

Accusing the Erotic Subject in Levinas

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They have used concupiscence as best they could for the general good; but it is nothing but a pretense and a false image of charity; for at bottom it is simply a form of hatred.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 404

Abstractions and Concretions

In the history of philosophy, the aim has predominantly been a universal and therefore neutral description of phenomena. The sphere of the erotic, so clearly linked to the sexual and gendered specificity and singularity of the subject, seems for this reason to be a difficult subject for philosophers. At what level of abstraction should one approach the erotic phenomenon? Phenomenology aims to treat the phenomenon as it shows itself – in itself. Yet never is it more evident than in the treatment of erotic phenomena that one needs to start from a personal experience or attitude, otherwise the phenomenon described becomes abstract and non-committal. On the other hand, it is probably never more disturbing than when a philosopher stretches personal experience too far, and claims it to be universal.¹

I will personally seek to avoid this problem wherever possible by speaking about *Levinas'* philosophy of the erotic. By Luce Irigaray especially, Levinas was accused of universalizing a male standpoint in

1. One may of course say, that this is true for all philosophical topics. But this doesn't show the problem to be void; rather underlines that the erotic is a field where this problem can be approached in an interesting way.

his description of the erotic phenomenon, thereby silencing the feminine voice. And of lacking in love – Irigaray writes: “he knows nothing of communion in pleasure. Levinas does not ever seem to have experienced the transcendence of the other which becomes immediate ecstasy in me and with him – or her.”² This kind of accusation is interesting, because it shows that the erotic is a very particular field of philosophy. What status must the utterances of an erotic philosophy have so that the field does not become a nasty quarrel about who is and who is not capable of a healthy or transcendental, a progressive or a politically correct, erotic experience? I do not want to deny the validity of Irigaray’s remarks or try to disqualify the philosophical position of which they are a part. Nonetheless, it seems to me that when choosing these wordings, she is also opening up for the possibility of comparing her position to that of the dissatisfied and/or disappointed lover. One could even claim that accusation is her philosophical style.

One seemingly safe way out of this kind of argument (note the double meaning of this word) would of course be to avoid the subject altogether, or to talk at such an abstract distance from it that the problem of particular experience does not occur. We could then find ourselves on the level of the transcendental ego or of a neutral *Dasein*, not yet belonging to either sex, who, as Levinas teasingly says, is never hungry. This term, a neutral *Dasein*, was of course primarily used by Heidegger in order to emphasize that his transcendental philosophy should not be confused with an anthropology. In this sense this neutrality is not abstract, but, as Hegel also said, the most concrete.³ There is an intricate dialectic between abstract universality and singular concreteness in the descriptive notion of a neutral *Dasein*. But interestingly, “this neutrality also indicates that *Dasein* is neither of the two sexes.”⁴ This does not mean that *Dasein* is indifference, rather “it is the original positivity and powerfulness [*Mächtigkeit*] of essence.”⁵ Its neu-

2. Luce Irigaray, “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas. On the Divinity of Love” in *Re-reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

3. Martin Heidegger, *Die Metaphysik des Satzes vom Grunde* (Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1990 [1928]), 176.

4. *Ibid.*, 172.

5. *Ibid.*

trality lies in it not yet being applied to the description of the factual existence it always is: “*Dasein* bears the inner possibility for the factual dispersion in corporeality and therefore in sexuality.”⁶ The original source of this “inner possibility” is the neutral *Dasein*, which as neutral does not exist (172). Thus, corporeality and sexuality are referred to as a force neither posited in nor exposed to the world.

