Alterity and Asymmetry in Levinas's Ethical Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT: Levinas’s first forays in ethics may be read as extensions of his engagement with Husserlian phenomenology. Levinas rejects Husserl's construction of alter ego, radicalizing it with his own alterity. Levinas similarly criticizes Martin Buber's reciprocity as reductive and insists that intersubjectivity is always asymmetrical. Levinas's application of his criticism of Husserl to Buber misconstrues Buber's dialogical philosophy and misvalues the notions of alter ego and intersubjectivity in Husserl. Levinas runs into the problem of solipsism, which he mistakenly identifies early on in Husserl as he struggles with the privileging of the Other. In place of Buber's relational subjectivity, we find in Levinas a form of the categorical imperative:

And the two walked on together (Gen. 22:6, 8).

One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity (Buber, 1970, 58).

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas’s earliest philosophical work directly engages the core problems of Husserlian phenomenology, specifically the concepts of intentional consciousness and the constitution of time through the encounter with the Other. Much of Levinas's philosophical study of time and intersubjectivity indirectly addresses the unanswered questions of Edmund Husserl’s fifth Cartesian Meditation, specifically whether his account of the constitution of intersubjectivity overcomes the risk of solipsism that follows his conception of intentionality: how does Husserl’s phenomenological account move from the recognition of a transcendental ego to the constitution of a community? Though Levinas's understanding of ethical response and responsibility is often attributed to his religious commitments, it proves helpful to concentrate on the Husserlian roots of Levinas's philosophical work. In this paper, I (a) explore how Levinas’s notion of alterity represents an intentional move away from Husserl’s conception of alter ego, (b) briefly review Levinas's criticism of Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, and (c) argue that Levinas’s responses to Husserl and Buber expose some weaknesses in his own ethical phenomenology.

Levinas critiques both Husserl's recognition of other people as like me, or alter ego, and Buber’s insistence that relation with another is reciprocal, because both approaches—on Levinas’s account—reduce other people to my own experiences of them, recognizing others as co-present and equal. Instead, Levinas insists that the Other person is irreducible to my experience of him/her, and so never present or co-present with me. I offer the following critique of Levinas’s dismissal of alter ego and reciprocity in Husserl and Buber: Levinas maintains that both engage other beings in the mode of knowing them, thus reducing them to our experience or
representation of them. In order to offer such a critique, I focus on two central concepts in Levinas’s thought: alterity and asymmetry. Alurity is the insistence that others always remain irreducible to representation. Levinas also insists that intersubjectivity is asymmetrical: the other is always above me, calling me, commanding me. Both alterity and asymmetry represent Levinas’s efforts to move beyond any philosophical consideration of the Other which begins with or is located in the subject herself.

Broadly speaking, Levinas’s earliest philosophical works all contain explicit critiques of Western philosophy, specifically the work of two of his teachers, Husserl and Martin Heidegger. I read his first forays into ethical phenomenology as extensions of his engagement with the central problems of Husserlian phenomenology, not only as reflections of any religious commitments on his part.1

1 The field of Levinas studies now includes a rigorous debate over the question of whether Levinas is best read as a philosopher driven by his own religious commitments. Though there remain a number of scholars who present Levinas in other (non-religious) contexts, the question of how Levinas’s Judaism finds expression in his philosophical writings remains a central concern. Claire Elise Katz notes some of the many difficult questions in her introductory essay to the Spring 2006 issue of Philosophy Today. Though it may seem disingenuous to avoid the possibilities of ‘Jewish thought’ in an essay on Levinas, Buber (and Husserl), I intentionally do not recognize what Katz describes as the “discipline” of Jewish philosophy or “the critical strategies in Jewish thought” (Katz 2006, 4). Katz is critical of trends in teaching continental philosophy that ignore the work of Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber, and others. Katz’s most recent book, Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013), turns to Levinas’s texts on Jewish education to build a fuller picture of his conception of subjectivity. Her arguments, which appear in a series of articles that precede this book, make a strong case that the often accepted distinction between Levinas’s philosophical and his religious writings is false:

Although Levinas insists on separating his two bodies of work – his philosophical writings and his Jewish writings – the distinction between them becomes increasingly blurred with his frequent introduction of citations from the Hebrew texts into his philosophy and by inflecting his Jewish writings with philosophical interpretations. (Katz 2005b, 160)

Martin Kavka also questions the distinction, though he disagrees with Katz:

If “Jew” can be translated into “Greek,” as Levinas thought it could, then the only substantive difference between Jewish and non-Jewish scholarship of Levinas should be that the Jewish scholars are perhaps, but not necessarily, better at transliterating Hebrew terms into English. If Levinas is correct, then his entire project hints at the more fundamental point that the view that Judaism and the West (or Judaism and Christianity, or Judaism and “paganism”) lie in contradiction to each other is a philosophical mistake. It is also a theological and a historical mistake. (Kavka, 2006, 71)

Kavka concludes that “the Jewish context of Levinasian thought really isn’t that important,” and “a study of Levinas’s Jewish context can give a fuller narrative left to concepts that seem vague in the philosophical writings” (76). I hope that my focus on what I am considering to be Levinas’s phenomenological texts, without attention to any early essays that explicitly focus on Jewish themes, will prove to bear philosophical fruit. Though I do not recognize an essential Jewish philosophical method or approach, I would disagree with those who claim that Levinas “remained, as it were, too much of a
While there is a great deal of literature and debate on the religious aspects of Levinas’s thought, the reading of Levinas which I propose brings to the fore Levinas’s misreadings of Husserl and Buber. Levinas misconstrues Buber’s dialogical philosophy as idealistic, and he mistakes Husserlian intersubjectivity as a mere content of consciousness. The criticism of Levinas’s earliest readings of Husserl extends to his essay “Intentionality and Sensation” (1965) and to his second major treatise *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974). The recovery of intersubjectivity in and through Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, as well as the ethical possibilities of Buber’s phenomenology, are meant to counter what I find to be Levinas’s own moral dogmatism and his insistence that the Other is always beyond the experiential reach of the self.

**Intentionality and Constitution**

Levinas’s presentations of time, presence, and alterity begin in many ways as a response to the work of his teacher, Edmund Husserl. In the discussion of intentionality in his 1930 dissertation entitled *Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Levinas writes:

> What is interesting about the Husserlian conception [of intentionality] is its having put contact with the world at the very heart of the being of consciousness. Intentionality is not the way in which a subject tries to make contact with an object that exists beside it. *Intentionality is what makes up the very subjectivity of subjects.* A subject is not a substance in need of a bridge, namely, knowledge, in order to reach an object, but that the secret of its subjectivity is its being present in front of objects. (Levinas 1995, 43, 41, 25)

Husserlian phenomenology provides Levinas with a version of subjectivity that opens up questions of meaning and relation; the phenomenological method that identifies an ego over-and-

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2 Derrida notes that “the thesis of Levinas is based only on texts that precede *Cartesian Meditations*” (Derrida 2003, 203-204 (n.4)). As is widely known, Levinas co-translated Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* along with Gabrielle Peiffer, and “introduced France to phenomenology” (See Katz, 2005a, 99).
against, or ontologically separate from, the world focuses attention on how individuals engage in and with the world.

