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Ethics, Interrupted: Community and Impersonality in Levinas

Viola Marchi

Despite the influence of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics on the rethinking of community in post-identitarian terms (most prominently in the work of Maurice Blanchot, Alphonso Lingis, and, to a lesser extent, Jean-Luc Nancy), the question of community remains a problematic spot in Levinas's own philosophy. I would argue that, instead of grounding a new thinking of community, the dyadic relation of Same and Other poses a structural problem when trying to open the ethical relation to the wider realm of others while keeping radical difference in place. As external observer and guarantor of justice, for instance, is the Third excluded a priori from the ethical relation? Is community always only another term for the political? Or, as Levinas himself puts it in *Otherwise than Being*: "What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?" Identifying in the notion of impersonality a way to access Levinas's thought on community, this essay aims at rethinking the scene of address and the ethical relation in terms of displacement, dislocation, and interruption.

The exigency of a new thought of community has become a moral imperative of contemporary philosophy. The resurgent interest in the concept of community and its ethical underpinnings appears to be deeply rooted in a widespread feeling of cultural decline, a malaise that has been connected alternatively to the rampant individualism promoted by contemporary society and to the experiences of the totalitarianisms and murderous conflicts of identities – be they religious, ethnic, or national – that characterized the twentieth century and that the early twenty-first century seems only to have exacerbated.

Literature, Ethics, Morality: American Studies Perspectives. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 32. Ed. Ridvan Askin and Philipp Schweighauser. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 143-158.

The American version of the debate in recent years has set around the contraposition between a Liberalism *à la* John Rawls and, on the other side, the theoretical current of the so-called “communitarians.” The main point of contention between the two positions lies in their different understandings of the formation of the moral and political self, with Communitarianism privileging what Michael Sandel calls the “encumbered self”¹ against Liberalism’s atomistic conception of the individual, detached from social entanglements and communitarian bonds. At the level of community, while Liberalism stresses the idea of voluntary, temporary, and reversible bonds – based on a dialectical movement between association and dissociation, dispersion and “periodic communitarian correction” (Walzer 21) – Communitarianism’s main goal is to rediscover and revive the experience of a community that has been overrun by fragmentation, alienation, and anomie, and that alone can constitute the source of stable, shared moral values as well as ethical meaning.

The European discussion, on the other hand – inaugurated in 1986 by Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay “The Inoperative Community” – has offered us an image of community that has remained almost unthought in the American context. Disjointed from notions of identity, immanent fusion, and teleological development, it appears to be completely removed from the traditional understanding of “community” as a web of meaningful relationships and commitment to a set of shared values. Instead of the nostalgic image of a harmony and unity belonging to a past that we now strive to retrieve, as the only remedy against the contemporary nihilistic drift, community has become, in Nancy’s rewriting of Martin Heidegger’s *being-with*, the primordial and inescapable condition of existence, a space for the articulation of singularities characterized by the utter vulnerability of finitude and radical exposure. Similarly, in the work of Maurice Blanchot, absolute relation [*le rapport sans rapport*] is at the heart of his negative community, where the term “absolute” merely indicates the absence of all relations except that, perhaps, of the insurmountable distance between the terms involved. As Roberto Esposito suggests, the “in common” of community is defined by nothing more than lack and the obligation of an ontological debt [*munus*].

What we are left with is, I think, a community without *ethos*, understood here as the series of shared practices, beliefs, and behaviors

¹ See Michael Sandel’s *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*.

that would regulate and confer meaning upon our being in common.² And this cannot but immediately raise the question of ethics. If every idea of community implies an underlying concept of ethics, whether explicitly sketched or just hovering in the background, then the first and foremost effect of a community without *ethos* would be that of deactivating the possibility of both a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics approach, as well as a Habermasian model based on the establishment of validity claims through intersubjective recognition.

