



The Primacy of Ethics, The Dangers of Reductionism

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*Agonies are one of my changes
of garments.*

*I do not ask the wounded
person how he feels;*

*I myself become the wounded
person.*

*My hurts turn livid upon me as
I lean on a cane and observe.*

-Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

*What we don't know, it is worth
remembering, is infinite.*

-H. Porter Abbott

"Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality;"² thus Emmanuel Levinas begins the preface to *Totality and Infinity* with a reflection on the gravity of the central concern of his work. Levinas' challenge lies in attempting to resolve this moral crisis within a philosophical framework that "does justice to human experiences as they are actually lived in the concrete...without reduction or distortion."³ His solution is to posit the *primacy of ethics*, its rightful position as the basis of the possibility of metaphysics that would refute any attempt to deny its centrality or certainty.

180 years earlier, Immanuel Kant embarked on a similar mission in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that spans the entirety of his subsequent work. Kant's metaphysical program developed in the service of this aim: he rejects determinism in order to salvage the possibility of human freedom necessary for moral responsibility, thereby committing himself to a fragile doctrine of transcendental illusion. Levinas, however, rejects the transcendental idealism of the phenomenology of his forefathers (most notably Edmund Husserl and Kant himself), denying a concern for the relationship between subject and

object in favor of an existentialist focus on the character of Being and the relationship subject and subject (*inter-subjectivity*). I argue, however, that the course of Kant's ethical philosophy has more in common with a Levinasian approach than even Kant intended.

Levinas' *transcendental desire*, his theory of the radical *alterity* of the Other and its effect on the subject, closely mirrors in both procedure and consequence Kant's theory of the sublime, introduced obscurely and transiently in the *Critique of Pure Reason* but not explicated fully until the *Critique of Judgment*. Both refer to specific human experiences that, they argue, establish the centrality of ethics in metaphysics, and both of these experiences entail a confrontation with an impression of *infinity* that leads the subject to recognize the inherently ethical nature of his existence and of humanity at large. In both cases, impressions of infinity "overflow" our sensible intuition with their incomprehensibility yet simultaneously fortify our awareness of our own freedom. For Kant, a subject's experience of a seemingly infinite magnitude in nature, in comparison with which he feels infinitely small and defenseless, leads to an inverse realization of the indomitable freedom and moral law within him; for Levinas, the experience of the *face-to-face* – a subject's physical and linguistic encounter with another, who is recognized as *infinitely other* and yet irresistibly fascinating – initiates the subject's comprehension of his ethical responsibility.

I believe that an analysis of these two theories and the correlations between them – primarily between Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* and Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* – reveals their shared ambitions for an autonomous metaphysics of morality. My intention in this essay is to demonstrate, firstly, that these

experiences of the infinite – Kant’s sublime and Levinas’ *face-to-face* – have parallel structures and produce similar ruptures in the restrictive subjectivity of human experience. Secondly I argue that both Kant and Levinas consider the aesthetic experience of the infinite to be a reinforcement of a *pre-existing* basic ethical nature – not the establishment of ethical instincts themselves but a process by which we become acutely aware of their existence – and that both of their metaphysical doctrines hinge on this dedication to the *primacy* of the realm of ethics.

Thirdly, and perhaps contrary to his conscious intentions, I contend that Kant’s explication of the sublime – and of instances of moral fortitude in general – presupposes not merely a window into the world as it truly is but a *necessary* (albeit ephemeral) *violation* of his commitment to transcendental idealism in order for a true transcendence of the phenomenological world (and thus a moral law) to be possible. I believe that Kant points to this violation in the *Analytics* as well as in specific formulations of the categorical imperative, despite “officially” claiming that it is transcendental idealism itself that allows for freedom and ethics. With respect to this breach of transcendental idealism I contend that, for the purposes of demonstrating the primacy of ethics, Levinas’ existentialist theory of exteriority – though it is *built upon* Kant’s theory of the sublime in many ways – provides a more robust solution (with respect to plausibility and utility) than Kant’s foundation of transcendental illusion.

I. KANT'S THEORY OF THE SUBLIME

Kant contends that when we are confronted with overwhelming natural events we experience a feeling of the sublime. When we observe the open sky in its seeming boundlessness, or a natural disaster that threatens to annihilate us, the sheer magnitude of such impressions of nature appears to our aesthetic judgment as infinite. In such situations, Kant argues, our sensible understanding becomes acutely aware of its own limitations, yet simultaneously this stimulates in us a feeling of might:

Our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea. And so [the imagination], our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power.⁴

The realization that we are incapable of totalizing the idea of infinity despite our reason’s insistence upon this totality makes us feel infinitely small in comparison to such aspects of nature. However, reason demands totality nonetheless; thus at the same time that we sense our own powerlessness, we also recognize within ourselves the supersensible capabilities of reason. The fusion of these conflicting sensations, “harmonious by virtue of their contrast,”⁵ awakens in us an awareness of ourselves as external to the world of sense. This awareness is significant for Kant, as his philosophy hinges on *transcendental idealism*, the idea that our perception of the world does not reflect the world as it is in itself but merely the world of phenomena as it appears to us through *our* conditions of space and time. Thus it is critical that in moments of the sublime “the mind...*fails to comprehend the phenomenal world*; as a result, the subject turns to reflect on itself independently of the spatiotemporal conditions of empirical consciousness, experiencing ‘respect for the idea within ourselves, as subjects.’”⁶ This respect “makes intuitable for us the superiority of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility.”⁷ In this way we are guided by our feeling of inadequacy in the face of the infinite to recognize the supremacy of our freedom (and thus our inner moral law) over even the greatest feats and threats of nature.