In his masterful history of the phenomenological movement, Herbert Spiegelberg notes, “It is only in Husserl’s thought (not in Brentano’s) that the term ‘intentionality’ acquired the meaning of directedness toward an object rather than that of the object’s immanence in consciousness” (Spiegelberg 1960, 107). This claim, that intentional consciousness does not necessarily imply a reduction of transcendence to immanence, is a central point of contention in my reading of Levinas’s critique of Husserl. Stephen Tyman, among others, identifies this as the risk inherent in Husserlian phenomenology. He asks whether Husserl’s conception is an “untimely concession to an old German idealistic habit of mind” (Tyman 1983, 44-45). Tyman points out, however, that Husserl’s conception of intentionality implies that “[c]onsciousness is always already beyond itself; it has the characteristic of not being closed in a determinacy of its own being, but rather open to determination from without. Consciousness has essentially the proclivity of overstepping itself towards the world it encounters, and subsequently of defining itself in terms of this world, as a ‘here-within’ in opposition to the ‘there-without’ (Tyman 1983, 48). In a late essay entitled “Outside the Subject” and written for the eponymous collection of essays, Levinas recognizes this very aspect of Husserl’s thought, describing intentionality as an “[o]penness of thought onto the thought-of. ‘Openness onto’: a thinking that is not, however, a blind shiver of the mental, but that, precisely as intention, is a project: ‘project’ of a thought-of, which, though not cut out from the same mental fabric of thought, is ‘unreally’ inherent in it, and presents itself in thought as in-itself (Levinas 1993, 152). Put more simply by Maurice Natanson, “If anything, [Husserl’s] philosophy is ‘extrospective,’ moving toward phenomena as objects, in the broadest sense, or perceptual acts. This ‘glance’—to use Husserl’s language—of the phenomenologist is directed toward what is presented in experience, not toward a repository of mixed sensations within the psyche” (Natanson 1973, 43). Levinas’s conclusion, however, is that Husserl’s conception of intentionality prioritizes “presence” and “representation” (Levinas 1993, “Outside the Subject,” 158). The most important aspect of intentionality for Levinas is the limitation that it sets on the force or power of the ego's engagement with the world: intentional consciousness is unable to know completely that which it intends, especially when the object is another person. The discussions of totality, infinity, and beyond being in Levinas begin with this most basic assumption about Husserlian phenomenology.

Levinas’s attacks on egological phenomenology are focused on the inability in intentional life—that is in the ego’s intentions, or my experiences of other people—to do anything other than re-cognize the neighbor as another version, a mirroring, of me. In the early passage on intentionality in his dissertation, we can anticipate the later criticism: intentionality implies both that the subject is immediately engaged in the world and that the Other has been reduced to being an object of my attention.

The thoroughgoing critique of the reductive and totalizing consequences of the Husserlian phenomenological method appears throughout Levinas’s major works Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (1961) and Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence (1974). Many critics of this reading of Levinas point to his detailed readings of Husserl, suggesting that his own position reflects a sensitivity to the ethical possibilities of Husserl's phenomenology.
Others, however, have found the limiting reading of Husserl in Levinas’s work. Edith Wyschogrod writes, “For Levinas, consciousness is the power of consciousness: cognizing entails a foredisclosure of the object thus forcing the otherness of the object to become (in Levinas’s term) the Same” (Wyschogrod 1980, 46). Additionally, Richard A. Cohen reminds us of the balance or tension between the explicit identification of Husserl and Rosenzweig as influences in Totality and Infinity:

By defining consciousness as intentional from top to bottom, from the most transcendent to the most immanent significations, as intentional even in its own self-constitution, phenomenology sees no exit from the circuit of noema and noesis. The mercy and justice which Rosenzweig’s Star [of Redemption] sets up against the conceptual totalizing of “philosophy from Parmenides to Hegel,” also inspire Levinas in his opposition to the noetic-noematic totality of phenomenology. (Cohen 1988, 170)

Commenting on the development of Levinas’s critique of Husserl between the publication of his dissertation (1930) and Totality and Infinity (1961), Cohen continues:

Levinas’s criticism of phenomenology in 1930 and in 1961 is that Husserl founds representational thought on representational thought, that for Husserl consciousness is always and ultimately representational consciousness, a predicative synthesis…In contrast to 1961, where, enlisting Rosenzweig, Levinas criticizes Husserl in the name of ethics and justice, in 1930, in the Intuition book, Levinas criticizes Husserl under the influence of Heidegger, that is to say, in the name of being. Beneath representation he sees not more representation but presence to being, i.e., an ontological thinking. (Ibid., 173)

In Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics, Wyschogrod sketches the developing relationship between Levinas and Husserlian phenomenology, emphasizing, as Cohen does, Levinas's distaste for the representational consequences or nature of intentionality. First in significance is the “disappearance of the exteriority of the object”:

Levinas insists that since [sic] the underlying structures of representation and intelligibility are the same. Intelligibility, like representation, is in its clarity free from any jarring elements. What can be represented gives itself to us in all its being, is totally present. It becomes possible for that which is represented, that which is other than ourselves, to become through representation part of the same, that is, part of our projects, the consequence of our intentions. (Wyschogrod 2000, 38, 39)

Even accounting for distinctions of rhetoric and method between TI and OB, Levinas consistently identifies phenomenology with a reduction to the same and totalization. His explicit and implicit criticism of Husserl in both texts often draws in the work of Martin Buber. A brief sketch of Levinas’s treatment of both in his two major texts will serve to introduce a more detailed discussion of Husserl and Buber.
The preface to Totality and Infinity announces the distinction that Levinas draws between ethics and idealistic philosophy: “[I]nfinity overflows the thought that thinks it.” Infinity is not to be understood subjectively as “an incidental notion forged by a subjectivity to reflect the case of an entity encountering on the outside nothing that limits it, overflowing every limit, and thereby infinite” (Levinas 1969, 26). Instead, Levinas attributes infinity to that which remains outside the subject, for the infinity of the Other is alterity. The credit due to Husserl at the conclusion of the preface is close to ironic: Husserl has provided only a theoretical basis for ethics grounded in the “noesis-noema structure,” which for Levinas “makes possible this passage from ethics to metaphysical exteriority” (Levinas 1969, 29). Husserl’s ethics is theoretical because it does not recognize (perhaps “respect” is the better term) the alterity of the Other. Alterity, for Levinas, precedes and resists what he takes to be the subject-object formalism of intentionality (Levinas 1969, 38-39). This well-known narrative explicitly links Husserl’s work in the “Fifth Meditation” with Buber’s I-Thou, both in the formal structure of the relation with the Other, according to their accounts, and in the contemporaneity which follows from it (Levinas 1969, 67-68). As he credits Husserl, Levinas writes, “This work does not have the ridiculous pretension of ‘correcting’ Buber on these points. It is placed in a different perspective, by starting with the idea of the Infinite” (Levinas 1969, 69). Levinas mistakes Buber (and Husserl) as belonging to the idealistic tradition as Levinas presents it, standing in stark contrast to the ethical (and so infinite) approach he provides. Despite Levinas’s generosity of spirit, his disagreement with both Husserl and Buber is clear. “The claim to know and to reach the Other,” applied implicitly both to Husserl and Buber, is the exact failing of both thinkers’ works (Levinas 1969, 69). One consequence of the subject-object, alter ego and ego, and I-Thou structures of engaging the Other is the assumption, on Levinas’s part, that the terms are reversible. In other words, both the ego/I and the Other whom she engages appear simultaneously. For Levinas, ethics begins only when the Other is recognized as prior to the I. Earlier, Levinas asks more gently if “thou-saying does not place the other in a reciprocal relation, and if this reciprocity is primordial.” In the later pages of Section I (“The Same and the Other”), Levinas becomes more forceful: “He who speaks to me and across the words proposes himself to me retains the fundamental foreignness of the Other who judges me; our relations are never reversible. This supremacy posits him in himself, outside of my knowing...The interlocutor is not a Thou, he is a You; he reveals himself in his lordship. Thus exteriority coincides with a mastery.” (Levinas 1969, 101). This same identification of Husserl (and Buber) with idealistic philosophy generally—and representation, totality, and symmetry in particular—recurs in Otherwise than Being. Buber appears in the opening pages, credited here with a failure to never have “brought out in a positive way the spiritual element in which the I-thou relationship is produced” (Levinas 1981, 13). The appearance of my neighbor “lies outside the ‘thou’ and the thematization of objects” (Levinas 1981, 12). Husserl is introduced explicitly at the end of the introductory chapter in a way that suggests that his work on the naïveté of philosophy is itself naïve, replaced by Levinas’s appreciation of the Other as beyond intentionality (Levinas 1981, 20). In chapter two, Levinas concludes an extended discussion of internal time consciousness. He argues, “The thesis [in Husserl] that the non-intentionality of the primal retention is not a loss of

consciousness, that nothing can be produced in a clandestine way, [t]hat nothing can break the thread of consciousness, excludes from time the irreducible diachrony whose meaning the present study aims to bring to light, behind the exhibiting of being” (Levinas 1981, 34).