That is to say, the idea of a community in which nothing is “in common” – except perhaps the sheer space of cohabitation – calls for a different approach to the ethical question, an approach beyond identity and sameness. One of the main candidates here is certainly Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy of radical alterity. Moving in a new direction with respect to the main cornerstones in the history of moral theory, Levinas grounds his whole philosophical edifice not on what we share as moral beings (the Aristotelian *telos* toward the “good” – also in its contemporary refashioning at the hands of virtue ethics philosophers – Kant’s reason, and so on), but on the concept of a radical Other that, in its irreducible exteriority, defies any possibility of comprehension. Refusing the very idea of an ethics of reciprocity, Levinas foregrounds instead the radical asymmetry inherent to every ethical encounter and the ensuing call for an infinite, non-mutual responsibility.

Despite the influence and the strong connections that can be traced between a Levinasian approach to ethics and the cited attempts at rethinking community in post-identitarian terms, however, the question of community remains deeply problematic in Levinas’s own philosophy.

On the one hand, Levinas’s stance toward community seems to adhere closely to what I call a community without *ethos*. As his overall philosophical project testifies, he is particularly ill at ease with a philosophical tradition – stretching from Plato to Heidegger – that understands the collective in terms of fusion, unity, and the One. As Michael F. Bernard-Donals succinctly puts it, Levinas is a philosopher “whose writing made clear that any attempt to establish a collectivity (a ‘we’) worked against ethics” (62).

In this regard, two names in particular figure in his work: Hobbes and Hegel. In “Peace and Proximity” Levinas sees the main flaw in what he calls “the dialectical project in the Hegelian style” in its indifference toward the necessary evils of war and suffering; necessary, as it were, to

² Before I proceed, I must clarify that, although the concept of *ethos* is not abandoned in Nancy’s philosophy, it is never employed in the sense in which I am using it here. On this topic, see Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy*.

“the unfolding of rational thought, which is also a politics” (164). The references to Hobbes are, I think, even more interesting, as they appear in different places in Levinas’s work, functioning as a sort of counterpart to his own thinking of community but never receiving an explicit articulation. What is at stake in the discussion of Hobbes is the question of the natural state of man as, on the one side, “a war of all against all” and, at the other pole, what Levinas would call an infinite responsibility of the one for the other. This, I would argue, is a dilemma that is never resolved throughout his oeuvre.³

While Levinas’s distrust of the totalizing power of the State makes him a suitable candidate for rethinking ethics in the context of the type of community that I have briefly outlined above, the complex relationship between politics and ethics in his thought, famously addressed by Jacques Derrida in *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, brings to light the difficulties of extricating a thought of community from Levinas’s moral philosophy.⁴

One of the problems I would like to mention in this regard is that grounding an idea of community on the dyadic relation of Same and Other, as proposed by Levinas, poses a structural problem when one tries to open the ethical relation to the wider realm of others while keeping radical difference in place. The structural asymmetry of the ethical relation, in fact, is taken back into the realm of equality with the intervention of the “Third” as the wider community of others. A series of questions thus arise: As external observer and guarantor of justice, is the Third excluded a priori from the ethical relation? Is community always only another term for the political? Or, as Levinas himself puts it

³ For a detailed analysis of the relation between Hobbes and Levinas, see, for instance, Cheryl L. Hughes, “The Primacy of Ethics.” However, I have to point out that, despite the incontestable differences between the two philosophers that Hughes highlights in her essay, in my view Levinas never seems to set for a final position on the matter. As he states in an interview with Richard Kearney: “Ethics is, therefore, *against nature* because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my existence first.” A few lines later, then, he defines “ethical conversion” as “a reversal, of our nature” (Cohen 24-25), explicitly embracing a Hobbesian view of the natural state of man.

