understands the remoteness, the alterity, the exteriority of the other.[76]

"A desire without satisfaction": with this qualification Levinas points to a very specific *affective* relation between the subject and its aim. This relation "is not the disappearing of distance, not a bringing together." Rather, it is "a relation whose positivity comes from remoteness, from separation."[77] If the Other is *absolutely* transcendent, not reducible to myself and my world, then the desire which it awakens can never reach satisfaction, and the movement which it inspires can never reach completion. In other words, the self can never attain its desired object. The self lies at an unbridgeable distance from the Other. The

Other relates to the self at an affective level, propelling it to move, but the Other remains forever separated from it.

In what follows, I will explain this affective separation. The Other draws the self but refuses to satisfy the desire which it awakens. It reaches down into the immanent order of the self's affects and yet remains unattainable by the self. This is another deployment of the same Platonic structure laid out earlier: a conditioning relation between separate terms. The 'Good beyond being' of *Republic* VI 509b is also, for Plato, an absolute *telos*, that in view of which "any soul does what it does."[78] After explaining Levinas's conception of desire—what he calls "metaphysical desire"[79]—I will indicate how it deploys the Platonic structure of separation.[80]

What does it mean to call desire "metaphysical"? Metaphysics is, in fact, the first theme of *Totality and Infinity*. In the opening lines of chapter one, Levinas says, quoting Rimbaud, "'The true life is absent.' But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi."[81] Metaphysics arises from the *separation* between us and the true life. But this true life is characterized by nothing besides its absence: the true life *is* absent. It consists in "the elsewhere and the otherwise and the other,"[82] that is, in what is absent from my world. The desire awakened by this separation, *metaphysical desire*, is one which "tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other."[83]

As a desire directed towards that which remains, by definition, always and forever other, metaphysical desire must operate as a transcending movement. It will perpetually draw us outward and onward, always further afield from ourselves. Metaphysical desire is thus a transcending relation; but transcendence, let us recall, is defined by Levinas as a relation between the Same and the Other where the two terms remain *absolutely* separated from each other despite being in relation. For this separation to be truly absolute, Same and Other cannot be defined in terms of a dialectical or co-constituting relation between opposites. Each term must be understood out of itself and by itself (*kath'auto*).

This means that metaphysical desire cannot be understood as *need*. Need arises from a perceived lack within me; it never recognizes the other *for its own sake*, but only according to my own interests as an item for possible consumption. The transcendence involved in need is only a momentary one; it immediately ceases once the subject attains its desired object and returns to a state of complacent equivalence with itself. Otherness, in this case, is only an obstacle that must be overcome for its integration into the subject's life.[84]

Metaphysical desire must therefore escape the logic of need altogether. It must lie "beyond satisfaction and non-satisfaction."[85] This means that metaphysical desire does not just remain *unsatisfied*—as if perpetually striving towards a satisfaction which it is denied or delayed from attaining—but is fundamentally and by nature *insatiable*.[86] There is no eventual unity promised between the subject and its aim; the subject is tied to an aim that is maintained at an insurmountable distance. As a result, metaphysical desire, rather than finding itself placated, only grows stronger as one pursues it. This transcending movement is forever, and by design, incomplete, and not because in our finitude we fail to complete it.[87]

Having described Levinas's conception of metaphysical desire, we should inquire into its underlying Platonism. Peperzak has already suggested that the Platonic movement towards the Good functions as "an uprooting brought about by the experience of absolute otherness," and that Platonic asceticism can be seen as a voyage to a foreign land, leading us from the "here below" (*enthende*) towards another land "over there" (*ekeise*).[88] Levinas has recognized this aspect of Platonic *eros* as providing a precedent for his own conception of metaphysical desire. In his reading of Platonic *eros*, Levinas stresses its homelessness— the impossibility of any homecoming.