Levinas sees this claim of neutrality as symptomatic for the entire tradition of philosophy. His critique of this claim is based on the idea that it distorts the representation of human existence in general, which he understands always from intrinsically non-neutral interhuman relations. When Levinas turns to the description of pleasure, love and ethics, it is because he is convinced that one must seek to describe the *concrete* human being – hungry, happy, sexually aroused, in pain, etc. From the point of view of a philosophy of a neutral *Dasein*, this aversion to the neutral could be seen as a version of the fear of the conceptual systematic philosophy, typical for a philosophy of life.⁷ And that epithet has something to it. The abstraction to a “neutral level” is in Levinas’ eyes a silent affirmation of one position in the non-neutral life world. The insistence on the concrete and the embodied is also the main reason, I think, that in his description of the erotic phenomenon, Levinas writes from an explicitly male heterosexual perspective, or at the very least, from an interpretation of one version of this perspective. His aversion to neutral abstractions makes him refuse or avoid to speak about either sex or gender in a more abstract sense, as if one could write from a non-gendered point of view. Still, even if Irigaray is wrong to claim that he universalizes the male perspective, it is clear that he associates it without question to the subject’s perspective, a position which of course has implications for his views on the feminine other. In *Time and the Other*,⁸ he represents the feminine as the exemplary modality of the other, whereas twenty-five years later in *Totality and Infinity*⁹ he describes it as a more intimate and in that sense “less”

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1979 [1946/1947]).

9. Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (Le livre de poche, 1990 [1961]), henceforth TI, trans. Alphonso Lingis *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne,

other than the absolute other. That this provides a highly problematic essentialization of the feminine and the masculine is obvious. When, in work subsequent to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas would distance himself from both this gendered language and from the ontologising language of *Totality and Infinity*, he would make reference to his earlier text in the following way: “[...] I thought twenty years ago that the feminine is another Gender (Germ. *Genus*) in the full meaning of the word: it is not the same Genus as the ego [...] What now remains from this is the thought of being-otherwise not only formally but with a certain content.”¹⁰ But this step away from gendered thinking would lead to a very marginalized discussion of the erotic in his later work. Here, I would like to show what systematic content we can retain from Levinas’ philosophy of the erotic in *Totality and Infinity*. For Levinas, the erotic occupies a kind of middle ground between enjoyment and ethics. In order to describe the phenomenon, we must therefore start out in a description of these modes of existence.

Enjoyment vs. Ethics

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy
 All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy
 (Irish proverb)

According to Levinas, one of the most basic conditions of human life is the search for happiness and pleasure. This is not just an accidental or isolated fact about human existence; enjoyment has a primary ontological status: human beings do not primarily encounter objects in the world, but they enjoy the world in its elements. Here Levinas partakes in the common, and possibly simplistic, criticism directed towards Husserl, namely that Husserl conceived the object too much from the viewpoint of mental representation, as well as extending his criticism toward Heidegger’s conception of the object as tool/*Zeug* or

2004 [1969]), henceforth TaI.

10. “Intention, Ereignis und das Andere, Gespräch zwischen Emmanuel Levinas und Christoph von Wolzogen am 20. Dezember 1985 in Paris” in Levinas, *Humanismus des anderen Menschen* (Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1989), 135.

Ready-at-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), deemed to be equally inadequate. Instead Levinas tries to show how taking pleasure in the elements of the world is more fundamental than encountering them as objects of representation or tools to use. The fresh air we breathe and the loaf of bread I eat – are these to be viewed as tools in any other world but one extremely marked by a protestant work ethic, in a technocratic, industrialist society? Enjoyment is never a specimen of work; rather I work in order to be able to enjoy, and I can even take pleasure in working. Enjoyment is our primary relation to life, our primary way of living. Life is understood as enjoying in the sense of living from... (*vivre de...*). I live from that which I enjoy. So needs are not understood as lacks, the human being is “happy for his needs” (TI 118 / TaI 114).

The ethical is described as running counter to, or as a rupture with, this happy enjoyment of the world. Suddenly, I can no longer allow myself to enjoy – someone else needs me. This does not mean that Levinas is endorsing an ethics calling upon us to forsake enjoyment. Rather, he is trying to *describe* ethics as a rupture with enjoyment, a possibility of an ethics irreducible to the search for happiness and pleasure.