⁴ As Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco suggest in their introduction to *Radicalizing Levinas*, in recent years the investigation of the difficult relationship between ethics and politics has become the new tendency in Levinas scholarship:

If the first wave of scholarship was aimed primarily at commentary and exposition, and the second wave was focused on situating Levinas within the context of poststructuralism and deconstruction, the third wave is an explicit attempt to situate and explore Levinas’s work within the context of the most pressing sociopolitical issues of our time (x).

in *Otherwise than Being*: “What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?” (154).

There are two claims and a suggestion that I would like to make in this essay. First, despite the importance usually given to the personal Other (*Autrui*) or to the concept of the Third, I would argue that one privileged way to access Levinas’s understanding of community would be via the notion of impersonality. While impersonality famously occupies a central role in Levinas’s early work, it is often disregarded in connection with the later texts, where it keeps coming back despite repeated attempts to exclude and contain it.⁵

As a consequence, and this is the second claim, through the acknowledgment of the centrality of the impersonal, the ethical as well as the political relation in Levinas turn out to be not dyadic, that is, an ethics and a politics of dialogue, but always constituted via a third term (be that illeity, the *il y a*, the Third, and perhaps even the son that makes his appearance at the end of *Totality and Infinity*). The obliquity of the relation is thus not simply a result of its asymmetry, that is, of the Other always approaching the I from above – from height – but also, and especially, of its being a relation that is always already opened *by* and *to* a third term.

The third and final suggestion that I would like to make is that, instead of surrendering to the total dissolution of moral and political agency in Levinas’s work – as many scholars have argued by emphasizing, and rightly so, the centrality of passivity in his ethics – his philosophy, and the approach that I try to sketch through the notion of impersonality, might indeed help us rethink agency beyond the agent/patient opposition, especially if considered in relation to Levinas’s break with Husserlian phenomenology.

This is how the argument proceeds from here. I start by drawing some connections between the *il y a* (or impersonal existence) and Levinas’s account of infinity in the process of the formation of ethical subjectivity to show how the opposition between the horror of impersonal being and “the good” of the experience of transcendence

⁵ Of course, the question of impersonality has already been tackled by other scholars although, to my knowledge, not in specific connection with the problem of community. A few recent examples are Kris Sealey’s “The ‘Face’ of the *il y a*,” Michael Marder’s “Terror of the Ethical,” Merold Westphal’s “The Welcome Wound,” and “*Il y a*” by Simon Critchley, who will constitute my main interlocutor here. The reason I privilege Critchley’s account is that Sealey and Marder, despite their insightful and valuable contributions, give mainly what I would call a “horror reading” of the impersonal existence that lies at the heart of Levinas’s ethics. Critchley is able to keep in place a zone of neutrality that resonates more with my own position on the topic.

toward the “otherwise than being” ultimately fall back into each other. Taking as an important point of reference Simon Critchley’s discussion of Blanchot and Levinas around the concept of the *il y a*, I consider the structure of the intersubjective relation beyond its rigid dyadic formulation. I then continue by investigating the impersonal by drawing on Simone Weil’s essay “On Human Personality” and by highlighting its connections with Levinas’s work.⁶

1. The Night of the *Il y a*

The notion of the *il y a* represents the main instance of impersonality in Levinas’s work as well as his approach to ontology and to the question of being. In “There is: Existence without Existents” the *il y a* is described as “impersonal” and “anonymous,” as utter exposure: “Before this obscure invasion it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one’s shell. One is exposed. [. . .] the nocturnal space delivers us over to being” (31).

The *il y a* is not an object of perception; it cannot be grasped nor intentionally constituted as it breaks down the distinction between subject and object. Its neutrality and impersonality soon acquires the traits of horror, menace, and insecurity. In the night of the *il y a* “the subject is depersonalized” (32). The phenomenological analysis that accompanies the *il y a* is that of insomnia:

The impossibility of tearing the invading, inescapable and anonymous rustling of existence is manifested in particular through certain moments where sleep escapes our appeals. [. . .] The bare fact of presence oppresses: one is held to being, held to be. (*Existence and Existents* 61)

The state of insomnia is apparently characterized by a complete passivity, but, I would argue, of a different kind from that which would oppose an active agent to a passive patient: the insomniac does not wake in the night; she is kept awake by something that is at the same time inside and outside of herself. It is the night that is awake *in* me, it is impersonal being that keeps me hostage.