Levinas says that Diotima rejects Aristophanes' myth of an *erotic* homecoming.[89] In fact, Diotima describes *Eros* as "homeless"—an attribute that is not merely accidental. In its very essence, *Eros* lies midway between presence and absence, always in transition between the 'here below' of mortal life and the absent life of the gods. *Eros* does not fully belong to either realm. Not of the Olympians, it cannot access their holy dwelling place; but not fully human, it also cannot make its home here on earth. As such, *Eros* is "shoeless and homeless"; it sleeps on the ground of doorsteps and waysides "without bedding."[90]

We find here a Platonic conception of *eros* that is closely aligned with Levinas's metaphysical desire. Its aim is not a homecoming, not the recuperation of something lost, but the discovery of something new. Levinas says just as much when he catches sight of a non-nostalgic *eros* in Plato:

> Might the Platonic myth of love as offspring of abundance and poverty [*Poros* and *Penia*] be interpreted as the indigence of wealth itself, as the desire, not for what one has lost, but absolute Desire…? Has not Plato, in rejecting the myth of the androgynous being presented by Aristophanes, caught sight of the non-nostalgic character of desire and philosophy?[91]

Aristophanes does not have the final word on *Eros*. Diotima's myth of *Eros*'s parentage tells a different story. *Eros* is born of *Poros* and *Penia*, of Plenty, Overfullness or Positivity, but also of Poverty, Want or Negativity.[92] *Eros* has an irreducible element of negativity. This negativity is not meant to be overcome or sublated but rather emphasized. The intermingling of wealth and poverty does not lead to the end of poverty, but to what Levinas calls "the indigence of wealth itself."[93] *Eros* is wealthy enough to throw itself generously onto a movement abroad, far away from the homely and the familiar; but this wealth is also indigent insofar as it does not seek to have its generosity remunerated by the attainment of a desired object. As such, *eros* is not merely conditionally desirous, but absolutely so. Levinas calls it an 'absolute desire': a desire no longer conditioned or predicated on a lack waiting for fulfillment.

Absolute desire sketches out a specific trajectory towards the Good. It does not circle back to its starting point in a nostalgic movement of homecoming. Rather, it moves forward, never again to coincide with itself. As a result, in the words of Stanley Rosen, "each movement of desire is radically incomplete, other than itself."[94] Drew Hyland also presents *eros* as seeking a *new* wholeness, one which it has *never* had before.[95] This is not a movement of reconciliation, redemption, and return. Platonic *eros*, at least in this view, does not result in self-coincidence. The self's affects are conditioned by the Good, drawn toward it, but this movement is left incomplete by the very nature of the Good as absolutely separate.

3. Conclusion

I have described three ways in which Levinas concretizes or deploys a formal structure of transcendence inherited from Platonism. This formal structure is, indeed, quite radical. It indicates a conditioning relation between terms that share *nothing* in common. This leaves us in *aporia*. After all, if two terms bear a relation, then they seem to have at least *something* in common, namely, their relation. A relation marked by absolute separation would be an impossibility for thought. And yet, it is precisely this relation which Levinas finds at work in the Platonic interaction between 'being' and the 'Good beyond being.' To grant further intelligibility to this relation, and to show that it cannot be dismissed, Levinas argues that separation is fundamental for a correct account of creaturehood, discourse, and desire. In each of these cases, Levinas is through and through a Platonist, enacting different aspects

of the Good as that which engenders *metaphysically*, enlightens *semantically*, and entices *affectively*. The result is that Levinas's "return to Platonism" is not just a passing remark but is integral to his project, displaying itself in three of his key conceptual developments from the first half of the 1960s.

More broadly, Levinas's return to Platonism is part of his search for "the meaning of transcendence," a search conducted through the double movement of formalization and concretization.[96] At first, he describes transcendence *formally* by turning to the history of philosophy. He looks at "the history of thought" to identify "the most general form" this transcendence has taken.[97] Clues are found in Plato, Descartes, Bergson, and others, though we have focused exclusively on Plato as the most cited figure in *Totality and Infinity*. Then, Levinas locates concrete situations in which this formal conception is *accomplished*, as in the phenomena of creation, discourse, and desire. These concrete phenomena can only be understood in light of the formal conception; but the formal conception, in turn, is clarified or specified through its concrete deployments.[98] Future work must be done to explain such a peculiar methodology.[99] For it is in this pendular movement between formalization and concretization that Levinas seeks to grant philosophical sense to the *aporia* of separation. What he realizes is that only an absolute separation leads to radical transcendence; but an absolute separation supposedly severs any relation between terms. To describe a relation between absolutely separated terms is thus Levinas's central task, which he never ceases to undertake. It leads him perpetually beyond. It makes him stand at the edge of words.[100]

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[1] GCM: 76.

[2] GCM: 200, fn. 23.