In relating to the other ethically, the other is treated *kath'auto*, as his or herself. This is precisely not an action based on a pre-conceived notion of who he or she is. What, for Levinas, is foremost emphasized is the very alterity of the other. In the manifestation of *kath'auto* the other expresses him or herself; he or she appears before us as a living presence. But this presence is also an absence: it unmakes every form-presented. The other introduces a language in which she produces meaning *by him- or herself*, without fitting into my schemes. Not only does she not fit, she produces meaning *by virtue of* not fitting into my schemes, by destroying them. The encounter with the other is here described through the face. The other faces me, looks at me. The gaze of the other speaks to me, forces me to respond, and thus calls upon me to be responsive and responsible. This is a source of meaning, and of rationality; the other provides a measure for my actions, and impels me to justify them.

This relation defines the subject as subject. A subject is someone to whom one can ascribe actions. Subjectivity therefore implies responsibility, someone who can say “I did it. It was me. I hurt you,” and who

can say “I’ll do it. I’ll help you.” Both in the sense of guilt of what has happened and of taking charge of what must be done. So in this sense, it is the ethical relation that defines the subject *qua* subject, and the other *qua* other. When Levinas says: the other accuses me (*autrui m’accuse*), this bears a double meaning: on the one hand, the other holds me responsible, forcing me to justify myself; on the other hand, the other causes me to appear more clearly, bringing me acutely forth.¹¹ But if, according to Levinas, I am brought forth as a responsible subject by the other, who or what was I before? What is there that can be accused and brought forth as subject, what is this previous subjectivity and what is its relation to the other?

The Erotic Subjectivity

Even if the ethical relation is understood as the defining relation, it is not the only way in which one relates to the other. It is contrasted to all other relations to the other; typically those described in terms of conflict or war, where one will try to subdue the other, or in terms of the relation of commerce, where both parties act in their own interest to gain advantage from trading with each other, or the erotic relation where both lovers take pleasure in the other and in the other’s pleasure. Of systematic importance for Levinas, however, is the erotic relation, which, via Pascal’s dictum of ethics as love without concupiscence, Levinas has sometimes explicitly contrasted to the ethical relation.

The only book where the erotic relation is extensively investigated by Levinas is *Totality and Infinity*. And even here it appears at the end, after both the sphere of enjoyment and the ethical relation have already been described. In the introduction to the section labeled phenomenology of Eros, Levinas starts out by saying that the erotic phenomenon belongs to a plane that both presupposes and transcends

11. For this meaning of the word, Larousse, dictionnaire de la langue française, 1999, provides: “Mettre en relief. Faire ressortir par rapport à ce qui entoure : *La lumière rasante accuse les reliefs.* (syn. accentuer) *Je vous ferai ici un petit conte pour bien accuser la pensée que je vous propose (Valéry)* (syn. souligner). *Les rides accusent son âge* (syn. indiquer).” In all of these examples the essential features of something already there are brought forward.

the face. Here he is not suggesting a transcendent metaphysics, which would reintroduce an underlying substance as an explanation for our world here. But it is still “a plane where the I bears itself beyond death and recovers also from its return to itself. This plane is that of love and fecundity, where subjectivity is posited in function of these movements” (TI 284 / TaI 253).

So what is Levinas looking for in his description of the erotic? By saying that the erotic phenomenon lies beyond the face, Levinas is announcing the search for a layer of subjectivity, which is not the ethical, but a layer in which the ethical can appear. This layer of life, behind and beyond the ethical, must meet some requirements:

1. It must allow for the ethical to appear as interpersonal, it must therefore provide separate terms which relate to each other as different.

1 a). It can therefore be just an instance of im- or subpersonal reason (TI 283 / TaI 252) – in order for the Other to appear for me, I must already be a person. The language introduced by the other is fundamentally interpersonal, and can never be totally impersonal. The impersonal language presupposes the interpersonal language, not the other way round. He will seek a dimension of the subject allowing for the impact of the other.

b). Nor can it be a mere animal partiality, a force fulfilling its needs (TI 283/ TaI 253). It must be already human, already treating the other as a human being.

2. The subject must be situated in a time that is not only constituted by its own death, but reaches beyond death; the subject must transcend itself.

So what Levinas is looking for is a dimension of subjectivity opening up to infinity, to transcendence, to the interpersonal, to a relation to what is not me, that is not enveloped in my projects. This will be a relation where I am neither in power or overpowered.