While there are substantial differences between Levinas’s two major texts, he consistently rejects Husserl’s approach to the other as reductive. According to Levinas, “Consciousness of…, correlative with manifestation, a structure of every intentionality, would…be, in Husserl, founding of everything that shows itself, or even the essence of all that shows itself” (Levinas 1981, 66).

Alter Ego

As he moves from the fourth to the fifth Cartesian Meditation, Husserl acknowledges the dual problems of solipsism and intersubjectivity. He asks, “As a natural man, can I ask seriously and transcendently how I get outside my island of consciousness and how what presents itself in my consciousness as a subjective evidence-process can acquire Objective significance?” (Husserl 1991, 83 [§41]). In his commentary on the Cartesian Meditations, Eugen Fink notes:

The theme of phenomenologizing, as disclosed by the reduction, is not a region or a new field of being, transcendental subjectivity in antithesis to the world, but that it is a constitutive process that must be comprehended as the object of phenomenologizing…Not the “members” of the correlation, but the correlation is the prior thing. It is not that subjectivity is here and the world there and between both the constitutive relationship is in play, but that the genesis of constitution is the self-actualization of constituting subjectivity in world-actualization (Fink 1993, 44-45).

Natanson argues that the world of the natural attitude (the Lebenswelt) has neither been “denied nor abandoned; it is, instead, reconstructed” (Natanson 1974, 42). Fink is on to something important: like Levinas, he views intentionality in the way that William James or John Dewey view experience, as an alternative to traditional philosophical dualities that tend to distinguish between individuals and worlds. One way of reading Husserl, for Fink, is as someone who pairs the emergence of subjectivity with this world-actualization. However, is this process simply another solipsism, as many—including Levinas—would have it?

Accounting for the situation of others in constitutive phenomenology is the trickiest aspect of Husserl’s attempt at an egological but non-solipsistic account of intersubjectivity. In the introduction to the “Fifth Meditation,” Husserl directly addresses the dilemma: “But what about other egos, who surely are not a mere intending and intended in me, merely synthetic unities of possible verification in me, but, according to their sense, precisely others? Have we not therefore done transcendental realism an injustice?” (Husserl 1991, 89 [§42]). Husserl provides what I see as the entrance for Levinas’s work in Time and the Other, where he concludes, “The doctrine may lack a phenomenological foundation; but essentially it is right in the end, since it looks for a path from the immanency of the ego to the transcendency of the Other. In fact, these questions are exactly fitted to phenomenological explication, indicated by the ‘alter ego’ and carried through in concrete work” (Husserl 1991, 89 [§42]). In other words, Husserl tries yet fails to
account for the Other solely as an aspect or content of my inner experience. He is immediately concerned with offering a description of the immanency of the Other in my experience that respects, for lack of a better expression, the transcendence of the Other. On my reading, the final reduction found in the Cartesian Meditations to a “primordial sphere” of existence deepens and signifies the sense of other. *Here I am*, and *there is an-Other*. The Other comes to be seen as both a content of consciousness and a phenomenon that points beyond itself toward radical otherness or separation. Husserl writes, “I can recognize that the Objective world does not, in the proper sense, *transcend* that sphere or that sphere’s own intersubjective essence, but rather inheres in it as an ‘immanent’ transcendency” (Husserl 1991, 107 [§49]). Levinas’s usages of “here I am”—recalling Abraham’s *hineini*, an annunciation of presence in the face of God (or readiness in the presence of God)—sounds dramatically distinct from Husserl’s pairing of egos and bodies.

We find that Husserl’s phenomenology of inner-time consciousness grounds his presentation of Other. Other consciousnesses appear, but only as aspects of the objects intended—as possibilities—while the personal character of the ego is constituted along with the world that is intended in “so to speak, the unity of a ‘history’” (Husserl 1991, 75 [§37]). The history of consciousness is not objective but personal, inseparable from the continuous transcending movements of consciousness: “[P]ast, present, and future, become unitarily constituted over and over again, in a certain noetic-noematic formal structure of flowing modes of givenness” (Husserl 1991, 75 [§37]). This is the limitation of transcendental subjectivity: *I* am my own flowing modality of consciousness, my own time, but the intentions through which I define myself involve broad horizons of possible experience, including histories and other people. Husserl identifies this dilemma as the border of transcendental experience and intersubjectivity.

The complexities of immanent constitution are bound up with questions of inner-time consciousness. Robert Sokolowski emphasizes that, for Husserl, “[r]eal things are in objective time and immanent objects are in inner time, the self-constituting stream of consciousness is not in any sort of time. It is beyond temporality” (Sokolowski 1964, 532). This is a significant point of concern in relation to the question about the constitution of other people. Sokolowski notes that the “independence” of the “ordinary objects of external experience, the units we perceive in the world, are on the first level of temporality. They are in objective time, the time which is measured by clocks” (Sokolowski 1964, 533). It is far from certain that Husserl does *not* reduce external objects and their own temporality to inner-time. At this stage in his work, Husserl grounds objective temporality in inner-time; there is a distinction to be made, however, between (a) describing the constitution of objects in and through inner-time and (b) the much stronger idealist claim that inner-time grounds the genesis of external objects. Sokolowski recalls that thematization is a second or further act, beyond “constitut[ion] as immanent objects” (Sokolowski 1964, 543). This may be no small point in relation to Levinas’s dismissal of Husserl’s conception of alter ego:

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4 For a helpful discussion of the varieties or modes of internal time consciousness, see Mary Jeanne Larrabee 1989.
Constitution of immanent objects is achieved by a performance of subjectivity; not in the sense of a distinct act which constitutes them, but in the sense of a constant, creative stream of partial intentions or phases that are added together...Although inner constitution explains how immanent objects arise and are experienced, it does not explain everything in them. There is a foreign element in them about which temporal constitution has nothing to say. (Sokolowski 1964, 549, 550)

For Sokolowski, Husserl more than allows for a surplus in the object of intention that is not reduced either to a single intention or to a stream of intentions. The “foreign element” in those we encounter (in Husserl) always outpaces the course of the intention.

Jacques Derrida’s dissertation, The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy, also addresses this set of problems. He writes in the preface, “Transcendental intersubjectivity, originary presence of the ‘alter ego’ in the monadic ‘ego,’ is, it seems, the impossibility of an originary that is absolutely simple; is that not also the kernel of a primitive existential thesis on which no reduction can get purchase, what not only cannot be ‘suspended’ but which must be admitted at the very origin of the act of reduction and of its conditions of possibility? (Derrida 2003, xl). Other consciousnesses appear in the horizons of transcendental experience. I may intend the Other as an object of the world, as I would perceive a table or a chair. In regards to the intention of another human being, the cat makes its way out of the bag: “By its remarkableness and multiplicity, that content already indicates the many-sidedness and difficulty of the phenomenological task. For example: In changeable harmonious multiplicities of experience I experience others as actually existing and, on the other hand, as world Objects (Husserl 1991, 91 [§43]). In ordinary language, this translates into ‘I take things at my own pace. My experiences and your experiences are not identical; we may both sit in a concert hall and enjoy a piece of music performed, but I hear or experience the flow of music differently than you do. And when I turn to you, I have an experience of you; I can see you as an object in the world and sense that you are also a conscious human being.’ Husserl recognizes that the Other cannot be reduced to being a mere phenomenon in or of the ego’s intentional life. In fact, Levinas’s own turn toward infinity as the metaphor for the relationship with the Other complements Husserl’s descriptions of the intention of the Other as both always pointing beyond the action and the object intended.