[3] Levinas speaks of the self as being *primarily* in the accusative case, conditioned by the Other's call. To be a self means to be for-the-Other (see GCM: 75: "The extroversion of the interiority of the subject: he would make himself visible before baking himself a seer! … Here I am. A marvelous accusative: here I am, under your gaze"). The 'I' is given a meaning in responding to the Other. But the Other is "what I myself am not" (TO: 83); it is separated from, and irreducible to, the self. We thus find here two requirements: the self is *conditioned* by the Other, but the Other is absolutely *separated* from it.

[4] Narbonne 2006.

[5] Res: 386; DF: 295; MS: 58. For an English translation of Res, see Peperzak 1997: 120-122.

[6] This focus on Levinas's Platonism does not come at the exclusion of his Judaism. This becomes clear, for instance, in the way that Levinas deploys Plato's 'Good beyond being' in his account of creation. Since Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" there has been a tendency to view Levinas's Judaism as a questioning of Greek thought—as a questioning of maieutics, recollection, light, and presence. But this is not the whole story. When it comes to transcendence, Levinas discovers a mutual participation of Greek thought in Judaism and of Judaism in Greek thought. As he says, "The invisible in the Bible is the idea of the Good beyond being" (HA: 136). There is, according to him, a certain complicity and complementarity between Jewish religion and Greek philosophy because of transcendence: "Religion's recourse to philosophy… [is] a case of two distinct but linked moments in this unique spiritual process that constitutes the *approach* to transcendence" (ITN: 200). Platonism as a thinking of transcendence is thus brought close to the Jewish religion, since, for Levinas, "religion means transcendence" (ITN: 197).

[7] Narbonne 2006: 42.

[8] See Narbonne 2006: 42-57.

[9] See Halfwassen 1992: 221f., cited in Baltes 1997: 3-4.

[10] Res: 386.

[11] MS: 57.

[12] In defending Levinas's appropriation of Plato's 'eidetic separation,' I challenge a line of scholarship on Levinas's relation to Plato. The participation (*methexis*) of sensibles in their forms has often been cast as totalizing. Gonzales (2008: 53-56), for instance, says that the major difference between Plato and Levinas is participation in Plato and separation in Levinas. In a similar way, Achtenberg (2011: 182; 2014: 20) articulates this distinction as one between two types of relation to the Other: a relation based on participation and sharing, and a relation based on separation and respect for what cannot be shared. But this is to overlook that participation in Plato is not an annulment of separation. These concepts cannot be taken in dualistic or Manichaean fashion. Despite participating in the forms, sensibles do not reduce to them. They relate across an unbridgeable distance; they remain separate. As Milbank (2012: 323) phrases it, "Within [Platonic] participation, there is both a conjoining and a separating."

[13] TI: 102-103, my italics.

[14] Morgan 2019: 91.

[15] TI: 52.

[16] TI: 52.

[17] TI: 48. Levinas's dissatisfaction with "the transcendence of religions" refers, of course, not to revealed religions like Judaism, but to natural religions. Twice in *Totality and Infinity* he says that "there is no natural religion" (TI: 62, 117). This repudiation comes from a certain conception of natural religions as reducible to a wish for fusion with the numinous or sacred within immanence. In natural religions, the sacred is "filtering into the world" like a set of impersonal forces (DF: 232), like "faceless gods" who draw us to them and offer us an experience of false transcendence (TI: 142). True transcendence, for Levinas, requires the preservation of the separated subject.

[18] TI: 276.

[19] TO: 91.

[20] Arnold 1903: 266. The imagery of the dewdrop slipping into the sea derives from Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a narrative poem depicting the life and teaching of Prince Gautama Buddha. I take this poem as exemplary of the kind of transcendence which Levinas rejects. A subject, initially separated, returns to its original source and is dissolved therein. Regardless of whether this is a fair assessment of Buddhist doctrine, Levinas must have had some such understanding of it. After all, when describing the radical kind of transcendence enacted by Plato, Levinas goes out of his way to stress that such a notion was reached "without any contribution from an alleged Oriental thought" (TI: 102). At stake here is, perhaps, a critique of the Buddhist teaching of the "no-self" (*anatta*). Radical transcendence must preserve the reality of separated subjectivity, which cannot be rendered illusory. It is in *this* sense that *Totality and Infinity* is called "a defense of subjectivity" (TI: 26). I thus position myself against the idea that "the lexicon of Buddhist philosophy provides a fitting language with which to express Levinas' own decoupling of the subjective I from the metaphysics of identity" (Garrett 2013: 13).

[21] GCM: 78.

[22] TI: 48.

[23] TI: 223.