Once the existent is hypostatized, separated, that is, from impersonal existence, the phenomenological articulation that Levinas proposes is

⁶ For different approaches to the similarities between Levinas and Weil, see, for instance, Michelle Boulous Walker’s “Eating Ethically” and Tanya Loughhead’s “Two Slices of the Same Loaf?”.

that of nausea: “this despair, this fact of being riveted, constitutes all the anxiety of nausea” (*On Escape* 66). What is worth pointing out here is that nausea “does not come from outside to confine us. We are revolted from inside” (66). Once again the distinction between inside and outside, activity and passivity, is problematized. We are totally passive in the moment of nausea, but again this is not a passivity opposed to the activity of an external agent. Immersed in the dead weight of existence, in the moment of queasiness, we only long for an escape, and “escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break the most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [*moi*] is oneself [*soi-même*]” (55).

Interestingly enough, the chains that bind us to ourselves and to being can only multiply in community or, more precisely, in a traditional understanding of community as essence, where “[e]ssence as synchrony is togetherness in a place” (*Otherwise than Being* 152). The description of the community of essence that Levinas offers is that of a community of slaves, all held fast to being:

Essence, the being of entities, weaves between the incomparables, between me and the others, a unity, a community (if only the unity of analogy), and drags us off and assembles us on the same side, chaining us to one another like galley slaves, emptying proximity of its meaning. Every attempt to disjoin the conjunction and the conjuncture would be only clashing of the chains. (*Otherwise than Being* 182)

With these thoughts in mind – especially the identification of essence with “synchrony” and “togetherness” – I now turn to Levinas’s account of subject formation as presented in his 1975 essay “God and Philosophy.”

2. Approaching the Other . . . with Descartes

To formulate the moment of the constitution of subjectivity, Levinas draws on the Third Cartesian Meditation. What interests him in Descartes’s account is not the proofs of God’s existence but the “breakup of consciousness” (“God and Philosophy” 136) provoked by the idea of infinity. With the idea of infinity, in fact, the certainty of the *cogito* is disrupted since “the *cogitatum* of a *cogitatio* which *to begin* with contains that *cogitatio* signifies the noncontained par excellence” (“God and Philosophy” 136). To put it in phenomenological terms, the noematic content of the intentional act incorporates the noetic act itself.

By thinking infinity, that is, I think more than I can think or grasp. It is a thought that overflows thought. Again, the way in which the I thinks infinity is not an active process, but it is a confrontation with an idea that is put into it, that slips into it in its passivity.

This is not, however, simply a case of the “inverted intentionality” that Merold Westphal identifies as the fundamental element of Levinas’s phenomenology. In the constitution of ethical responsibility, Westphal’s argument goes, the self emerges from the *il y a* through intentional acts that, instead of being directed by me toward the outside, are directed toward me by the other as the only real agent. Through a reading of Levinas in connection with Jean-Paul Sartre’s analysis of the gaze, Westphal tries to explain the former’s conceptualization of the inversion of identity in the moment of substitution:⁷

In what seems to be original intentionality the ego constitutes, objectifies, represents, identifies its object; the hunter wounds the stag. In inverted intentionality the subject is seen, addressed, defined by the other; the hunter is wounded by the stag. (222)

Yet, Levinas’s use of Descartes’s Third Meditation as a purely formal paradigm for the encounter with the other and for the constitution of ethical subjectivity seems to suggest a different interpretation. By this I mean that what allows the ego to become a subject is not merely a reversal of positions between an objectifying (gazing) ego and an objectified (gazed at) Other. Rather, the idea of infinity introduces an “inassimilable surplus” that exceeds and absorbs any notion of intentionality:

The Other who provokes this ethical movement in consciousness and who disturbs the good conscience of the Same’s coincidence with itself compromises a surplus which is inadequate to intentionality. Because of this inassimilable surplus, we have called the relation which binds the I to the Other (*Autrui*) the idea of the infinite. (“Transcendence and Height” 19)

What emerges here is then an “intentionality of a wholly different type” (*Totality and Infinity* 23) that cannot be exhausted by the simple exchange of roles between self and other, agent and patient.