Consider the conclusion to his second critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or

were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence. The former begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and enlarges my connection therein to an unbounded extent ... The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity, but which is traceable only by the understanding, and with which I discern that I am not in a merely contingent but in a universal and necessary connection.⁸

The starry heavens, which exceed our sensory capacities in their potential infiniteness, defy empirical comprehension and “threaten to annihilate the human sense of worth;”⁹ in contrast to their boundlessness we feel infinitely small. Yet the boundless skies evoke both fear and *delight*; they give the subject an awareness that the might of nature “has no dominion over us,”¹⁰ (or, more specifically, over our freedom from nature as moral agents). The might of nature cannot compare to the might of our own natures, to the indestructible moral law within us; our fearful admiration for nature becomes a fearless admiration of humanity. Because we recognize our physically destructible selves, the empirical “I,” “we come to realize that there is a power within us that no natural power can destroy.”¹¹ This power is the power of the *Ought*, to which Kant refers in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, long before his full explication of the sublime: “The *Ought* expresses a species of necessity [for humanity] and a connection with grounds which do not occur anywhere else in the whole of nature.”¹²

Thus we know our “intelligible” character only “when we motivate our actions by the necessity of the *Ought*.”¹³ The source of this moral necessity can be found only in the free subject; Kant argues that we can, under specific circumstances (namely, experiences of the sublime), *experience* ourselves as free and spontaneous agents. The sublime is a recognition of “the idea of humanity in our own self,”¹⁴ caused by “the subjective play of the mental powers (imagination and reason) as harmonious by virtue of their very contrast;”¹⁵ that is, caused by our

reason’s inability to totalize our imagination’s idea of infinity.

II. LEVINAS ON *THE OTHER*

Levinas’ theory of *transcendental desire* reflects a similar move from a confrontation with the idea of infinity to a recognition of moral responsibility. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues for a specific type of inter-subjectivity that hinges on a non-reciprocal relation of responsibility; a subject can never know or understand an Other, but in a *face-to-face* with the Other (i.e., a physical confrontation), the subject is necessarily drawn to him and finds himself morally accountable in front of him. All aspects of the world that can be subsumed under a totality with the subject Levinas calls *the same*; that which cannot be totalized due to its “infinitely other nature” he calls *the other*. The self, even with all its different states of mind, is always the *same* to a subject, as is the world of his experience (i.e., the world as he knows it); though the world may “resist” perception, it is fundamentally *the subject’s* perception that is obscured in such a case and thus the world is still part of the *same*. What is necessarily *other* is the self of *another* subject and the world as *he* knows it; in that any objective understanding of the world is limited by my subjectivity, my understanding of other people is hindered both by my subjectivity and by *their* subjectivity. The Other as a subject is necessarily mysterious to me; he lives in his subjective world and not mine, and is thus not *mine* to perceive. He is unknowable in his absolute otherness.

The *transcendental desire* is the attraction a subject has to that which is infinite in its incomprehensibility (that is, the Other). This does not reflect a *need*; in fact, it is always easier for me to keep to myself, to think internally, and to make use of my world for my own purposes. Rather, the Other represents a *desire* for that which transcends me and my self-centered categories. Nor is it with the hope of *fulfillment* of the transcendental desire that we feel ourselves responsible to him:

The explication of the meaning that an ego other than me has for me – primordial me – describes the way in which the Other wrenches me from my hypostasis, from the *here*, at the heart of being or the center of the world where, privileged, and in this sense primordial, I posit myself...I see myself from the Other's vantage point; I expose myself to the Other; I have to render account.¹⁶

Levinas' theory is thus based on an existentialist notion of radical subjectivity, which precisely *allows* for the absolute otherness of the Other, and yet is unique even within existentialism, in that it primarily focuses not on the interior play of a subject's thoughts and representations but on the exterior life of the subject as he relates to other subjects. It is the Other's invisibility, his unknowable yet equally legitimate being to our own, that allows us to enter into a relationship with him without entering into a *totality* with him: "the identification of the same is not the void of a tautology nor a dialectical opposition to the other, but the concreteness of egoism."¹⁷ The Other must remain autonomous, unable to be subsumed under my perceptions due to his foreign subject-hood. The primordial subject is *at home* in his subject-hood, where he knows and commands himself, and is only drawn away from his center when he enters into a *face-to-face* with the Other, whose absolute otherness forces the subject to recognize the Other's unintelligible but indubitable subject-hood, and whose face immediately stimulates the subject's intuition of ethical responsibility toward the Other.

In stark contrast to the structural character of Kant's metaphysics, Levinas argues that it is only in this sense that there is any formal structure in the world: "the idea of Infinity in us."¹⁸ But because the infinite cannot be brought into a total system with the subject, this formal structure is only as meaningful as the subject holds himself accountable; like Kant, Levinas believes that our subjectivity makes us free from determinism, and thus we are *actively* responsible for our lives. For Levinas, ethics is a "first philosophy;" it is an entity independent of subjectivity (despite its dependence on the will for

its *exercise*), and yet it is integral to the subject. In this way, ethical responsibility is an *intuition*, rather than a product of the intellect, and thus *precedes* relations that are rooted in the intellect. Levinas posits this "relation without relation"¹⁹ as "the ultimate structure,"²⁰ but not as a totalized *system*. The Other is too *other* for such a totality. "I may simply treat [the Other] as a different version of myself, or, if I have the power, place him under my categories and use him for my purposes. But *this means reducing him to what he is not*. Thus the question remains, how can I coexist with him and still leave his Otherness intact?"²¹

Levinas' answer to this question is found in the experience of the *face-to-face*. When I am physically confronted with the Other, when I look into his eyes and focus on *his* Being, my ability to remain in my own subjective world and to make use of the world around me solely for my own purposes is fractured. Suddenly I am able to break out of my subjective site and see myself as an object of perception for the Other whose human face, the ultimate symbol of humanity, is set in front of mine. The idea of infinity (as represented by the Other) is laid before me during the *face-to-face*: infinity is given to my imagination as an idea but is not able to be *understood* by me. The "strangeness" of the Other's face is not explicable; I do not know what it might conceal; but I do know that this strangeness for me must be *sameness* to him. The Other is a verifiable subject to me despite his otherness; his unified egotism is the scope of his world as much as my world exists for me. For Levinas, the indubitable quality of this concept is demonstrated through the face, through the undeniable humanity it conveys.²²

The purposeful *gaze* of the Other seeks a response from me, causes me to question my world and how it is perceived by others. I am thus drawn to the Other; I desire to make my world more apparent to him, to shape myself as I would like the Other to see me. Such communication subsequently entails another component of Levinas' theory: the conversation. The gaze of the Other does not merely request a gaze in return; the *face-to-face* also includes the appeal that I put my world *into words* and offer it to the Other

(this offers a proposal for why it is only the *human* face, which is capable of further communication than the merely visual, that elicits such a desire in us). “Responsible communication depends on an initial act of generosity,” Levinas writes, “a giving of my world to him with all its dubious assumptions and arbitrary features. They are then exposed to the questions of the Other, and an escape from egotism becomes possible.”