Love manifests itself through an ambiguity. On the one hand the relationship to the other goes beyond the relation to the face. This relation to the other is not best described in terms of responsibility, respect. These borders are crossed. But they are still essential for the erotic relation – “disrespect presupposes the face” (TI 294 / TaI 262). This means that only if I recognize the transcendence of the other can the intimate immanence be erotic; the erotic is constituted by “a

simultaneity [...] of concupiscence and transcendence” (TI 285 / TaI 255). But the erotic goes beyond the face; in voluptuousness the caress is not stopped by the nudity of the face.

The caress searches – it is not searching for something, in the sense that there is a definite object for its search. It seeks something in communication with the will of the other. Not in the sense that it wants to establish a fact about the other’s desire, or dominate the desire of the other. It seeks what is not yet there (TI 288 / TaI 258). The discovery does not entail an increase of power or knowledge. This “not yet” is not something that will appear as apart of my scheme or plan. In fact, my having plans, my very position as a subject is swept away. The erotic subject delights in being moved. This does not mean that a caress cannot be part of a plan – but if that is so the caress as such will threaten to move the subject wanting to be the absolute mover: “Eros is not accomplished as a subject that fixes an object, nor as a pro-jection, toward a possible. Its movement doesn’t expand the realm of possibilities, but consists in going beyond the possible” (TI 292 / TaI 261); i.e. beyond the “I can.”

Seen from the viewpoint of the ethical relation, the discovery of the erotic other entails a certain violation, a certain disrespect toward the other as transcendent. This means that it presupposes the ethical. It does not violate the face by necessarily being unethical, rather it removes the ethical standard. Seriousness becomes play. Where the ethical relation leads toward universalization, rationality, the erotic relationship in contrast is intimate, a closed society of the here and now. The lovers are alone in the world, in a community of the sentient and the sensed. The other is sensed as sentient, desired as desiring. In the ethical relationship I can never disclaim responsibility, whereas in the erotic relationship it is often unclear and unimportant if you or I did whatever it is we are doing.

In this sense it is an inward relation, relating “to a community of feeling.” It is inward in the sense of referring to a community in which the community in which the subject itself takes part. Still it is intersubjectively structured. The other is not desired as other *kath’auto*, but as desiring me. “In voluptuousness the Other is me and separate from me” (TI 297 / TaI 265). The meeting of desires is nothing like possession, reification or domination; as usual, Levinas wants to contrast his

own account with the dialectics of master and slave. Far from reification or domination, the erotic desire delights in the desire of the other. With this background, Irigaray is hardly fair to claim that “the description of pleasure given by Levinas is unacceptable to the extent that it presents man as the sole subject exercising his desire and his appetite upon the woman who is deprived of subjectivity except to seduce him.”¹² Irigaray is right insofar as Levinas strongly associates subjectivity to masculinity. But the beloved isn’t deprived of subjectivity, she is always loved as loving. If one were to look for something like a proto-feminism in Levinas’ eroticism, it would consist in not universalising the masculine desire, but in describing a masculine desire in the encounter with a feminine, without saying how far they are universal. Even if there is a distinct classical masculine and feminine position described by Levinas, there is also an overturning of them in the very description of the erotic. Otherwise, when describing the lonely subject, the subject to be approached by the other, Levinas writes about the classical autonomous subject with its projects as a virility – and here, it becomes obvious that this subject undergoes a change. This virile I is in some sense “feminized,” and it proves to be a blessing, because it releases me from being me (TI 302–305, TaI 270–272).

Irigaray also says: “To caress, for Levinas, consists [. . .] not in approaching the other in its most vital dimension, the touch, but in the reduction of that vital dimension of the other’s body to the elaboration of a future for himself.”¹³ This seems a positioning of Levinas that makes sense only from the point of view of Irigaray’s own philosophical project. For Levinas the erotic is never a personal project, fulfilling the ego. On the contrary, it is a future that releases me from being me in the sense of my projects, while the caress is a shared experience which releases us. Maybe one could say with Irigaray’s own words that it gives us rebirth as others.