It is significant to notice that, at this moment, we are again turned inside out “like a cloak” (*Otherwise than Being* 48), as in nausea and insomnia, as well as fully immersed in a nocturnal scene that is very

⁷ Cf. the chapter “Substitution” in *Otherwise than Being*, especially page 115.

close to the night of the *il y a*. The uncontained, ungraspable otherness slips into me, undermining the unity of the same and awakening it. In “God and Philosophy” Levinas writes:

The irreducible categorical character of insomnia lies precisely in this: the other is in the same, and does not alienate the same but awakens it. Awakening is like a demand that no obedience is equal to, no obedience puts to sleep; it is a “more” in the “less.” (132)

Thus, whereas insomnia and the possibility of sleep belong, respectively, to the anonymous vigilance of the *il y a* and to consciousness itself (*Existence and Existents* 70), it is the fact of awakening that enters in all respects into the order of the ethical.

It is here, in the exposition of the alterity of God, that Levinas suddenly makes a really striking move that is worth quoting at length. He undermines the opposition between the horror of the *there is* and the good of absolute transcendence:

God is not simply the first other (*autrui*), the other (*autrui*) par excellence, or the absolutely other (*autrui*), but other than the other (*autrui*), other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other (*autrui*), prior to the ethical bond with other (*autrui*) and different from every neighbor, *transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the there is*. (“God and Philosophy” 141; my emphasis)

That the radical transcendence of “illeity” – of the good beyond being – ends up merging, strangely enough, with the impersonality of the *il y a* is a point already stressed by Critchley in his “Blanchot-inspired re-reading of Levinas” (89) in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*. The acknowledgement of such confusion and of the recurrence of the trace of the *il y a* that haunts Levinas’s oeuvre leads Critchley to the question of ambiguity, ultimately the “felt ambiguity between the transcendence of evil and that of goodness” (93). In this ambiguity he recognizes the ineradicable resource for the preservation of ethical sense and, resorting to Blanchot, he asserts the possibility and productivity of a reading of Levinas that, by suspending “God” and the “good beyond being,” is able to linger in the third space of the neuter. Critchley concludes by proposing an, albeit summary, definition of what he calls “atheist transcendence” (97) that, not surprisingly, has stirred quite a lively debate.⁸

⁸ For Lis Thomas, Critchley’s “notion of ‘atheist transcendence,’ in its affirmation of Blanchot’s third, misinterprets Levinas’s position” (161) or, as Christopher Watkins puts it, “such secularization is in vain for it can never rid itself of the inaccessible God be-

I will return to the question of atheist transcendence in the conclusion, after my Weil-inspired re-reading of Levinas. Presently, I concentrate on the one point at which my argument departs significantly from Critchley's, namely in the interpretation of Levinas's account of the intersubjective relation and, more specifically, of the significance of the neutrality of the third-person position within that same relation.

Let me begin by referring to a sentence that immediately follows the passage quoted above from "God and Philosophy." "In this confusion" Levinas states, referring to the possible merging of illeity with the *il y a*, "substitution for the neighbor gains in dis-interestedness, that is, in nobility" (141). The confusion, then, far from being just a mistake on the part of an inattentive or ignorant subject, is located at the very heart of the ethical experience of substitution, the main core of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*. In other words, this ambiguity is – as Critchley himself suggests – not contingent but crucial to Levinas's ethics. Yet a question remains: Why would this confusion bestow nobility on the experience of substitution?