Peter Schmiedgen partially concurs with my analysis, placing Levinas “between Husserlian phenomenology and Cartesain infinity” (Schmiedgen 2000, 146):

In Husserl…the trace of the infinite other within is not to be found. In Levinas, [however,] we find a thinking, or bearing witness to, an other that radically transcends the limits of such reasonable harmonies and the worlds defined by them. The relation to the other is a relation to an un-synthesisable “infinity here and now,” rather than to an infinity understood as an “always more to come,” or indeed even as a repetition of the past (Schmiedgen 2000, 159).

My intention of ‘mere’ physical presence points beyond materiality through an ongoing process of encounter, adjustment, reaction, and further experience. Husserl writes:
The Other’s animate body and his governing Ego are given in the manner that characterizes a unitary transcending experience. Every experience points to further experiences that would fulfill and verify the appresented horizons, which include, in the form of non-intuitive anticipations, potentially verifiable syntheses of harmonious further experience. Regarding experience of someone else, it is clear that its fulfillingly verifying continuation can ensue only by means of new appresentations that proceed in a synthetically harmonious fashion (Husserl 1991, 114 [§52]).

Husserl defines this encounter, to borrow from Walter Kaufman’s translation of Buber’s I and Thou, as a “bodily confrontation” (Husserl 1991, 97 [§44]). I first perceive the Other, necessarily, as and through his or her body. Husserl writes, “The ‘Other’, according to his own constituted sense, points to me myself; the other is a ‘mirroring’ of my own self and yet not a mirroring proper, an analogue of my own self and yet again not an analogue in the usual sense” (Husserl 1991, 94 [§44]). For Husserl, this apprehension recalls for me what “my body would look ‘if I were there’” (Husserl 1991, 118-9 [§54]). However, assimilative apperception does more than simply awaken in me the awareness that here I (physically) am, and there is an-Other like me: “The external body over there receives analogically from mine the sense, organism belonging to another ‘world’, analogous to my primordial world” (Husserl 1991, 118 [§54]).

The experience of someone else, for Husserl, is phenomenologically bumpy. I perceive the Other, then the world around us, the commonality of this world, and the other looking at this world (Husserl 1991, 124 [§55]). Husserl works from this encounter toward what he calls phenomenological realism. If apperception is the concomitant intending of the horizons of transcendental experience (nature, culture, history), and intentionality is the basic movement of even the most isolated ego, then we may say that both my consciousness, here, and the alter ego (as animate organism, looking back at me) are responsible for the constitution of a new horizon of experience: intersubjective time. Husserl’s description is particularly telling for Levinas: “A certain mediacy of intentionality must be present here, going out from the substratum, ‘primordial world’, (which in any case is the incessantly underlying basis) and making present to consciousness a ‘there too’, which nevertheless is not itself there and can never become an ‘itself-there’. We have here, accordingly, a kind of making ‘co-present’, a kind of “appresentation” (Husserl 1991, 109 [§50]). From this description of encounter as co-presence, Levinas forms his second criticism of Husserl, which is a criticism he also makes of Buber’s conception of reciprocity.

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5 See also Husserl 1991, 110 [§50]:

Since, in this Nature and this world, my animate organism is the only body that is or can be constituted originally as an animate organism, the body over there, which is nevertheless apprehended as an animate organism, must have derived this sense by an apperceptive transfer from my animate organism, and done so in a manner that excludes an actually direct, and hence primordial, showing of the predicates belonging to an animate organism specifically, a showing of them in perception proper. It is clear from the very beginning that only a similarity connecting, within my primordial sphere, that body over there with my body can serve as the motivational basis for the “analogizing” apprehension of that body as animate organism.
Alterity

Levinas maintains that the mediacy of intentionality that brings forth alter ego, and intersubjectivity, intimates otherness. Intentionality presents the Other as another like I am or would be; this is the meaning of *alter ego*. For Levinas, the Other is always one step beyond, one moment in the future:

Alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship – that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneousness. The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not…It can be said that intersubjective space is not symmetrical. The exteriority of the other is not simply due to the space that separates what remains identical through the concept, nor is it due to any difference the concept would manifest through spatial exteriority. The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual (Levinas 1987, 84).

Levinas’s break with Husserl is decisive. Husserl’s account of apperception is an aspect of the evidencing or “further experience” of the other we find in the “Fifth Meditation.” In his dissertation, Levinas echoes Husserl when he writes, “The aspects which we see at any given moment always indicate further aspects, and so on. Things are never known in their totality; an essential character of our perception of them is that of being inadequate” (Levinas 1995, 22). I do not agree with Levinas’s equation of alter ego with sameness or totality. Certainly, for Levinas, I can never make the Other fully present to myself. This is the meaning of *alterity*. The engagement with the other is not an act of comprehension, is not ‘formed’ through appresentation, and does not result in co-presence. The critical moment in Levinas’s argument is the identification and rejection of *presence* as the modality of the encounter of intentional consciousness with the Other.

The impossibility of another being present for me (or ‘making’ another present) is for Levinas the ultimate success of philosophy, even if that success is accidental: “The fact that philosophy cannot fully totalize the alterity of meaning in some final presence or simultaneity is not for me a deficiency or fault. Or to put it another way, the best thing about philosophy is that it fails. It is better that philosophy fail to totalize meaning—even though as ontology it has attempted just this—for it thereby remains open to the irreducible otherness of transcendence” (Levinas 1986, 22). Presence, for Levinas, is not achieved by a subject. Levinas’s phenomenology of the ethical begins with the inversion of Husserlian intentionality. In *Otherwise than Being*, he writes that “the refusal of presence is converted into my presence as present, that is, as a hostage delivered over as a gift to the other” (Levinas 1998, 146, 151).

Claire Katz argues that Levinas exactly “overturn[s]…the modern subject,” especially in relation to the identification or “[link]age” of responsibility to the subject’s freedom. She claims, “Levinas inverts this relationship in a manner that undercuts the free/not free distinction altogether. In Levinas’s account of responsibility, the subject’s obligation to the other is not

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6 Levinas later (and often) repeats this claim: “All knowing qua intentionality "intentionality" already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently non-adequation” (Levinas 1969, 27).
chosen, nor can it be chosen. We cannot recuse ourselves from our obligation because it is not something that we chose in the first place” (Katz 2005a, 100). This is the major theme of Time and the Other: the ego emerges into a consciousness that is present, but not in time, and that remains in need of the Other for entry into what would be any meaningful presence. This, too, will be a point of contention with Buber: responsibility appears in Buber’s work as a consequence of the freedom that recovers the relational self, not as a command imposed as a central aspect of an asymmetrical encounter with another.

Alterity displaces alter ego when Levinas rejects the possibilities of synchrony, copresence, and reciprocity. He does so explicitly in Time and the Other:

To be sure, the other that is announced does not possess this existing as the subject possesses it; its hold over my existing is mysterious. It is not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light. But this precisely indicates that the other is in no way another myself, participating with me in a common existence. The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place…Alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship—that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneous-ness (Levinas 1987, 75, 84).

The Other must be absolutely distinct, with no exceptions, or else we maintain an alter ego and find ourselves stuck in solitude. Husserl’s phenomenological discovery of the alter ego provides insufficient grounds for a robust account of the experience of alterity. The infinite begins, so to speak, with and through alterity. The thesis of Time and the Other, Levinas writes, “consists in thinking time not as a degradation of eternity, but as the relationship to that which—of itself unassimilable, absolutely other—would not allow itself to be assimilated by experience; or to that which—of itself infinite—would not allow itself to be comprehended” (Levinas 1987, 32).