“If love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself”(TI 298 / TaI 266). But at the same time it is a movement away from oneself. My identity

12. Irigaray, 115.

13. *Ibid*, 110.

with myself is altered, as is the difference to the Other. But we are not engulfed in a unity; instead says Levinas, we engender a child.

This is where he causes some bewilderment. Surely he is aware that the erotic does not necessarily generate a child, or necessarily aim for a child? On the contrary, the erotic is as such per definition independent of the natural goal of reproduction. Is this then a concealed concession to biologism? Is the erotic all about the reproduction, preservation and the prolongation of the species? Perhaps it is a veiled religious commandment to procreate? Or is Levinas just losing himself in metaphors? In order for this to make sense, I suggest we read this as a statement about a similarity of the structures of the erotic and the structure of reproduction. We can find some helpful remarks on this relation in Bataille's introduction to *Eroticism*:

while it is true that eroticism is defined by the mutual independence of erotic pleasure and reproduction as an end, the fundamental meaning of reproduction is none the less the key to eroticism. Reproduction implies the existence of discontinuous being. [...] Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity.¹⁴

The erotic phenomenon as well as reproduction blurs the distinction between continuity of the ego and discontinuity in my relation to another, and suggests a continuity of the discontinuous, a discontinuity of the continuous. We can transpose this onto Levinas: just as the erotic moment carries a certain separated unity and a united separation, so does the parent-child relationship.

The child is in my interpretation neither a metaphor, nor a biological category. I would like to see it more as an example, demonstrating a subjectivity that goes beyond itself as subject. The possibility of a child entails the evidence of a future beyond projects, a future that is me without being mine. Levinas writes: "By a total transcendence [...] the I is, in the child, an other" (TI 299 / TaI 267). The child is not mine, *but me as an other*. So, the description of the erotic phenomena does not instrumentalize the sexual relation for the purpose of

14. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (London: Penguin, 2001), 12–13.

reproduction. The two are instead, linked but parallel phenomena, with a similar structure.

This relationship to the future Levinas calls fecundity. It is in a sense a possibility, but not in the sense of a project that I set out for myself. It is a possibility for me, but for a me complicated by the erotic structure. This is an attempt to allow for a different kind of possibility than that of a logical possibility, which is less than being. But it is also different from his understanding of the Heideggerian possibility “which transforms the relation of the future into a power of the subject” (TI 299 / TaI 267).

This implies a complication of the subject’s finitude. The subject thus transcends the tedium of repetition and is no longer riveted to itself. Levinas also refers to this phenomenon as *youth*. The subject is at its origin, but is not tied to this origin, not encumbered with itself.¹⁵ Philosophy also lives from this kind of youth, making it possible to reach out anew to the others and continue philosophical dialogue. The erotic is beyond the meaning created by projects, but this does not entail the meaninglessness that causes anxiety. “Fecundity continues history without producing old age” (TI 301 / TaI 268).

It is in this way that Levinas can criticize the notion of an ego as the origin of everything, without having to resort to a neutral entity behind the ego. Both in the erotic and in the parental relation with the other, the I is itself and becomes other. This means that I am not locked into my fate, for “a being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being” (TI 314 / TaI 282).

This is described as a starting point for a critique of the privilege of unity over multiplicity. Even when thinking multiplicity, one has traditionally envisaged it as many of a kind, a multiplicity of monads. Levinas’ analysis of fecundity seeks to show how transcendence of the I is possible without being self-refuting, without obliterating the I. He acknowledges Heidegger’s philosophy as an attempt to break with this fixation with unity. *Dasein* is not only its actual here and now, it is first and foremost its possibilities, its future. But this is always described in terms of power: *Dasein* is either master of its situation or subdued

15. This was an important problem in early texts such as *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* and *On escape*; in the latter text erotic pleasure was treated as an escape that fails, since it leads back to the self in the moment of satisfaction.