The key term here is "dis-interestedness." Leaving aside the obvious Kantian overtones, it is worth concentrating on the direct equivalence that Levinas establishes between essence and interestedness as well as with "the extreme synchronism of war" ("Essence and Disinterestedness" 110-11). As previously mentioned, "[e]ssence as synchrony is togetherness in a place" (*Otherwise than Being* 152). If this is the case, then it becomes clear that disinterestedness in the experience of substitution has to be understood in terms opposed to both synchrony and togetherness and that, as a result, the relation between self and other, to be ethically meaningful, cannot do without a movement of transcendence that, I would argue, needs to be interpreted also as displacement along the lines of diachrony and distance.

In his delineation of Levinas's (and Blanchot's, one might add) understanding of the "relation without relation," Critchley maintains:

yond its limits. There is no such thing as 'atheist transcendence'" (192). This position closely recalls Alain Badiou's argument against Levinas's philosophy as a mere "category of pious discourse" (23) in *Ethics*: "[t]here can be no Other if he is not an immediate phenomenon of the Altogether-Other. There can be no finite devotion to the non-identical if it is not sustained by the infinite devotion of the principle to that which subsists outside it. There can be no ethics without God the ineffable" (22). As it will be made clear in the remainder of this essay, my argument is deeply indebted to Critchley's formulation of "atheist transcendence," although I will arrive at it by following a rather different path.

The relation between myself and the other only appears as a relation of equality, symmetry and reciprocity from a neutral, third-person perspective that stands outside that relation. When I am within the relation, then the other is not my equal and my responsibility towards them is infinite. It is such a non-dialectical model of intersubjectivity that Levinas has in mind, I think, with the notion of the “relation without relation.”

(*Infinitely Demanding* 59-60)

What I would like to draw attention to, in this passage, is not so much the formulation of the absolute relation in terms of non-dialecticity, with which I would agree. My main concern here is with the reduction of the third, as the element external to the dyadic relation, to a secondary, merely accessory position that acquires significance only within the realm of politics. Conversely, what I have tried to argue for in this paper is a view of this third element (*les tiers* of the political dimension, but also the confused and confusing double instance of the *il y a* and illeity) as operating within the ethical relation itself, as a central instance of interruption and displacement. As anticipated in the introduction, my claim is that the obliquity of my relation to the other is not simply a result of its asymmetry and irreciprocity, but also of its being a relation that is always already opened *by* and *to* a third term. A relation that, because of this, never leads to fusion but disrupts the logic of dialogue between the I and the you – a logic that, as it were, presumes their reciprocal presence at the moment and place of enunciation – through the spatial opening of a distance and diachronic displacement.⁹ And this opening could be thought, to quote Levinas, as a “third direction of radical *unrectitude*” (“Meaning and Sense” 61), an absolute obliquity that interrupts the dyadic relation opening up a field that could, I would argue, actually constitute the liminal and precarious space for the event of “a collectivity that is not a communion” (*Time and the Other* 94).¹⁰

⁹ As Adriaan T. Peperzak suggests in a footnote to “Meaning and Sense,” tracing the etymological derivation of *illeity*, the French *il* or the Latin *ille* indicate “that one there, at a distance” (117n72).