Husserl, however, acknowledges the problem raised by Levinas and is aware of the existence of another primordial sphere for which he cannot ultimately be ‘phenomenologically responsible’:

Experience is original consciousness; and in fact we generally say, in the case of experiencing a man: the other is himself there before us “in person”. On the other hand, this being there in person does not keep us from admitting forthwith that, properly speaking, neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. If it were, if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same. These two primordial spheres, mine which is for me as ego the original sphere, and his which is for me an appresented sphere -- are they not separated by an abyss I cannot actually cross, since crossing it would mean, after all, that I acquired an original (rather than an appresenting) experience of someone else. (Husserl 1991, 109 [§50], 121 [§55])
Alter ego is not reducible to the intending ego. One does not have an original or generative experience of the other. Husserl's arithmetic is clear: the intention of another yields two. Husserl both maintains that subjective time represents an original mode of appearance of Objective temporality to a particular subject, and that “that which is primordially incompatible, in simultaneous coexistence, becomes compatible: because my primordial ego constitutes the ego who is other for him by an apperceptive apperception, which, according to its intrinsic nature, never demands and never is open to fulfillment by presentation” (Husserl 1991, 119 [§54]).

Co-existence does not make for a totality of one ego; each consciousness is uniquely “here,” both spatially (the body vis-à-vis other bodies) and temporally (my stream of experience). There is no intention of the Other that is open to fulfillment by presentation. Daniel Birnbaum convincingly argues this in The Hospitality of Presence: Problems of Otherness in Husserl's Phenomenology:

The operations performed in order to reach the sphere of primordial consciousness have often been described as a continuous reduction of otherness, ultimately leaving nothing but a pure presence, from which all traces of transcendence and otherness have been excluded. But what if the most fundamental level of egological self-presence is displayed as containing an irreducible form of otherness, i.e., a co-presence of the Other operating within the sphere which is my very own? The road towards transcendental solitude, away from the common world, would thus by necessity reach a point where one cannot but turn around and return to the world. Primordiality would appear not as a permanent position, but rather as a dialectical turning-point – a passage through ownness towards levels of otherness (Birnbaum 1998, 92).

Levinas's contention that alterity marks a relationship with the future (one aspect of asymmetry) is offered as a rebuttal to Husserl's presentation of alter ego. Birnbaum points out:

From Husserl's point of view, this is clearly a mistake. The Other, understood as a time-constituting alter ego, is encountered neither as “past” not as “future.” Both suggestions are equally misguided, because the Other... is not part of my temporal horizon. All experience, according to Husserl's view, takes place in the living present, but this does not imply that the Other is reducible to my present, since the alter ego is not presented at

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7 Birnbaum convincingly argues that the success of Husserl’s efforts in Cartesian Meditations is found in the “[a]mbivalence…concerning the givenness of the Other... The solipsism of the primordial sphere must be seen as a methodological stance which cannot be maintained as anything but a transitional position; the primordial sphere has an inner tendency to transcend itself. (Birnbaum 1998, 156)

See also Alweiss 2009, 1, 54: “What marks out a weak and a strong methodological solipsist is that both assign the explanatory role for existence to the subject (be this the individual, the social or transcendental self) and not to entities in the world... Although phenomenology begins with the first person perspective, it advocates neither the strong nor the weak version: first, it allows us to study an objectivity which is not reducible to mental processes and goes beyond an investigation of mental states; second, it assigns the explanatory role to the object or state of affairs and not, as it may appear, to the subject.”
all. Husserl takes great pains to make this clear: the otherness of the Other must be respected (Birnbaum 1998, 168).

Birnbaum, then, reads Husserl in a way similar to Sokolowski. Birnbaum also acknowledges the limitations of intentionality that Husserl recognizes: alter ego is always beyond any given presentation (or intention) of it. Birnbaum restates Husserl’s rather simple acknowledgement that the other is not reducible to my experience of her.

I do not find Levinas’s early rejection of alter ego convincing. Husserl accounts for the constitution of the world and world time through the intendings of radically individuated egos:

The coexistence of my <polar> Ego and the other Ego, of my whole concrete ego and his, my intentional life and his, my “realities” and his -- in short, a common time-form -- is primally instituted; and thus every primordial temporality automatically acquires the significance of being merely an original mode of appearance of Objective temporality to a particular subject. In this connexion we see that the temporal community of the constitutively interrelated monads is indissoluble, because it is tied up essentially with the constitution of a world and a world time (Husserl 1991, 128 [§55]).

It is not clear to me that Husserl’s phenomenology is violent towards otherness in the way Levinas warns us of idealist philosophy in TI. The ‘temporal community’ is predicated on an interrelationship that is anything but solipsistic or reductive. In fact, the entry into ‘world time’ is dependent on an encounter with another. Husserl’s co-existence may not be Levinas’s common existence. Moving away from Husserl’s conception of inner-time (and experience), Levinas suggests that there is but one meaningful time, the relation with the other. This is an implicit rejection of intentionality and of the mode of experiencing the other in inner-time, which Levinas attributes to Husserl. The first lines of Time and the Other read, “The aim of these lectures is to show that time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other” (Levinas 1987, 79).

Some thirty years later, in the second Preface to the work, Levinas re-emphasizes the centrality of the problem of time in his thought:

Is time the very limitation of finite being or is it the relationship of finite being to God? It is a relationship that, nevertheless, would not secure for a being an infinitude as opposed to finitude, an auto-sufficiency as opposed to need, but that would signify, beyond satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the surplus of sociality. This way of examining time still seems to me today to be the vital problem. Time and the Other presents time not as the ontological horizon of the being of a being [Heidegger] but as the mode of the beyond being, as the relationship of “thought” to the other, and --through the diverse figures of the sociality facing the face of the other person: eroticism, paternity, responsibility for the neighbor -- as the relationship to the Wholly other, the Transcendent, the Infinite. Time is a relation or religion that is not structured like knowing -- that is, an intentionality. Knowing conceals re-presentation and reduces the other to presence and co-presence.
Time, on the contrary, in its dia-chrony, would signify a relationship that does not compromise the other’s alterity (Levinas 1987, 31).

The religious—not intentionality—is this diachronous relation to the Other. For Levinas, the infinite is the very relation with the Other, understood in terms of the non-adequation of intentionality and the constitution of temporality. This theme of Time and the Other is repeated in Face to Face with Levinas:

Time fashions man’s relation to the other, and to the absolutely other or God, as a diachronic relation irreducible to correlation. ‘Going towards God’ is not to be understood here in the classical ontological sense of a return to, or unification with, God as the beginning or end of temporal existence. ‘Going towards God’ is meaningless unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person. I can only go towards God by being ethically concerned by and for the other person (Levinas 1986, 23).

In Time and the Other, the sphere of ownness is translated into the situation of the self in solitude, suffering, before death. The reduction to this sphere of ownness knows no self-made resolution. For Levinas, Munchausen disappears into the sand. Early in Levinas’s career, the Other becomes the beacon or possibility of salvation because the Other brings the possibility of time. “The other is the future,” he writes, and “[t]he very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future. It seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone, or to speak of a purely personal duration” (Levinas 1987, 77). Yet again, he writes: “The situation of the face-to-face [with the Other] would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship” (Levinas 1987, 79).

Resistance to this reading of Levinas against Husserl focuses on the essay “Intentionality and Sensation,” as well as Otherwise than Being (1974)—specifically Levinas’s presentation of “substitution” in his last major work. Though these later works do reveal the depth of Levinas’s knowledge of Husserl’s work, they do not mark a change in his overall assessment of the limits of Husserl’s own thinking about otherness and intersubjectivity. At the end of the opening section of “Intentionality and Sensation,” Levinas asks, “But did not the rediscovery of the intentionality of consciousness, and the radicalization of its conception, announce the disappearance of this mythical ‘mental object?’” (Levinas 1998, 138). I am skeptical that Levinas’s sensitivity to Husserl, evident in this complex essay, marks a shift in his reading of Husserl that is later reflected in Otherwise. We find in Otherwise that intentionality still “bestows meaning which it animates;” though this is tempered through Levinas’s recognition of the role of sensation, “the nought thought that is lived” (Levinas 1981, 139). He cites Husserl, “By presentative of intuitively re-presentative contents, we understand the contents of intuitive acts that, by means of bearers, refer unequivocally to the contents of the object that correspond to them in a determined way and present them to us in the manner of imaginative and perceptual
sketches.” Still, Levinas is not arguing that sensation—as opposed to intentionality—is “found on the objective side, as an embryonic object or as a brute fact requiring interpretation” (Levinas 1981, 140). The most suggestive reading of Husserl that Levinas offers here refers to Husserl’s *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*. Levinas identifies Husserl's own “peculiar question” in particularly Levinasian terms: “Is not the object of intentionality already older than the intention? Is there diachrony within intentionality?” Consciousness, then, may be considered “senescence and remembrance of things past” (Levinas 1981, 143, 145). The intentionality-in-motion, which Levinas evokes, suggests to him that Husserl has “perceive[d] a corporeity in the depths of sensation, that is, a liberation of the subject vis-à-vis the very petrification of the subject, a gait, a freedom that demolishes structure” (Levinas 1981, 150).