under *das Man*. In his later texts Heidegger strongly emphasized that there is always a powerlessness in power. But Levinas means that Heidegger still thinks the subject too much in terms of mastery. Powerlessness is still only a negation of power, thus dependent upon power. The erotic relation, however, is before the powerful or powerless subject. It is thus also liberation from the subject-as-power (or *Dasein* as *Mächtigkeit*). Fecundity offers a proof of the plurality of being, in the form of an I and an other that are not just separate monads, separate versions (“avatars”) of the I. In the next step, it is intimated that this structure is responsible for structuring the subject itself. It shows another way of being a subject than being a power center. This is paralleled by the erotic encounter. As we saw, the caress searches for an unknown future that is not controlled by the subject in the taking place of the encounter. The longing that is a part of the caress can be described as a longing to break the chains of the I seen only as the subject of projects. I live the other and am lived by the other. This kind of attachment is both subpersonal and superpersonal.

In a further step, fecundity is used as a sort of explanation of the possibility of ethics. Through my relation with the child, filiality and paternity, I am linked to all human beings; all human beings are my brothers. This is what allows the face to appear: “The human I is posited in fraternity: that all men are brothers is not added to man as a moral conquest, but constitutes his ipseity. Because my position as an I is *effectuated* already in fraternity the face can present itself to me as a face” (TI 312–313 / TaI 279–280). By this filial link between all human beings, the I is opened up to an understanding of infinite time that does not make goodness something empty and unapparent.

So, now it seems that the erotic and the ethical spheres are mutually dependent on each other. On the one hand, without the face of the other, there would be no erotic phenomenon, only lust. On the other hand, the key erotic concept of fecundity is the condition of possibility for the fraternity that makes the appearance of the face possible.

Levinas’ descriptions of the erotic and of fecundity are attempts to show some related ways in which human beings can share in other people’s lives without there being a common neutral entity that they share in, such as a transcendental subject. They are in some sense each other.

But on the other hand, one could think that the ethical phenomenon must contradict this view. The other as absolutely other would not allow for a shared starting point in concupiscent love or in family, rather it is the stranger with a disturbing gaze. If the charity shown to the stranger would be somehow justified through the concept of fecundity and fraternity (my being the other), won't the very idea of the absolute gratuity of the ethical be lost? The concept of fraternity blurs the sharp distinction between the erotic and the ethical. But how can Levinas then understand ethics as love *without* concupiscence?

One way to avoid this paradox is to view the ethical only as a different aspect of a reality that it has in common with concupiscent or otherwise reciprocal love. The ethical would be love not necessarily *without* concupiscence or even reciprocity, but in disregard of concupiscence and reciprocity. So while the erotic phenomenon and fecundity serve as examples of a real or possible community with all human beings, in my truly ethical relation, this community is not something I can fall back on. I am called to re-enact it in my actions, rather than hope that I will do the right thing just because of a feeling that we all belong together anyway. Rather, this feeling is always under suspicion in Levinas' texts. The ethical stamp is rather given only to an an-archic disturbance, assenting to actions that are carried out in spite of oneself.

The story of the caress, fecundity, paternity and fraternity comes at the end of *Totality and Infinity* and serves as a kind of hindsight, or an ad hoc explanation, which tries to mediate between, on the one hand, the "virile" autonomous, autarchic, self-sufficient subject and, on the other, one's encounter with the other. The account is questionable for many reasons, the emphasis on the masculine only being the most obvious problem. The biggest problem is that it first seems that the ethical encounter needs the contrast with the seemingly autonomous subject in order to be described, whereas later the autonomous subject must be softened by the description of its erotic origin in order to rationalize the possibility of ethics.

Firstly: was there ever the autonomous subject? Indeed, even in Levinas' description in the period of *Totality and Infinity*, there never was – rather, it is described as a sort of fiction necessary for the whole ethical intrigue. This puts the focus on the interhuman as living in the

encounter with the other, in the (non-)experience of the other. Levinas was trapped in a phenomenological language that he was trying to avoid. But in his later works, Levinas was to tell this intrigue differently. Or perhaps we should say that he gives up on the idea of the ethical intrigue, i.e. the possibility to describe the ethical in the mode of an experience for the otherwise autonomous subject. Rather, what is now being described is the subject as pre-originally determined as susceptibility, i.e. responsibility. Here, instead of describing the ethical (non-)experience as almost a miracle turning the otherwise predetermined egoistic tide of the subject, the description of the human subjectivity is now focused on being the condition of possibility for the ethical. As Robert Bernasconi puts it: “Levinas reframes the question of the possibility of ethics by turning from the other to the ethical subject so as to ask about the possibility of such a subject. . . [H]e goes behind the back of the consciousness of the I, so that there is no longer any danger that Levinas will be read as if the ethical first arose as a concrete event in the life of an already constituted ego.”¹⁶