Stranger also means free one. Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site ... The *relation* between the same and the Other – upon which [this theory] seems to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language.²³

However, this conversation does not totalize the relationship, in that language is limited and fundamentally interpretive, and therefore a distance is maintained not only between the subject and the Other but also between the subject and *what is said by him*. The face-to-face neither “binds [the subject] down nor limits him.”²⁴ In fact, the conversation *enlivens* the autonomy of the subject by allowing the Other to de-center him from his often unconscious Being “at home”²⁵ and releasing the subject’s spontaneity through the freedom with which he *chooses* how to present his world to the Other with language. This is a Nietzschean sort of understanding of autonomy, one which revolves around the freedom exercised in *self-shaping*. And the same is true of the Other: “...he does not merely present me with lifeless signs into which I am free to read meanings of my own. His expressions bear his *meanings*, and he is himself present to bring them out and defend them.”²⁶ Thus it is also necessary that “we pay attention to the Other and take account of him and the strange world he inhabits;”²⁷ this is the only way in which the conversation can be serious and ethically fruitful.

III. THE SUBLIME, THE FACE-TO-FACE, AND MORTALITY

Note how Levinas’ description of the *face-to-face* is

remarkably similar to Kant’s description of the sublime: upon an aesthetic experience of infinity (viewing the boundless sky, or the unknowable face of the Other), we become conscious of our mind’s inability to totalize such an incalculable idea, despite our reason’s desire to do so, and thus the infinite leads to a recognition of our ability to transcend our subjective capacities (the phenomenal world for Kant, or the subject’s primordial site for Levinas). In Levinas’ articulation: “Perfection exceeds conception, overflows the concept; it designates distance: the idealization that makes it possible is a passage to the limit, that is, a transcendence, a passage to the absolutely other. The idea of the perfect is an idea of infinity.”²⁸ Similarly, if one reads Kant’s theory of the Sublime substituting “the Other” in the place of “nature,” it is easy to see the correlations between his and Levinas’ ethics. The infinite wrenches us from our subjective world, making us recognize our own ability for self-affection that holds us responsible for our ethical comportment. Rather than the infinite as a reflection of the absolute *magnitude* of certain natural events, Levinas’ infinite is the other person, the target of my ethical responsibility himself, whose absolute *otherness* allows for the self-intuition of our freedom as subjects. For both, though, it is a direct comprehension of the conflict between *totality and infinity* that leads us to fully recognize the autonomy of the moral subject: human reason demands that we perceive the world in terms of totalities, yet the idea of infinity resists totalization *by definition*. In this way the idea of the infinite, stemming from nature for Kant and from foreign subject-hood for Levinas, represents to us the primacy of our ethical being; the contrast of our necessary desire for the infinite, its refusal to submit to our powers of totalization, and the refusal nonetheless of these powers to give up their pursuit of totality, reminds us of our free will and forces us to hold ourselves accountable for this will.

For both Kant and Levinas, this experience necessarily stems from the free subject; but the experience of infinity itself is one of seeing oneself as both subject and *object*, both owner and owned. For Kant, we see ourselves as the object of our own

representations, and we see that this self is powerless in the face of nature; at the same time, this allows us to recognize ourselves as the autonomous subject of our choices, which are necessarily bound to ethical concerns. “[Man], who knows all the rest of nature solely through the senses, knows himself also through pure apperception.”²⁹ For Levinas, the experience of the Other necessitates a recognition of oneself as an object (from the Other’s perspective); this de-centers the subject, forcing him to reflect upon how he appears to others as an object as well as how he presents himself as a subject. The face-to-face reminds us of our moral responsibility by a visual stimulus in which we encounter the Other in all his (physical) humanity; in his eyes we immediately recognize his mortality and his suffering, and link it to our own.

Indeed, mortality plays a crucial role in the psychology of both these experiences of morality. For Levinas, the human face acts as a catalyst for our recognition of universal human suffering; moreover, as Levinas claims: “To die for the invisible – this is metaphysics.”³⁰ That is to say, appreciation and respect for the transcendental desire is, for Levinas, “the very elevation of height and its nobility.”³¹ For Kant, overwhelming natural events incite fear in us because they threaten our lives; in fact, this is precisely how we recognize the supremacy of the moral law. Our physical mortality reminds us of the immortality of human freedom. For both Kant and Levinas, an ethical mindset is closely related psychologically to an awareness of one’s own mortality.

In conjunction with the concept of mortality is the idea of *bravery*; both Kant and Levinas point to a certain lack of fear necessary for realization of our inner ethical nature. Levinas argues that it is *easier* to bypass the Other and live one’s life at the center of one’s own world, but that this is to sacrifice a great portion of one’s ability for self-reflection and self-affection. Kant conjectures that the most respected man in all cultures is “the soldier...who is undaunted, who knows no fear, and who, therefore, does not give way to danger...[but] there is then

further required of him that he should also exhibit all the virtues of *peace*,”³² implying that there is a necessary connection between nobility and fearlessness on the one hand and peacefulness and ethicality on the other. This also implies that – although Kant calls morality a “duty” that is a necessary law for practical reason just as teleological reasoning is for theoretical reason, and Levinas refers to it as an “obedience” which is apparent to us prior to the systematic logic that also inhabits our encounters with the Other – our ethical natures are *our responsibility*. As is obvious enough in the human experience, not everyone is in touch with their inner moral law; its activation requires both fearlessness and a certain *dissatisfaction* with the shallow and largely conditioned nature of existence “at home with oneself,” i.e., in the subject’s solitary world. In that a viable ethics must stem from the subject’s free will, the subject is free to *commit himself* to ethicality as well; inner moral law must be *developed* and *cultivated* by the subject.