Does this evocation of his own anti-Idealism in Husserl’s writing on time mark a shift in Levinas’s reading of or relation to Husserl? Turning even briefly to *Otherwise*, where themes of substitution and “remembrance of things past” recur, I suggest not. In a section titled “Sensibility and Signification,” Levinas insists that “despite” Husserl’s contributions, “a fundamental analogy is constantly affirmed by Husserl between the cognitive consciousness of…, on the one hand, and axiological or practical intentions, on the other” (Levinas 1981, 65). In what follows, I hope to tie together the strands of “the past that bypasses the present” in *Otherwise* (mentioned above in “Intentionality”), “substitution,” and the insistence on diachrony as a criticism of Husserl and Buber alike.

Levinas, in a central claim of *Otherwise*, places responsibility for the Other (or, perhaps simply the Other herself) before the subject, identifying this variously as “the null-site of subjectivity” (Levinas 1981, 10). If “the present is essence” in Levinas’s terms, “the unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes form the hither side of my freedom, form a ‘prior to every memory’, an ‘ulterior to every accomplishment’, from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence.” This prior-to or “past…provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other as a hostage” (Levinas 1981, 11, 10, 11). The introduction of “substitution” flows into a criticism of Buber, who gets introduced somewhat immediately and then dismissed quickly in the text. Levinas writes, “If the relationship with illeity were a relationship of consciousness, ‘he’ would designate a theme, as the ‘thou’ in Buber’s I-thought relation does, probably – for Buber has never brought out in a positive way the spiritual element in which the I-thou relationship is produced” (Levinas 1981, 13). Substitution, for Levinas, is described in terms of passivity “more passive still than the passivity of matter…Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it.” Invoking the language of Abraham in the biblical book of Genesis, Levinas argues that “the word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone” (Levinas 1981, 114). Though the early mention of Buber is not sustained, Levinas’s reading of I-Thou conforms both to his later (and earliest) criticism of Husserl – even if we grant that Levinas’s reading of Husserl is as sophisticated as it is extensive. Neither Husserl nor Buber recognize the priority of alterity and the eternity or immemorial ground of asymmetry.

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On Buber

Levinas’s criticism of idealist philosophy, and his turn to the relationship with the Other (in place of mere subjectivity), suggests to me a sympathy with Buber that Levinas would not accept. Does Buber repeat the mistakes that Levinas attributes to Husserl? Is his dialogical philosophy grounded in a conception of reciprocity that reduces alterity and diachrony to presence and synchrony? Levinas consistently and explicitly criticizes Buber for exactly these mistakes, but I find that his reading of Buber is often fast, convenient, and inaccurate. Levinas does not grasp the essence of Buber’s dialogical philosophy. Even when he acknowledges its value, he dismisses it as another mode of the totalizing discourse of Western philosophy that he finds antithetical and violent to the alterity of the Other.

Though Husserl rarely appears explicitly in Buber’s writing, scholars recently have turned their attention toward Buber’s phenomenological inheritances.9 We find Husserl, at the head of the philosophical family tree in which Buber situates himself, alongside Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger. Buber fits well in this tradition; he was a student of Wilhelm Dilthey, whose work also deeply influenced Husserl.10 Dialogue, grace, and philosophical anthropology in Buber’s work all map onto conceptions we find in Husserl. Reading Buber through Husserl helps for pressing the case to reconsider Levinas’s criticisms of Husserlian phenomenology.

Buber identifies Husserl as “the man in whose school and methods the most powerful attempts of our time to construct an independent philosophical anthropology made their appearance” (Buber 1965, 159). Philosophical anthropology, simply taken as the approach in philosophy that addresses the particular individual in concrete situations, shares a great deal with Husserl’s own attempt to provide an alternative to psychologism, historicism, and materialism. Philosophical anthropology emerges as an attempt to liberate the subject (and its ‘You’) from the naturalistic forces that have submerged the individual under any variety of causal forces. Buber credits Husserl with raising the questions and setting the method for its approach to the “fundamental communion” of the human, though Buber regards Husserl as intentionally distanced from “his school” (Buber 1965, “What is Man,” 161, 160). Dialogical philosophy, with its emphasis on human relation, emerges in Buber after he dismisses other philosophical possibilities. Buber wants to promote a form of subjectivity that is, for lack of a more useful expression, non-reductive. This I/You subject (moral subject or relational self) opposes the traditionally autonomous and rational subject. We should not confuse the role of freedom in Buber’s work with the category of autonomy. Following Dilthey and Husserl, he resists the subjugation or suppression of self and Other to any a priori force. This withdrawal or recovery of the relational self from the ‘forces of causality’ appears throughout Buber’s work.

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9 We find brief mention in Buber’s “What is Man?” (originally published in 1938; see Buber 1965), and later in “The Philosophical Anthropology of Max Scheler” (Buber 1945). Two recent articles in Husserl Studies address his conceptions of intersubjectivity and encounter in relation to Husserl and Aron Gurwitsch. See: Arvidson 2003 and Nam-In Lee, 2006.

Buber traces his notion of “fundamental communion” to Husserl’s critique of “individualistic anthropology”: “Man’s essence is not to be found in isolated individuals, for a human being’s bonds with his generation and his society are of his essence” (Buber 1965, “What is Man,” 160). The emergence from determinism, whether philosophical, psychological, or religious, begins with the recognition of a type of intentional consciousness that puts the world at the heart of the subject, and it requires that the subject always be engaged in and take responsibility for the task of creation. Buber provides a concrete example of the ethical possibilities that follow Husserl’s conception of intentionality.

In “On the Psychologization of the World,” written in 1923, Buber clearly delineates the connection between his rejection of psychologism and the emergence of his emphasis on relation in place of autonomous subjectivity:

That the world faces me and that between us the real happens, this essential basic relation from which our life receives its meaning is injured if the world is so far removed within the soul that its non-psyche reality is obliterated, that this fundamental relation of I to the world ceases to be able to be a relation of I to Thou. After this essential disturbance the world is perhaps only something in me with which I can certainly concern myself, as with other things in me to which, however, I cannot legitimately, cannot in full truth, say Thou (Buber 1967, 144).

Two things strike me about this argument: the image of the world—and the self, for that matter—disappearing into the “soul” reappears throughout Buber. More importantly, it becomes clear that Buber finds some allegiance with Husserl (especially Husserl’s “Crisis” writings); dialogue is not meant to supersede intentionality and intersubjectivity. Intentionality opens the possibility of dialogue after it liberates the subject from psychologism. Buber wants to recover what he calls “an immediate connection of I and world, a connection, however, that signifies no fusion, but a connection of relation” (Buber 1967, “Psychologization,” 144). Again, this connection is obscured when the world disappears into the soul, or the soul into the world—the rival options of idealism and materialist or naturalistic philosophy. (As we will see, this question appears with great dramatic flair in I and Thou.)

The choice Buber offers in I and Thou, “Distance and Relation,” and elsewhere, is not between dialogue and intentionality; it becomes apparent because of intentionality. Buber offers “the primal setting at a distance” and “entering into relation” as the two tropes of intentional life: “That the first movement is the presupposition of the other is plain from the fact that one can enter into relation only with a being that has been set at a distance, more precisely, has become an ‘independent opposite’” (Buber 1999, “Distance and Relation,” 4). Buber characterizes “the act and the work of entering into relation with the world” as “synthesizing apperception” (Buber 1999, “Distance and Relation,” 6-7). Neither the I, nor the Other, are determined by causal, divine, psychological, naturalistic, or other forces.