To this we can add that the same goes for the erotic. Levinas is now clearly conceiving subjectivity as sensibility – the presupposition for the ethical and the erotic, as well as for the classical idealist ego of consciousness. In *Otherwise than Being*,¹⁷ the subject is not described as being divided between an erotic and an ethic relation to the other. Rather sensibility is described as a more fundamental concept, a category that aims to account for not only ethical and erotic relations, but for subjectivity as such. Now, he no longer needs the erotic as a background for an egosphere in which the other supposedly breaks through. There is now “a possibility of a libido in the most elementary and most ‘rich’ signification of proximity” (proximity being one of the many synonyms encircling the key concept of pre-original responsibility). Responsibility is however still “before Eros” (AE 143n /

16. “To what question is substitution the answer?” in *The Cambridge companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 245–246.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (Livre de poche 1990 [1974]), *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne, Pittsburgh, 1998). Henceforth AE / OB.

OB 192n). But “before” is a very difficult word in all philosophy, and especially so in *Otherwise than Being*, which questions the language of primacy at the same time as it seems to reintroduce it in another way. In this statement of responsibility being before *eros*, I understand it thus: we can question *eros* from the point of view of responsibility, for responsibility is closer to the order of a question and an answer.

But still, the conflict between the ethical and the erotic might seem to reappear in a new guise – after all, the erotic often seems to be interpreted as a version of the subject’s conatus, the subject’s drive to be in the world. This is exemplified by one of the opening mottos for *Otherwise than Being*, a quote from Pascal’s *Pensées*:

They have used concupiscence as best as they could for the general good; but is nothing but a pretense and a false image of charity; for at bottom it is simply a form of hatred (*Pensées*, 404; OB vii).

Is concupiscence thus the antonym of the Good? In fact, for Levinas it cannot be its antonym, for the Good has none:

The Good invests freedom – it loves me before I love it. Love is love in this antecedence. The Good could not be the term of a need susceptible of being satisfied, it is not the term of an erotic need, a relationship with the seductive which resembles the Good to the point of being indistinguishable from it, but which is not its other, but its imitator. The Good as the infinite has no other, not because it would be the whole, but because it is Good and nothing escapes its goodness (AE 25n / OB 186n).

This makes a few central points clear. The Good does not have an opposite, but an “imitator.” Concupiscence is questioned insofar as it, as Pascal says in the above quote, claims lust not to be only good, but *the* Good. One way in which this has been claimed is the common view that lust is a need, the most central human need, which has to be fulfilled. Levinas sees it rather as part of a force of life, which also always produces a surplus, allowing it to give to the other, even to the point where it is itself destructive for this particular life. Levinas is not attacking the lustful per se; the word “concupiscence” here comes to stand for the view that the erotic and the lustful are “the whole” and

“the Good,” and where impossibility for a view on the Good goes against the grain of caring for oneself.

Another question might still be plaguing us, however. If the description of one’s relation to the other shifts from being couched in terms of an experience (which is never an experience) to the quasi-transcendental questions on the very possibility of ethical and erotic relations, are we not led back to the very “neutrality,” which Levinas had been trying to avoid? Is the an-archic subject, depicted in *Otherwise than Being*, perhaps not so far from the idea of the neutral *Dasein*, after all? Yes, maybe not. Though an important difference remains: its originary *Mächtigkeit* is accused, it is being made and held responsible, and brought forth (remember the wider meaning of *accuser*) as already responsible. In this sense, Levinas already practised the art that Irigaray continued: philosophy bears its fruits not only in dialogue but also in accusation.