¹⁰ The community of lovers that Blanchot describes in *The Unavowable Community* resonates closely with what I envisage here. It is only a third space of “empty intimacy,” for instance, that preserves the lovers “from playing the comedy of a ‘fusional or communal’ understanding” (49). Similarly, in his reference to Georges Bataille’s *récit Madame Edwarda*, the infinite passion of the protagonist can enter in relation with Edwarda as “the absolute that rejects any assimilation” (48) only by means of the interposed and utterly contingent presence of the driver. On the spatial and temporal displacement of the relation, as well as the presence/absence of the third, see also the opening dialogue of Blanchot’s *The Infinite Conversation*: “They take seats, separated by a table, turned not

3. Ethics in the Absence of God: Levinas and Weil

In her essay “On Human Personality,” Simone Weil attacks the philosophical discourse of Personalism – with direct reference to the writings of Jacques Maritain – and the tradition of human rights that Personalism founds and sustains. For Weil, the notion of rights is strictly dependent on power, as any claim or demand must be enforced by some power already in place behind it. Differently stated, in the paradoxical mechanism of human rights, it is exactly the powerless that are excluded from their exercise. Furthermore, according to Weil, positing the person as the inviolable core of human beings will not be able in any way to stop the violence and the atrocities that are committed against the powerless.

“What exactly prevents me from putting out the eyes of this man if I am allowed to and I feel like doing it?” (12), Weil asks. It certainly is not because I would damage or violate his “person”; on the contrary, although bloody and blind, he would still be a person. What would stop my hand – what is “sacred” about this man, according to Weil – is not his person or personality but the impersonal cry, silent and at the same time devastating, that would emerge from him as the result of a contact with injustice through suffering.

In a similar vein, for Levinas, the nudity of the face does not have much to do with the concept of the person, but emerges from “the cracks in the mask of the personage,” in the “wrinkled skin” of the Other (“God and Philosophy” 181). In a further move, which is again strikingly similar to that of Weil, the being of the Other “‘without resources’ has to be heard like cries not voiced or thematized, already addressed to God” (“God and Philosophy” 181). Or, as Levinas puts it again in “Transcendence and Height”: “I alone can perceive the ‘secret tears’ of the Other” (23). My infinite responsibility toward the Other, then, does not stem from the face of God – the Altogether-Other – that would shine forth through the face of the personal Other. The absolute transcendence of illeity, as Levinas himself points out, turns into an absence, an echo chamber, the empty space where the call of the Other – also Weil’s impersonal cry – reverberates.

toward one another, but opening, around the table that separates them, an interval large enough that another person might consider himself their true interlocutor, the one for whom they would speak if they addressed themselves to him” (xiv).

Conclusion: Beyond Passivity

The readings of nausea and insomnia that I have tried to sketch have shown how Levinas's phenomenological approach breaks with Husserlian intentionality not in the direction of an "inverted intentionality" but in the sense of a more complex interplay of activity and passivity that could possibly open up space for further reflections and a rethinking of agency not necessarily limited to the work of Levinas. What this discussion has tried to highlight is the process through which consciousness becomes an object of perception itself instead of consciousness *of* something – controlled, watched over, radically passive, and yet inextricably implicated in what is happening to it, thus attesting to the too often concealed constitutive ambiguity that, I believe, lies at heart of any ethical claim, or claim about ethics.

The uncanny coincidence between the night of the *il y a* and the radical transcendence of illeity has, in its turn, offered the possibility to imagine the dyadic relation of Self and Other in a more "communal" sense, as always already disturbed, displaced, and interrupted by a third term. And it is in this moment of interruption and in the space opened by the obliquity of the relation that I have located the possible field of a community without communion or *ethos*.

To conclude, let me briefly come back to the idea of "atheist transcendence." Whether understood as "the absence, disaster, and pure energy of the night that is beyond the law" (Critchley, *Ethics* 161) or, in my interpretation, as the third, empty space that opens up between Self and Other and in which the impersonal cry as ethical demand reverberates, it does not need to consign us to the detached (nihilist) passivity of "pious discourses," as Badiou would have it, nor to a meaningless paralyzing terror. Perhaps, beyond the horror of this starless night, the "dis-aster" that Blanchot (and Critchley) ascribe to the *il y a* and Levinas's unfulfillable metaphysical "de-sire," as the oblique trajectory of longing that takes the Self out of itself and toward the Other, without goal nor destination, might have more "in common" than their simple etymological roots.

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