At the conclusion of Part Two of I and Thou, Buber tells an odd existentialist tale of a person “overcome by the horror of the alienation between I and world.” He may take refuge in two philosophical alternatives: either the “I is contained in the world, and that there really is no
I, and thus the world cannot harm the I,” or “that there really is no world, and thus the world cannot harm the I” (Buber 1970, 121-122). This tension reappears in “Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour” with the description of another individual in crisis. For Buber, the choice that must be made finds its “discursive expression [in] the old philosophical quarrel between indeterministic and deterministic views of the world.” These are “two irreconcilable-reconcilable sides of the same happening,” and “[p]hilosophy does justice to the life experience in which the moment of beginning the action is illumined by the awareness of freedom and the moment of having acted is overshadowed by the knowledge of necessity” (Buber 2000, “Prophecy,” 173). There is a third alternative to these double binds. In “Pyschologization,” Buber asks, “Are they things between which we must choose, are they opposites for which no third thing exists that overarches this opposition, overcomes it?” (Buber 1999, “Pyschologization,” 145). This third thing is Buber's dialogical philosophy, which is prophetic in the face of what constitutes apocalyptic alternatives. These terms and the options they describe are described as types of faith. Prophetic faith invites or affords the “real working power of the dialogical relationship between divinity and mankind, within which compassion can answer man's turning of his whole being back to God” (Buber 2000, “Prophecy,” 176). Apocalyptic faith, on the other hand, represents a kind of “dogmatic encystment” (Buber 2000, “Prophecy,” 177). It offers certainty and devalues freedom and choice, whereas Buber's more tough-minded faith offers a task and no guarantee. “Prophecy,” he writes, “has in its way declared that the unique being man is created to be a center of surprise of creation...The future is not fixed...Because and so long as man exists, factual change of direction can take place, toward salvation (Buber 2000, “Prophecy,” 178). He concludes “Prophesy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour” with the instruction that “[o]ne cannot strive for immediacy, but one can hold oneself free and open for it; one cannot produce genuine dialogue, but one can be at its disposal” (Buber 2000, “Prophecy,” 186).

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11 This tale reminds the reader of Levinas’s own description in which insomnia is the inability to escape interiority by oneself (Levinas 1987, 48-49).

12 See Buber 2000, “Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour,” 172:

The man who, without particularly reflecting on himself, allows himself to be borne along by the bustle of life, still at times unexpectedly finds himself confronted by an hour which has a special and even an especially questionable connection with his personal future. Among his possible reactions, two stand out as essential. The man of whom I speak can now in the next instance renounce the beaten track, draw forth the forgotten primal forces out of their hiding places, and make the decision that answers the situation; he cherishes the until-now-unsuspected certainty of thus being able to participate in the factual decision that will be made, on the ground of becoming, about the make-up of the next hour and thereby in some measure also about the make-up of the future hours. Or, in contrast, he banishes all impulses of this nature and resolves, as one says, not to let himself be fooled—not by the situation, which is just an embroiled situation and not by himself, who is just a man come to grief—for everything hangs together invincibly with everything and there is nowhere a break where he could take his hold. So he surrenders anew to the turmoil, but now, so he thinks, out of insight.
Here, as in *I and Thou*, dialogue does not suggest the reduction of two to one; freedom and passivity, relation and election, presence and communion, and faith all reflect a self in need of another and incapable of fulfillment—one that is both responsible for and dependent on another. Freedom and passivity (“will” and “grace”) exist in equal tension through dialogue. Freedom is an essential component of relation; without it, both I and You are reduced to a third element, identified as common and brought together by a force outside of each of us for which neither can claim responsibility. Grace represents Buber’s recognition that the intentional ego is not *solus ipse*; grace is what limits will, and by so doing, it limits the ability of the self to establish (or force) intersubjective relation. Together, freedom and passivity lead Buber to press the case for responsibility and engagement, and not a faith predicated on having been created with and commanded in many ways toward the Other.14

**Asymmetry**

In his three essays that directly focus on Buber, Levinas recognizes in Buber’s *I-Thou* all of the seemingly necessary components of alterity and asymmetry: the positing of the Other as exterior, not a content of consciousness, not the object of a comprehension, not reducible to an appearance or mere phenomenon, and, unlike other objects in the material world, not given over to a reduction to usefulness (Levinas 1967). In addition to sharing a basic understanding of the I-it relationship, Levinas and Buber share a concern that philosophy mimics the I-it by thematizing and totalizing the Other: “The I-Thou relation consists in confronting a being external to oneself, i.e., one that is radically other, and to recognize it as such…A real access to the otherness of the other does not consist in a perception but in thou-saying, and this is at once an immediate contact and an appeal which does not posit an object” (Levinas 1967, 138).

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13 See Buber 1967, 62:

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed. The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: An action of the whole being must approach passivity, for it does away with all partial actions and thus with any sense of action, which always depends on limited exertions.

14 See Buber 1967, 100-101:

In the It-world causality holds unlimited sway. Every event that is either perceivable by the senses and “physical” or discovered or found in introspection and “psychological” is considered to be of necessity caused and a cause…The unlimited sway of causality in the It-world, which is of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature, is not felt to be oppressive by the man who is not confined to the It-world but free to step out of it again and again into the world of relation. Here I and You confront each other freely in a reciprocity that is not involved in or tainted by any causality; here man finds guaranteed the freedom of his being and of being. Only those who know relation and who know of the presence of the You have the capacity for decision. Whoever makes a decision is free because he has stepped before the countenance.

Earlier in the text, he writes: “As long as the firmament of the You is spread over me, the tempests of causality cower at my heels, and the while of doom congeals” (Buber 1970, 59).
What is wrong for Levinas with Buber’s I-Thou? Levinas charges that Buber formalizes the relationship, and, as a consequence, the absolute distance between subject and Other is broached or filled (Levinas 1994, “Martin Buber’s Thought and Contemporary Judaism,” 17). Furthermore, he argues, the “Between” that characterizes the I-Thou relationship is a “mode of being: co-presence, co-esse” (Ibid., 23). In other words, Buber does to the Other something similar to what Husserl does: he reduces it to the sphere of sameness. The most well known objection is that the essence of reciprocity is reversibility; Buber does not acknowledge—or is ignorant of—the asymmetry of the relationship with the Other. As Neve Gordon has written, the conflict is between reciprocity and an ethics that privileges the Other (Gordon 1999 and 2004).  

Buber intentionally places dialogical reciprocity beyond the rival philosophical alternatives of idealism and realism in order to avoid the negative consequences of each: “Subjectivism is psychologization while objectivism is reification of God; one a false fixation, the other a false liberation; both departures from the way of actuality, both attempts to find a substitute for it” (Buber 1970, 167). Levinas’s alternative, the privileging of the Other, may represent in Buber’s language a “dogmatic encystment” that reifies the divine. A reasonable case may be made that Buber, by actually maintaining an emphasis on the address of the Thou, avoids slipping back into the subjectivist metaphors that Levinas rejects while remaining unable to escape them (part of Derrida’s well-known criticisms in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics.”) Levinas’s insistence on asymmetry creates a philosophical double bind: the subject cannot reach beyond itself to relate with another, because this inherently and unavoidably does violence to the Other; as a consequence, the self is imprisoned in itself. Levinas’s insistence that the relation with the Other is non-intentional resolves itself in the assertion that the Other is always master over the self.

