Eating the other
Levinas’s ethical encounter

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Statement of originality

The work presented in the thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.
My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?

We live from ‘good soup’...

(Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 1961:110).
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**Abbreviating Levinas’s works**


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This thesis is the story of my journey with Emmanuel Levinas on a dystopic path to the ethical encounter. For the journey, I agree to be Levinas’s human subject, to encounter his “other”. And he agrees to traverse a path through my world, a world of food and eating. To ready me for the encounter, Levinas tells me the story of his ethics, narratively (we ‘journey’ through it), and so my thesis is unavoidably ‘story’ too. To preface, then:

The ethical encounter is a “face to face” encounter between a “human” subject (me) and an “other” (TI:39). In my encountering the other face to face in the world of food, food production and eating, Levinas tells the story of the violences of my existence—of my ‘eating’ of the world at the expense of the other. Face to face with the other, I cannot avoid my responsibility for the needs and suffering of the other. In “proximity” with the other, I am guilty for eating; in proximity, I respond by giving the other “bread from [my] mouth” (OB:100).

In the first four chapters of the journey, I am hungry, and Levinas leads me through scenes replete with food and eating. Some of these scenes Levinas had intended to show me, and some he did not; some scenes I show him (I have, after all, asked him into my world). At first, he shows me how this world can satiate my needs, but how it will, inevitably and inextricably, leave me, a not-yet ethical human subject, vulnerable and exposed. So Levinas and I enter scenes that help me avoid exposure: Industrialised production and destruction of animals for food and its sequelae of familiar and dependable home-cooked meals, both temporally and temporarily, secure me from feeling anxious in the world. But, with security, my enjoyment loses its exciting edge.
In chapters five and six, Levinas takes me to the space where the ethical encounter is meant to take place; and he has readied me through vivid story to feel guilty—*I am ready now to give the bread from my mouth to the other*. But there is no other here for me to encounter. I confront Levinas; I ask him to think beyond the security of his own ethical space. I suggest that perhaps the spatial strategies he has shown me to avoid the threats of the world have now all but voided that world itself—voided the possibility of my encountering (any) other(s).

It is here that I leave Levinas, in the silence he offered me in reply, and I walk alone into the final two chapters. I argue (with whom, for there are no others?) that, perhaps, the world around me is a hyper-secured space that refuses to regard the boundaries that Levinas sets upon it. I argue that this space has been voided of responsibility, and I ask: What are the consequences? This final question draws me back (albeit facing in a different direction from that in which I began), to eating. I suggest that all Levinas and I have been through on this journey—avoiding the consequences of my eating the world, avoiding my guilt and responsibility, avoiding a world voided of guilt and responsibility—all this can be avoided: *We can avoid avoidance, and eat it too*. And what will this mean? To my story, then, to the thesis...
Introducing avoidance, violence, and Levinas

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).

Once, food was intimate. If we had not grown or produced it ourselves, then to consume it we had to face its producers. Now, the distance between cities and sites of industrial food production is vast and untraversable.¹ Now, as consumers, our relationship to food is akin to a “one-night stand” (Berry 2002:7): We eat without caring; we do not think about origins or consequences; we avoid thinking about consequences.

We buy food now, devoid of identity beyond its status as ‘carrot’,² produced by a faceless, ‘highly efficient’ system that does not tolerate diversity or variety. We do not know the origin of the carrot (so distant is the systematic and highly technical mode of its production). And its origins are inconsequential to its qualities: Industrialised production can create ‘carrot’ almost anywhere in the world with the same consequences for the carrot—and the same consequences for the world: Soil erosion and salinisation, poisoned ground waters, food-borne illnesses, loss of biodiversity, grossly inequitable labour conditions, grossly altered climatic conditions, famine.

As a consumer, a city dweller, I do not think about my complicity with the out-of-site industrialised production processes that produce food for me. I may think about how the

¹ Michael Symons (1982:10) suggests that Australia, from the time of its invasion, has had to deal with this alienation. Unlike agrarian societies that have built up centuries-old relationships with the land, or the indigenous hunter and gatherers of this country who understood the limits our fragile soils placed on food supply, the first colonialists bypassed these traditions for an immediate reliance on the first products of an industrialising food industry—canned vegetables and meat.

food will sustain me, but I do not think about what sustains *it: I consume* without care or responsibility for origins and consequences, human or nonhuman.