[24] See *Ennead* V.5.4, 12: "[The One] will not be included in the count with another one, or another number of any size." All references to the *Enneads* come from Plotinus 1966-1988.

[25] Narbonne 2001: 190-244; 2006: 43; 2007: 37-39. Even though Narbonne mentions a "differentiation of levels" in Plato, he does not show how Levinas retrieves *both* differentiations—the 'eidetic' separation of sensibles from forms, and the 'agathistic' separation of forms from the Good. In other words, Levinas is interested in *both* the separation of becoming from being, and the separation of being from the Good beyond being. The first is used, for instance, to differentiate the variability of history and culture from the universality of ethics, and the second to differentiate the universality of ethics from its ground in the other person. Moreover, Narbonne does not indicate that Plato's account of these separations is still too formal, and that Levinas's task, as a phenomenologist, is to concretize or deploy these relations. My task in this paper is precisely to make these additional points, showing that Levinas concretizes the relation between being and the Good beyond being in his account of creation, discourse, and desire.

[26] TI: 293, cited in Narbonne 2006: 44.

[27] See TI: 43 and PI: 49 for Levinas's critique of the totalizing tendencies found in Plato's conceptions of maieutics and recollection.

[28] Narbonne 2006: 44. See Levinas's positive references to Plotinian transcendence in TH: 31, 12, and EE: 189-190.

[29] See *Republic* VII 517b8-c1: "In the knowable realm, the Form of the Good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty." All references to the dialogues come from Plato 1997.

[30] Narbonne 2006: 49.

[31] *Republic* VI 505a, 506e, 509a.

[32] *Republic* VII 517b, 518c, 532c, cf. 526e.

[33] See Ebert 1974: 171 and Dodds 1928: 134f.

[34] OB: 19, cited in Narbonne 2006: 46.

[35] Narbonne 2006: 55.

[36] See *Ennead* I.3.5, 7f.; II.4.16, 25; III.9.1; V.5.6, 11; VI.2.17, 22f.; VI.6.5, 36f.; VI.7.16, 22f.; VI.8.9, 28.

[37] Morgan (2019: 100) says that Levinas's view of the Good is "anachronistic" as a reading of Plato; and Roux (2020: 276) says that Levinasian transcendence "may actually find its origin in Neoplatonism."

[38] Derrida 1978: 106. See also EE: 47: "Light… is since Plato said to be a condition for all beings."

[39] *Republic* VI 505e; *Gorgias* 499e.

[40] Plato's account of the Good in *Republic* VI 509b is still too formal. Part of Levinas's goal is to deploy or concretize it empirically. Such is his method, always oscillating between describing transcendence as a formal structure and concretizing it empirically: "The method practiced here does indeed consist in seeking the condition of empirical situations, but it leaves to the developments called empirical, in which the conditioning possibility is accomplished—it leaves to the concretization—an ontological role that specifies the meaning of the fundamental possibility, a meaning [otherwise] invisible in that condition" (TI: 173). This move to the concrete is part of what is *phenomenological* about Levinas's method: "The presentation and the development of the notions employed [in *Totality and Infinity*] owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is a search for the concrete" (TI: 28).

[41] See TI: 26: "The term 'production' [what we may call 'deployment'] designates both the effectuation of being (an event 'is produced,' an automobile 'is produced') and its being brought to light [*mise en lumière*] or its exposition (an argument 'is produced,' an actor 'is produced')." Levinas's deployment of Platonic transcendence metaphysically, semantically, and affectively has thus a double function: it concretely realizes a formal structure, and, in so doing, it grants further intelligibility to that structure.

[42] See TI: 50: "The infinite in the finite… the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name *face*"; TO 48-9: "I am going to characterize the *there is*, and the way that existing is affirmed in its own annihilation, by a vigilance without possible recourse to sleep [i.e.,

by insomnia]." Levinas hints at this general methodological approach at TO: 78: "I have just described a dialectical situation. I am now going to show a *concrete situation* where this dialectic is accomplished."

[43] See TI: 119: "To this problem the idea of causality can bring no solution…"

[44] See OB: 182: "Analogy . . . chains us to one another like galley slaves."

[45] See TI: 292: "The concept of a Good beyond Being… announces a rigorous concept of creation, which would be neither a negation nor a limitation nor an *emanation* of the One."

[46] On this point, see Hanson 2015 and Dalton 2006.

[47] TI: 104.