How does Levinas account for the asymmetry of the relation with the Other? The simple answer, that the Other is not an object in my temporal stream of experience, does not satisfy this question. How does he explain the Other as height and destitution—two critical aspects of asymmetry? Levinas’s description of eros and femininity at the end of Totality and maternity at the end of Otherwise, coupled with his similar attempts in Time and the Other, suggest a not so subtle gendering of self and Other. The less generous reading finds the widow and the orphan to

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15 These criticisms of Buber are reviewed in many of the essays that form the collection Levinas and Buber: Dialogue and Difference. In his contribution, Robert Bernasconi points out that “Levinas—from the beginning—places Buber in line with Western philosophy and sets him at work in and with the problem of knowledge” (“Failure of Communication as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas,” in Levinas and Buber, 75). Maurice Friedman restates Buber’s own refutation of the “charge of formalism” and reversibility:

It is false...to say that the meeting is reversible. Neither is my Thou identical with the I of the other, nor his Thou with my I. To the person of the other I owe the fact that I have this Thou, but my I—by which here the I of the I-Thou relationship is to be understood—I owe to saying Thou, not to the person to whom I say Thou (“Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas: An Ethical Inquiry,” in Levinas and Buber, 119).

(The passage from Buber appears in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, 697).
be poor women who make demands on men who, while they may feel guilt or shame because of their relative strength, also are obligated by this position of power to provide for their female neighbors. The kinder reading offers that, because of the personal experiences of vigilance, insomnia, solitude and/or solicitude, the self can empathize with the Other. Empathy, a projection of one's own condition onto the Other, is rejected by Levinas. To found the height and destitution of the Other in the solitary ego's need for salvation through the Other is not a Levinasian option. Asymmetry and alterity are primordial conditions that precede subjectivity itself.

Levinas has fixed the meaning of the Other as both master and destitute, and the relationship with the Other as duty. The dogma of asymmetry marks the final overcoming of the philosophical tradition, in favor of an allegiance to what Levinas recognizes as a particular 'Jewish ethic.' James Hatley argues that "devastation," a notion he borrows from Oona Eisenstadt, "is not an undoing of my animation but its inescapable preface, its heartbeat" (Hatley 2006, 85). It strikes me as particularly interesting that in "Martin Buber's Thought and Contemporary Judaism," Levinas links Buber's supposed formalism with Henri Bergson and the idea of a "pure act without content." He writes, "All this is consistent with Buber's religious liberalism, with his religious feeling, which very early on opposed religion – placing, by reaction to dogmatism, the contact above its content, the pure and unqualifiable presence of God above all dogma and all rule" (Levinas 1993, 17).

David Michael Kleinberg-Levin compares Levinas's categorical imperative with Kant (and others). He describes Levinas's rendition in terms of the move beyond phenomenology: "The heart of the categorical imperative is responsibility: it is as a bodily responsiveness to the other that takes place prior to the intentionality of consciousness, prior to volition and reflection, that the moral law first moves and disposes us" (Levin 2001, 14). Levin points out that Levinas offers a more forceful and primordial imperative than Kant does:

There is at least one other major difference between Levinas and Kant with regard to the categorical imperative. Levinas actually reverses the Kantian theoreism: for him, the assignment of moral responsibility that binds my relationships with others not only does not conflict with perception and sensibility, but actually makes them possible. Even

16 Edith Stein’s doctoral dissertation On the Problem of Empathy, written under the direction of Husserl, provides a fascinating phenomenological study of this problem. See also Haney 1994. Haney notes, "Husserl held that empathy, properly speaking, involves the prior recognition of separateness since, without constituting human objects as human subjects, as other minds if you will, there is no experience of alterity as something to be overcome" (Haney 1994, 58).

Empathy does make the other present, in some sense, and so would seemingly be rejected by Levinas. Given his discussion of the recognition of destitution, hunger, and nudity in Tt, however, we may ask if Levinas does recognize some faculty of empathy, or if one is needed one in order for the subject to be affected by the face of the Other.

For a different reading of Time and the Other, see Katz 2006. Katz argues, "Levinas’s concern with transcendence and immanence in this early work is directly tied to the dangers involved with these conceptions generally, but also specifically insofar as he sees them lead to the philosophical logic that underpins Hitlerism" (Katz 2006, 61).
perception is first of all a solicitous, caring bringing-to-light, before it is appropriation, possession, domination. Even perception is first of all a responsiveness coming from the assignment of responsibility embodied in the categorical imperative (Levinas 2001, 17).

In the preface to Totality and Infinity, Levinas lays out what could have been a fascinating link with Buber when he places “prophetic eschatology” over and against politics and, of course, the totalizing tendencies of Western philosophy. He writes, “Eschatology is a relationship with a surplus always exterior to the totality…. It is reflected…within experience. It institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality” (Levinas 1969, 22, 23). Unfortunately, only two pages later, Levinas catches himself and offers the correction that one cannot experience “the infinity of the alterity of the Other” because “infinity overflows the thought that thinks it” (Levinas 1969, 25). Keeping in mind Robert Bernasconi’s point that Levinas misplaces Buber in a philosophical tradition that privileges knowledge, we might wonder why Levinas does not turn to experience as experience to describe the relation with the Other. The “metaphysical asymmetry” Levinas portrays (and demands)—“the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others”—is better captured in and through either experience or relation (Levinas 1969, 53).

Dialogical reciprocity in Buber clarifies and extends Husserl’s somewhat muddled phenomenological account of intersubjectivity. Neither Buber nor Husserl offers the variety of idealism that Levinas condemns. In fact, both view their work as a recovery of a concept of relational subjectivity lost in both idealism and naturalistic thought. The distance between Levinas and Husserl and Buber is clearly intentional. Levinas’s critical and yet positive presentation of ethics as first philosophy does not strive to find phenomenological justification, as this would taint Levinas’s conception of the grounding of ethics. Joanna Hodge makes the case in this way:

Unlike Nietzsche, he does not deny the relevance of the community, but he disjoins community through the asymmetry of the relations of the one to the other, and of the other to the one, and disrupts it in advance of the other. This entails, for Lévinas, that

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17 John Drabinski has made this argument, commenting on Levinas’s adaptation of Husserl’s “living-present” in TI. The face-to-face relation is given through experience, and “the presentation of the face of the Other manifests a phenomenal excess, an insurmoutable surplus of meaning, to which no objectivating mode of intentionality is adequate” (Drabinski 1996, 143). Drabinski points out the dramatic change in Otherwise, where “Lévinas alternatively, and with decisive consequences, characterizes the face as ‘already a failing of all presence, less than a phenomenon’” (Drabinski 1996, 143). Citing repeated passages in Totality and Infinity, Drabinski concludes that the face-to-face encounter as a “living presence indicates the extent to which [Levinas’s] analysis draws upon the Husserlian conception of the living present, specifically the protentive horizon implicated in the transcendent intention that affirms and sustains the infinity of the alterity of the Other person” (Drabinski 1996, 146).

The original passage, reflected in experience, might claim a lot less than I propose. “Réfléter” does not necessarily suggest immanent constitution or inner-experience. Thanks to Martin Kavka for his challenge.
there is an ethics of responsibility and obligation, which is not grounded in an ethics of autonomy and of freedom (Hodge 2002, 116).

The alternatives, then, are a phenomenological approach to ethics that couples intentionality with passivity, grace, and community, or the acceptance of a moral obligation to an Other predicated on the rejection of the very possibility of relation. For Levinas, every subject is a solipsist standing in need of overcoming by moral command.

Levinas does not begin with the self, but like a solipsist, he does not believe that we can project our states onto others, that we can empathize with them or they with us. There is no ethical pathway toward the Other through experience. The insistence on alterity and asymmetry, the heart of Levinas's rejection of Husserl's conception of alter ego and Buber's reciprocity, do not leave Levinas with many ways around this problem. Husserl and Buber's recovery of the intentional subject is undone from the very leveling force of Levinas's asymmetry. Buber credits intentionality as the phenomenological discovery which itself allows for the recognition of the primacy of relation and the task and responsibility for dialogue. It provides for choices in both the philosophical approach to the human and the human approach to her neighbor. In Levinas's work, we find the first at the expense of the second.  

18 For Brenda: A lifetime of relation, reciprocal and present.
References


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