Kant’s refutation of the objectivity of theoretical reason, which precisely allows for practical reason to serve its purpose, implies that the application of reason to elements of the human experience is more complicated than its application to the natural world. For example, in nature, we accept death as necessary and it is considered part of life; in humans, it is seen as tragedy and suffering and is generally perceived as an injustice, despite its being equally necessary for us as it is in nature. This is to say that the ideas of justice and injustice (i.e., ethics) inhabit the exclusive realm of pertaining only to humanity and not to the rest of nature. In correlation, Levinas insists that mere objects, as well as the world itself, are part of the “sameness” of the subject, in that they can be other but never *absolutely* other; the Other, however, escapes our grasp by an essential element, is never wholly “in our site.” The Other is *infinitely* other because I recognize in him the same right to justice that I recognize in myself; his infinity *stems* from his humanity, from *his autonomy from nature*.

IV. KANT’S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR EPISTEMOLOGY

In order to leave room for free will, essential for the establishment of moral accountability, it is necessary to deny determinism; if the state of the world is necessarily determined as such, it is impossible to conceive of intentionality or responsibility at all. Kant presents a series of challenges to the sovereignty of pure reason itself in an attempt to refute determinism; it is our erroneous use of reason that leads us to deterministic conclusions, he argues. In the *Antinomies of Pure Reason*, Kant demonstrates that theoretical reason leads to self-contradictory conclusions by positing two contradictory theses and proving them both to be true through a *reductio ad absurdum* of the other; thus Kant establishes the “cosmological conflict of reason with itself,”³³ ascertaining that theoretical reason is illusory. He maintains that it is necessary to *assume* theoretical reason for the sake of inquiry, but that any theoretical conclusions stemming from this dialectical illusion are illusorily conceived and must be regarded as such.³⁴ Subsequently, he posits transcendental idealism as a solution to this problem:

On the assumption that our cognition from experience conforms to its objects as things in themselves, the unconditioned cannot be thought at all without contradiction, but ... if we assume that our representation of things as they are given to us does not conform to these things as they are in themselves but rather that these objects as appearances conform to our way of representing, then the contradiction disappears.³⁵

At the core of Kant’s transcendental illusion is his claim that human perception takes place through the *a priori* forms of the mind, space and time, which are not intrinsic to things-in-themselves but are supplied by our cognition; thus we can know things only as they appear to us in space and time, as mere phenomena, and not as they are in themselves. It is important to note here that this limited cognition includes our own selves: on this view, I cannot even cognize *myself* as a noumenon, I can only *think* myself as such. I am able to cognize myself only as a representation of my mental states to myself:³⁶ “...all

I can do is to represent to myself the spontaneity of my thought ... and my existence is still only determinable sensibly, that is, as the existence of an appearance.”³⁷

Kant’s transcendental idealism focuses not on epistemological insufficiency but rather on the illusorily *dialectic* character of knowledge,³⁸ our “...tendency to indulge in plausible arguments which contradict one another [in order to] undermine the claims of [moral] duty.”³⁹ This elucidates his ultimate purpose in maintaining transcendental idealism: namely, for the sake of positing the existence of inner moral law. For this reason Kant undermines the *status* of theoretical reason, but not our practical reasons for employing it (e.g., morality); his commitment to transcendental idealism, while weakening our epistemological authority, allows for a non-illusory estimation of *practical reason* that can maintain the possibility of freedom:

After speculative reason has been denied all advance in the field of the supersensible, what still remains for us is to try whether there are not data in reason’s practical data for determining that transcendent rational concept of the unconditioned, in such a way as to reach beyond the boundaries of all possible experience... cognitions *a priori* that are possible, but only from a practical standpoint. By such procedures speculative reason has at least made room for such an extension, even if it had to leave it empty; and we remain at liberty, indeed we are called upon by reason to fill it if we can through practical data of reason.⁴⁰

In other words, “...transcendental illusion is not only the root cause of metaphysical error, it is also the necessary condition of the successful operation of the understanding.”⁴¹ We are only applying reason from our limited human perspective; thus it cannot be proven that we are *not free*, and only the possibility of freedom is necessary in order to posit ethics. It is toward this end that Kant professes to “...deny knowledge in order to make room for

faith.”⁴²

V. THE SUBLIME AND THE MORAL LAW: TRANSCENDENCE OF TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM

But is this fragile defense, in fact, the strongest argument Kant offers toward our freedom and moral responsibility? In subtle contrast to this position, Kant writes in the introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

What is still more ... is that certain cognitions seem to expand the domain of our judgments beyond all bounds of experience through concepts to which no corresponding object at all can be given in experience. And precisely in these latter cognitions ... lie the investigations of our reason that we hold to be far more preeminent in their importance and sublime in their final aim than everything that the understanding can learn in the field of appearances, in which we would rather venture everything, even at the risk of erring, than give up such important investigations. These unavoidable problems of pure reason itself are God, freedom, and immortality.⁴³

With respect to passages such as this, which become more explicit in his later works, I do not believe that Kant truly bases his convictions about human freedom and morality on the “faith” for which he has made room through transcendental idealism; in fact, transcendental idealism seems to preclude the possibility of ethics just as determinism does. By committing me to a merely empirical, phenomenological understanding of my own existence (as well as the existence of others), Kant excludes the possibility self-affected existence, of my truly *knowing* myself to be an ethical being, as well as the possibility of my perceiving *other* people as more than mere objects in a play of representations.