[48] TI: 63. Interestingly, right after this passage Levinas connects his description of creation *ex nihilo* with his account of paternity and filiality: "Filiality itself cannot appear as essential to the destiny of the 'I' unless man retains this memory of the creation *ex nihilo*, without which the son is not a true other" (TI: 63). The son proceeds from the father—is conditioned by him—but does not reduce to him, since the son is a different person entirely, a "true other." At stake here is a deployment of the formal structure of transcendence inherited from Plato, but now concretized in an intermediary way that is at once both metaphysical and affective—*metaphysical*, because it is the creation of a new being; *affective*, because it proceeds from love and desire (see again TI: 63), anticipating our description of affective separation.

[49] TI:119.

[50] TI: 103.

[51] TI: 104. Some scholars suggest that Levinas's account of creation *ex nihilo* ventures into the territory of Kabbalah (see Meskin 2007, Fagenblat 2021, Morgan 2021). The conjecture was confirmed in a late interview with Edith Wyschogrod (1989: 107) in which Levinas acknowledged "an evocation of the *tzimtzum*" in *Totality and Infinity*, even if in Kabbalistic fashion he refused to elaborate: "I won't go into that."

[52] TI: 293.

[53] TI: 292.

[54] MS: 63.

[55] *Ennead* V.3.15, 35. Jean-Louis Chrétien (1980) has written a study on the paradoxical phrase, "*le Bien donne ce qu'il n'a pas*." On the connections between Levinas and Plotinus, see Blum 2000: 101-103, Corrigan 2007, Izzi 2008, Schroeder 2008, Cohoon 2019, and Roux 2020.

[56] See *Ennead* VI.7.17, 41.

[57] See *Ennead* V.5.6, 1-11.

[58] Rist 1967: 27.

[59] See *Ennead* III.8.9.43-55.

[60] *Ennead* III.8.9, 54-55.

[61] TI: 293.

[62] *Republic* VI 506b-507a.

[63] See TI: 96: "The meaningful refers to a signifier."

[64] See MS: 47: "Do not meanings require a unique sense from which they derive their signifyingness?"

[65] See OB: 5-7.

[66] See Blum 2000: 100.

[67] See MS: 46 and Bernasconi 1990: 72-73.

[68] TI: 96.

[69] Hendley 2000: 9.

[70] TI: 96.

[71] My account of the relation between 'meaning' and 'sense' is indebted to Hendley 2000: 10.

[72] MS: 59.

[73] MS: 63.

[74] See *Republic* VI 507c-508c.

[75] MS: 52.

[76] TI: 34.

[77] TI: 34.

[78] *Republic* VI 505e; *Gorgias* 499e.

[79] TI: 33f.

[80] It is worth noting that Levinas's conception of affectivity is capacious, including not only metaphysical desire but also certain forms of pre-theoretical sensibility—such as fatigue and indolence in the early works (cf. EE: 29f.), and enjoyment or *jouissance* in *Totality and Infinity* (cf. TI: 110f.). These other forms of affectivity are fundamental for the formation of the subject and lay the ground for its desire toward the Other. My focus on metaphysical desire comes from the conviction that only *there* do we find a deployment of what we may call Plato's "agathistic separation" between 'being' and the 'Good beyond being.' Recall that Plato describes *two* kinds of separation, one between the Good and forms, another between forms and sensibles. What takes place in the earlier conceptions of affectivity, then, is a re-enactment of what we may call Plato's "eidetic separation" between forms and sensibles. Pre-theoretical sensibility or affectivity allows for the formation of a fixed, stable, putatively independent self from out of anonymous existence, much like the emergence of being from out of pure becoming.

[81] TI: 33.

[82] TI: 33.

[83] TI: 33.

[84] See TI: 129.

[85] TI: 179.

[86] My account of metaphysical desire is indebted to Allen 2007, 2009 and Dalton 2009, 2011.

[87] TI: 63.

[88] See *Phaedo* 117c, 61d, 66b-d; and Peperzak 1993: 43-44, 67-68.

[89] See *Symposium* 205e; and TI: 63.

[90] Symposium 203c.

[91] TI: 63.

[92] Symposium 203c.

[93] TI: 114.

[94] Rosen 1968: 217.

[95] Hyland 1995: 108.

[96] GCM: 200, fn. 23.

[97] TI: 33.

[98] See TI: 173 for hints of this methodology.

[99] I hope to investigate this methodological question in a future paper, tentatively titled "Levinas's Method: Between Formalization and Concretization."

[100] Warm thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful suggestions.