On the other hand, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant seems to demonstrate through his theory of the sublime that non-empirical cognition of the self is

possible. For Kant, this consciousness of our own existence as external to empirical and sensible experience directly correlates to our consciousness of ourselves as morally legislated subjects. In experiences of the sublime, we become conscious of the moral law of humanity and its supremacy over even the greatest of natural forces. “We come to realize that there is a power within us that no natural power can destroy - namely, our independence from nature and our freedom as moral beings.”⁴⁴ While Kant maintains that our existence “...is *thoroughly* determinable only sensibly,”⁴⁵ and thus that such self-intuition would not augment the sovereignty of theoretical reason, this supersensible awareness of our own existence represents a considerable advancement in the strength of Kant’s position on moral obligations. I believe that this advancement arises from a rupturing of transcendental idealism at the moment of the subject’s confrontation with the idea of infinity.

The sublime in nature makes our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with [its] might. But ... it raises the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and [we] discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.⁴⁶

I believe that this resistance is the resistance of transcendental illusion we feel at moments of the sublime; it is our resistance to the idea that we can only see ourselves as phenomena, our intuition that we can also know humanity as external to representations. Absolute transcendental idealism is a commitment to an extreme doctrine of illusion along the lines of Nietzsche’s; it allows for the possibility of freedom, but it commits Kant to the position that all objects of experience, including ourselves and other people, are mere phenomena to us. If the sublime gives us an awareness of ourselves as a thing-in-itself (and thus as free, not through faith but through intuition), how can transcendental idealism be maintained during this experience? The sublime violates the limitation of our knowledge to mere representations, and thus it violates

transcendental idealism. Our self-affirmation in the face of the idea of infinity is a transcendence of our empirical selves and the subsequent *cognition* (not merely *recognition*) of our sovereignty from nature. As Levinas himself writes in his little-known essay on Kant: “The very rationality of action demands the freedom that theoretical reason excludes from experience (of the world of the phenomenon) and can neither affirm nor deny beyond experience. Thus, practical reason pushes us to confer being upon ideas that were merely regulative principles for speculative reason, to posit freedom beyond experience ... It demands that freedom not only be regarded as thinkable ...but also upheld without proof as true.”⁴⁷

In this way Kant’s moral philosophy hinges not on faith but on a *defiance* of the necessity of faith. As Kant himself puts it:

The feeling of the sublime in nature is *respect for our own vocation* ... this is a subjective movement of the imagination by which it does violence to inner sense – a violence which must be proportionately more striking the greater the quantum which the imagination comprehends in one intuition.⁴⁸

In light of this passage, it seems almost implausible to me that Kant was unaware of the violation of transcendental idealism necessary for his theory of the sublime. His use of the word “violence” is particularly telling in this regard; and in that he proposes that this violence increases with the magnitude of the object being comprehended, it seems fitting to expect that in the face of something infinite this violence would be intensified to the point of *rupturing* our ordinary state. It is generally permitted that when Kant says “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith,” he is referring to his doctrine of transcendental idealism, which forces him to abandon theoretical reason as illusory but allows him to posit freedom, upon which his ethics is based. However, the possibility of positing oneself in the absence of the sensible world (as Kant claims occurs during the sublime) indicates that it is not faith through which we recognize our

moral imperative but rather through a moment in which we breach the barrier between the phenomenological world and the world of things-in-themselves. The acute recognition of myself as a phenomenon in the face of the infinite leads to the immediate recognition of myself as a noumenon and as free in the transcendental sense, “independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world, at least so far as may be inferred from the destination assigned to my existence by [the moral law], a destination not restricted to the conditions and limits of this life, but reaching into the infinite.”⁴⁹

And it is necessarily so, for without this breach, I believe, Kant could not posit his belief in our inner moral legislation, let alone its certainty. For it is not just ourselves that we must know in order to recognize our moral legislation; we must also be able to recognize the moral law within *others*. Consider the “End in Itself” formulation of Kant’s moral theory of the categorical imperative:

I say that man, and in general every rational being, *exists* as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will; he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed *at the same time as an end* ... Rational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves. Persons, therefore, are not merely subjective ends whose existence as an object of our actions has value *for us*: they are *objective ends* – that is, things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they would serve simply as means; for unless this is so, nothing at all of *absolute* value would be found anywhere. But if all value were conditioned – that is, contingent – then no supreme principle could be found for reason at all.⁵⁰

By Kant’s own standards, it seems, “faith” would be inadequate to legislate the morality that he desires; the categorical imperative, at least in this formulation, necessitates a certain *de-*

phenomenalization of other people (as well as ourselves). In order to see others as ends and not merely means, Kant cannot retain an untarnished transcendental idealism, which would have all people be merely objects of one's *experience*, necessarily *not* features of the world itself. Thus under transcendental idealism people would be mere representations to me – how could they then be of “*absolute value*”? Moreover, how could objects of my cognition, upon which (whom) I thus *project* certain necessary *a priori* features, be “by their nature already mark[ed] out as ends in themselves”? In order for a universal moral law that necessitates the treatment of others as autonomous subjects, we must have at least a momentary ability to recognize *ourselves* as autonomous from nature and free from the superficiality of mere representation, but we must also intuit the autonomy of *others*. Only such a moment could allow us to see the equal humanity in other people. Kant's transcendental illusion offers us the *possibility* of freedom, but cannot offer us an ethics based on a universal recognition of the human condition. However, I believe that the experience of the infinite during the sublime as Kant portrays it satisfies this requirement, though Kant himself did not recognize it as such (rather disregarding the colossal metaphysical problem of *other people* in his work). It seems that the “End in Itself” formulation of the categorical imperative demonstrates Kant's understanding of the infinity represented by the Other, and not only of the aesthetically infinite in nature.

Thus, on my analysis, we come to realize by using practical reason that we *are* capable of knowing one thing-in-itself: humanity. The experience of the sublime causes me to lose my empirical consciousness of myself, foregoing the *a priori* forms of the mind – space and time – that allow me to perceive objects of the senses; and yet, I still perceive that I exist. Thus it cannot be through space and time that I perceive myself (i.e., as a representation), but as a noumenon. Moreover, in recognizing my own supersensory capabilities stemming from my humanity, it must also be possible to extend this cognition to other subjects; I must recognize that the humanity I intuit within myself also represents the

humanity of others. In order to see others as ends and not merely as means, I must recognize them as existing in the real world, not merely as objects of my sensory perception. The problem of other people must be solved for the primacy of ethics to be plausible—for Kant, this necessitates a “hole” in the structure of transcendental idealism; the sublime represents a transcendence of transcendental idealism.

VI. LEVINAS' EXISTENTIALIST ADVANTAGE

Levinas' transcendental desire, if applied to a Kantian framework, would also necessitate our ability to transcend our subjective world of representations: “The idealization that makes [perfection] possible is a passage to the limit, that is, a transcendence, a passage to the absolutely other. The idea of the perfect is an idea of infinity.”⁵¹ Such transcendence is to cross the barrier of subjective experience, toward an understanding of the noumenal character of humanity *beyond sensible being*: “Kant was bold enough to formulate a more radical distinction between thought and knowing. He discovers a plot in the practical usage of pure reason not reducible to being. A good will, as it were utopian, deaf to the information, indifferent to confirmations that could come to it from being, proceeds from a freedom which is situated above being and on this side of knowing and ignorance.”⁵²

In that Levinas is less concerned with conceptual constructions than Kant, he rejects transcendental idealism as not even representing a far-reaching issue; his existentialist framework stresses the alienated nature of the world of the subject, but contends that this subjective experience is as real as we are capable of understanding the word. Thus for Levinas, it is not an issue of the relationship between subject and object; this relation is given as undeniably true *for that subject*, because his subjective scope is all he knows. What is at stake is the relationship between subject and *other subjects*, and what is under investigation, what we desire to understand, is the *nature* of foreign things-in-themselves, of otherness itself, not merely its relationship to us: Levinas pays “less attention to

things as they appear to the separated self, and more attention to the search for what they are in themselves, in their radical otherness, even though this is less certain and always more difficult to find.⁵³

While this pursuit may be more dubitable, Levinas has much less trouble positing his ethical position through this philosophy than Kant does through his. To be fair, Levinas had the advantage of time on his side; writing *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, much insight had been added to the discipline of philosophy since Kant had revolutionized the field with his *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. In the meantime, naturally, progress was made; subtleties were expounded, new structures (or lack thereof) arose. Levinas' rejection of transcendental idealism allows him to fully recognize the importance of *inter-subjectivity*, i.e., the problem of *other people*; looking back on Kant's metaphysical program from the more modern existentialist point-of-view, it is easier to consider in retrospect that the Kantian must at least partially (or periodically) break with transcendental idealism in order to maintain a Kantian position on ethics. As John Wild maintains in his introduction to *Totality and Infinity*: "Without these new developments, Levinas' work would have been impossible."⁵⁴

Yet it is not merely a matter of intellectual evolution; Levinas' theory itself was truly original for its time. It is generally considered that a sturdy ethical philosophy would depend on a "joint sacrifice of self to a neutral, englobing system,"⁵⁵ but Levinas' philosophy is both radically subjective and substantively ethical; all he employs is an empirical understanding of the human ego, how it relates (or is unable to relate) to other egos, and the language used to communicate between them. Thus Levinas avoids the commitment to Nietzschean illusion against which Kant must struggle to posit moral law as a result of his doctrine of illusion (a struggle for which, I argue, he must ultimately *violate* his own doctrine); a repudiation of transcendental idealism makes *sense* in terms of the infinity of the Other because this is precisely how the Other *confirms* our subject-hood, as opposed to challenging it (as

transcendental idealism – the limitation of the Other to a mere phenomenon – would have it).

In addition, Levinas is able to recognize the *not free* – perhaps even the banal or bad – in humanity, without weakening his claim to ethics:

Levinas is not denying that a great part of our speaking and thinking is systematic and bound by logic of some kind. What he is interested in showing is that *prior* to these systems, which are required to meet many needs, and presupposed by them, is *the existing individual and his ethical choice to welcome the stranger* and to share his world by speaking with him.⁵⁶

All that Levinas posits in terms of the *goodness* of this interaction is that the good *can* (and *desires* to) prevail over the bad; this, he argues, is shown by most of humanity's typical avoidance (or, in less fortunate situations, forestalling) of the "instance of inhumanity,"⁵⁷ the moments of wrongdoing to others. Kant, on the other hand, needs more than the mere possibility of freedom in order to posit his moral law, a *necessity*; his strict moral demands require more than his transcendental idealism gives him.

The chief deficiency of Kant's moral system lies in his lack of recognition of the issues that *other people* present to a "metaphysics of morals." He uses his theory of the sublime as a demonstration of how we can realize our inner infinity and independence from the physical world, but neglects to identify the infinity of the *Other* as an *absolute* infinity, absolute owing to its completely foreign, unknowable character. For Levinas, on the other hand, while the self and his subjective world may "offer [themselves] to or resist possession"⁵⁸ by the subject, they are both inherently *knowable* to the subject because they are his own representations of himself and/or to himself. In this way they can be understood within a totality that includes the subject, and are merely a part of *sameness*. Conversely, the Other is not merely relatively but *fundamentally* unknowable.

Thus Levinas' true infinity does not lie within the subject himself, as it does for Kant, but within *other* subjects: "It is not I who resists the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the Other."⁵⁹ Kant's moral law stems from "the invisible self,"⁶⁰ or Levinas, the Other is the *truly invisible*, its subject-hood fundamentally unintelligible. While for Kant the violation of transcendental idealism (if he were to accept such a thing) would be caused by *oneself*⁶¹ and would thus reflect a "respect" for the self, Levinas' theory hinges on a "respect for exteriority,"⁶² adoration not for oneself but for otherness, for the Stranger. If Levinas were to adopt the terminology of Kant's sublime, he might posit the aesthetic experience of the Other as the ultimate experience of the sublime.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

"Morality commenced with the noblest attribute of human nature, the development and cultivation of which gives a prospect of infinite utility; and ended – in fanaticism or superstition."⁶³ Kant refers here to the *primacy* of ethics, its centrality to the possibility of his metaphysical program. Such a primacy, I believe, must violate transcendental idealism in order to be posited – though, as Kant points out in the same sentence, without transcendental idealism this primacy would lead us to dogmatism. Thus a belief in the objectivity of theoretical reason makes us dogmatists; but in addition, I believe, we are also dogmatists if our morality depends merely on *faith*, if we lack a reference to a momentary *breach* of transcendental idealism that somewhat paradoxically *does* allow for objective knowledge.

One must ask, though, why we are so concerned with the position of human freedom in the first place. In that it is generally considered *our* responsibility to develop and cultivate our ethicality, it is implied that we do not always necessarily use our free will to act *well*. This sets the playing field at a disadvantage for morality; there is a pre-existing notion of injustice that it must counter. But perhaps this is precisely *why* we concern ourselves with the idea of our own freedom and with the more fundamental question: why is there *something* instead of *nothing*? As

Schopenhauer puts it:

Philosophy, like the overture to Don Giovanni, starts with a minor chord... The more specific character of the astonishment that urges us to philosophize obviously springs from the sight of the evil and wickedness in the world. If our life were without end and free from pain, it would possibly not occur to anyone to ask why the world exists.⁶⁴

Thus Schopenhauer posits the *ultimate* primacy of ethics, the idea that the origin of philosophy itself lies in our awareness of injustice as we experience it in the world and the subsequent question of *why* it is so. By the tenets of the theoretical reason itself, we need a *reason* to begin employing it; in other words, we must ask the question "why ask why?" Schopenhauer's answer to this question is that only an experience of injustice could lead us to ask "why?" and thus instigate the causal chain of the reason that stems from this initial question. That is to say, there is no motivation to begin applying theoretical reason unless there is an ethical question *first*: "By making the Moral Law "the principle for the deduction of an inscrutable faculty: freedom" (CPrR 49/48-9), Kant ... has established an independent interest on the part of morality in the Idea of freedom. Theoretical reason indeed demands that freedom be thinkable in its attempt to think the unconditioned in a causal series and attain completeness, *but it is morality that provides the only rational interest in asserting that it has objective reality.*"⁶⁵

Not only does this reflect Kant's renunciation of the theoretical reason in order to avoid determinism, it reflects Levinas' explanation of our ethical obligation to the Other as well: when we are *face-to-face* with the Other, we recognize his suffering, his mortality – in short, his *humanity* in all its frailty – and we reflect upon this suffering, asking *why it is so*. On a Schopenhauerian reading, this questioning echoes the primary reason we ask *why* at all: our experience of both justice and injustice, the question of why the world is not always simply good, as well as *how* we might improve its goodness. In short, the initial questioning of the world originated from the questions of ethics.

The conclusions of our basic philosophical questions, Levinas argues, are to be found in ethics; the way that I *choose* to exist conveys my answer to these questions.

As John Wild points out in his introduction to *Totality and Infinity*:

One answer is given by the totalizers who are satisfied with themselves and with the systems they can organize around themselves as they already are. A very different answer is given by those who are dissatisfied, and who strive for what is other than themselves, the infinitizers, as we may call them. The former seek for power and control; the latter for a higher quality of life. The former strive for order and system; the latter for freedom and creative advance ... Many examples of the former can be found in the history of our Western thought. The latter is largely unknown and untried.⁶⁶

This opposition between control and systematization on the one hand and freedom and moral advancement on the other, between totality and infinity, supports my reading of Kantian ethics as necessitating a *breach* in his metaphysical structure; it substantiates the idea that an inherent *lack of structure* is necessary in order to posit freedom and a robust morality:

For Levinas, it is not rationality that makes the will good but responsibility for the Other ... This entails the adoption of maxims of nonreciprocal and non-universalizable action, presupposing the spontaneous capacity to act independently of pure practically legislative reason Is it so certain that the entire will is practical reason in the Kantian sense? Does the will not contain an incoercible part that the formalism of universality could not oblige? Levinas is not saying that a Kantian good will is not good. What he is calling into question is the Kantian claim that *a complete account of moral willing can be given in terms of universal law*. Implicit in the reference to "incoercible

spontaneity," attesting to the difference between persons, according to Levinas, is the suggestion that moral goodness resides in the capacity of the [individual] will to disregard reason no less than in its capacity to follow reason.⁶⁷

In this way, Levinas' existentialism is an overcoming of the structurality of previous philosophies such as Kant's. Even Heideggerian existentialism, which insists that our *angst* is due to the lack of objective meaning in the world but that a confrontation of this truth is the only authentic path, left Heidegger himself with a desire for structure more than for morality (as his personal choices made clear). As Wild remarks, many examples of the inclination toward totality can be found in history, particularly observable in the reactionary neo-Hegelianism of the 20th century, of which just one disheartening example is Heidegger's support of the Nazi regime. The word *totalitarianism* itself reflects its loyalty to the purpose of order, control, and totality.

Partiality towards freedom and infinity, on the other hand, as Wild asserts, remained largely untested until recent history.⁶⁸ This is obviously the stance Levinas seeks to take. But I believe that it is also potentially a Kantian stance: for example, Kant distinguishes between the "...theoretical point of view that looks to the interests of our faculty of knowledge" and "...the broadening of the mind, that from another (the practical) point of view feels itself empowered to pass beyond the narrow confines of sensibility."⁶⁹ This is in fact the distinction between totality and infinity, the latter of which Kant chiefly seems to value, in that he denies the veracity of the theoretical point of view due to its attempts to totalize that which by definition cannot be totalized (i.e., infinity).

And yet, Kant could not relinquish his structure and his control to the point that would be necessary, I believe, in order for him to put forward a viable morality. Perhaps this reflects Wild's point about the dominance of totality over infinity in Western thought, as well as Schopenhauer's point about the origins of philosophy: it seems we have an innate partiality toward order and totality. With its

inherent restrictions on the infinite and on freedom, this desire for control begets the original injustice, “...the sight of evil and wickedness in the world,” that subsequently leads us to ask the question “*why?*” and to discover (in contrast to our penchant for stability and control) the primacy of our ethical intuition and our *dissatisfaction* with the character of the world (costly though it is for our comfortable complacency). In this way “phenomenology’s search for the ‘concrete’ and for ‘horizons’ of meaning is led, beyond any expectation of Husserl’s, to the *infinitely abstract concreteness* of the Other’s nonobjective moral claim and to the horizon of justice that belongs neither to consciousness nor to the world,” but only to the relation between the subject and the Other.⁷⁰

If the only concrete horizon of meaning available to the phenomenologist is the “...infinitely abstract concreteness of the Other,” this designates the supremacy of infinity over totality; in searching for a concrete totality that avoids distortion or reductionism, the phenomenologist would come to the conclusion that the only horizon available is not a concrete totality, as he hoped, but an *abstract infinity*. Anything that can be broken down into parts or integrated as a part into a system, i.e., anything *quantifiable* and thus *totalizable*, is fundamentally knowable; it is the *infinite*, on the other hand, that we must *strive* for, in the hope of “...the words to come,”⁷¹ of an improvement of the quality of life for humanity, and of an offsetting of the intrinsic injustice of the world by our equally intrinsic yearning for justice.

NOTES

1. Epigraph inspired by that of Cohen, Richard A., *Face to Face With Levinas*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.
2. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, p. 21. Alphonso Lingis, tr. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
3. *Totality and Infinity*, introduction by John Wild, p. 11.

4. Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*, 250. James Creed Meredith, tr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1952.
5. *Critique of Judgment*, 258.
6. Boehm, Omri, *Descartes’ Cogito and Kant’s Sublime: On Self-Knowledge and the Experience of Freedom*, 26 (citing Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, 257).
7. *Critique of Judgment*, 257.
8. Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Practical Reason*, conclusion. Mary J. Gregor, tr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
9. *On Self-Knowledge and the Experience of Freedom*, 27.
10. *Critique of Judgment*, 260.
11. *On Self-Knowledge and the Experience of Freedom*, 27.
12. Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B575. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, tr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
13. *On Self-Knowledge and the Experience of Freedom*, 25.
14. *Critique of Judgment*, 257.
15. *Ibid.*, 258.
16. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Philosophy and Awakening* (1977).
17. *Totality and Infinity*, 38.
18. *Ibid.*, 79.
19. *Ibid.*, 80.
20. *Ibid.*, 80.
21. *Ibid.*, introduction, John Wild.
22. *Ibid.*, 14, introduction.
23. *Ibid.*, 39.
24. *Ibid.*, 14, introduction.
25. *Ibid.*, 37.
26. *Ibid.*, 14, introduction.
27. *Ibid.*, 14.
28. *Ibid.*, 41.
29. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B474-5.
30. *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
31. *Ibid.*, 35.
32. *Critique of Judgment*, 262.
33. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B525.
34. This possibility lies in the distinction between *illusion* and *error*. As Descartes

- recognized with respect to his method of radical doubt, error is a property of *judgment*; if I make no judgments, I cannot be in error. Illusion, on the other hand, is a property of the *senses* and does not entail judgments; thus I can believe in an illusion without technically making an error, as long as I recognize the illusion as such.
35. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxx.
 36. The important distinction here is between *cognizing* and *thinking* something; on the one hand, some content is given to me within the thought such that I know something about it. On the other hand, I am able to think a thought, but there is no *content* within that thought with which I might *understand* the thought.
 37. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B158, footnote.
 38. Allison, Henry E., *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
 39. Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, analysis by H. J. Paton. New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1964.
 40. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxi.
 41. *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 425.
 42. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx.
 43. *Ibid.*, B6-7.
 44. *On Self-Knowledge and the Experience of Freedom*, 26-27.
 45. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B431, emphasis added.
 46. *Critique of Judgment*, 261.
 47. Levinas, Emmanuel, "The Primacy of Pure Practical Reason," trans. Blake Billings, *Man and World* 27 (1994): 451.
 48. *Critique of Judgment*, 257-259, emphasis added.
 49. *Critique of Practical Reason*, conclusion.
 50. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 64-65.
 51. *Totality and Infinity*, 41.
 52. "The Primacy of Pure Practical Reason," 16.
 53. *Totality and Infinity*, 16, introduction.
 54. *Ibid.*, 12, introduction.
 55. *Ibid.*, 14, introduction.
 56. *Ibid.*, 14, introduction.
 57. *Ibid.*, 35.
 58. *Ibid.*, 38.
 59. *Ibid.*, 40.
 60. *Critique of Practical Reason*, conclusion.
 61. Though even this would not be sufficient for the "End in Itself" formulation of the Categorical Imperative unless it was also capable of extending to the autonomy of others.
 62. *Totality and Infinity*, 40, emphasis added.
 63. *Critique of Practical Reason*, conclusion.
 64. Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*, E.F.J. Payne, tr., New York: Dover Publications, 1969.
 65. Atterton, Peter, "From Transcendental Freedom to the Other: Levinas and Kant", from *In Proximity: Emmanuel Levinas and the 18th Century*, Eds. Melvyn New, Robert Bernasconi, and Richard A. Cohen, Texas Tech University Press, 2001, pp. 327-54.
 66. *Totality and Infinity*, 17, introduction.
 67. "From Transcendental Freedom to the Other: Levinas and Kant," 4, emphasis added.
 68. A few notable exceptions are Alexander Herzen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and contemporaries of Levinas' such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Derrida.
 69. *Critique of Judgment*, 255.
 70. Cohen, Richard A., *Face to Face With Levinas*, 57, emphasis added. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.
 71. Celan, Paul, "Todtnauberg", from *Lichtzwang* (1970) in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, pp. 255-256. S.H., tr.; Celan, a Jewish poet, wrote this poem upon visiting Martin Heidegger at his cabin long after the war, before committing suicide in 1970. The poem is about Celan's signing of Heidegger's guest book, and his wondering about "whose names it had received before [his] own".