As a student of philosophy and architecture, I have become aware that I am complicit; that I am implicated. And from this awareness comes questions. How and why does distance make it possible for me to avoid thinking about, and taking responsibility for, the violences of industrial food production? How can I confront the distance between food production and eating? What would my responsibility look like if I were to look at it? And how would this confrontation change my world of eating?

In the process of seeking answers to these questions, I found this passage in Levinas’s work:

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).

This passage has led to my journeying with Levinas into his ethics, towards a *face to face* encounter between me and the violence of my existence. This thesis is the story of that journey and my confrontations with avoidance, industrialised food production, eating and ultimately with Levinas himself.4

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3 According to Claude Fischler (1980:945), in modern society, “an ever increasing number of people have become mere consumers, that is, they consume foods they have not helped produce, or even seen being produced”.

4 Despite the chronological way in which I present this story, my subjectivity comes into being in this relation with the other, that is, the other’s face calls me into being, and thus I am, from the beginning, a subject obliged to, or responsible for, the other. I am never an isolated or autonomous individual who “later” discovers his or her sociality. Simon Critchley (1997:77) asks, “should one read Levinas in a linear fashion, as if the claim to ethics as first philosophy were a linear ascent to a new metaphysical summit...?” To this question, I answer, ‘yes, if one finds it useful’. I find it useful to write about Levinas’s ethical subject as a subject who emerges, because it allows me to reinvest the ethical relation with what I have learnt about the subject’s relationship to the world. And Levinas does write about the subject’s relationship with the world as something that is distinct—untroubled even—by guilt or responsibility to the ethical other. Edith Wyschogrod (1989), Oona Ajzenstat (2001) and Wendy C. Hamblet (2004) also take the strategy of thinking of the subject as someone who *emerges*, although not without their own qualifications.
One

Levinas separates the (hu)man from the non(hu)man, using hunger, enjoyment and anxiety to illuminate their relationship

My ‘place in the sun’

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP: 82).
I wish to begin by asking how and where do I encounter “the other” in an ethical manner? This question would be somewhat irrelevant if this “other” were like any other thing that I may come across in the world. If the other were any thing, then I would, perhaps, encounter the other everywhere. But the other is, according to Levinas, specifically and exclusively another human. It follows that my place in relation to this (hu)man must somehow differ from my place in relation to nonhumans. According to Levinas, the condition of being (hu)man does place me in a very particular way within the world, and this opens my existence to the potential of the ethical encounter. I say only the potential of the ethical encounter, rather than the encounter itself, because, at this stage, I am not yet guaranteed of the stability of my ethical position or my status. Nonetheless, for Levinas, to be a (hu)man is to be transcendent: it is already to take a step upward. But what am I stepping up towards? I am stepping towards an absolute otherness, which Levinas

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1 Throughout this thesis, when referring to the ethical subject of Levinas’s making, I will be even more specific. I plan to continually draw attention to the fact that this other human who I encounter face to face, is a ‘(hu)man’. The argument for this is complex and will be drawn out of Levinas’s work by the end of part two of this thesis. It is complex, but also self-evident in Levinas’s work, if one chooses to look for it. At many times, he makes no disguise of it, using the term ‘man’ rather than ‘human’. “It is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me” (TI:73). We could be lenient on Levinas (or his translator), and assume he means human. However, I prefer to be suspicious, and this is why I have chosen to describe Levinas’s human other as (hu)man. Sylvia Beno, in her book The Face of Things (2000:35-7) says “The woman is Autrui [the Other] only as an ef-faced, forgotten other. That is, the woman is not properly Autrui”. Or, even more relevant to this discussion: “To be Autrui, the woman should cease being a woman”; hence my justification for using (hu)man.

For other examples of theorists who have argued that Levinas’s use of the term ‘man’ exceeds grammatical standards of the time, see Luce Irigaray’s “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas” (1991); Helen Chapman’s “Levinas and the Concept of the Feminine” (1988); Morny Joy’s “Levinas, Alterity, the Feminine and Women: A meditation” (1994:463); Kelly Oliver’s Family Values: Subjects Between Nature and Culture (1997:64-5); Craig Vasey’s “Faceless Women and Serious Others: Levinas, misogyny and feminism” (1992:327); and Jacques Derrida’s “At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am” (1991:39-40).
calls alterity. And this alterity is only accessible through a (hu)man face. Furthermore, I, as one such (hu)man, can only access this alterity by encountering the face of another (hu)man. I cannot access it in my own face. The other (hu)man is always more transcendent than I. Nonetheless, I am a (hu)man, and this does give me access to a certain amount of elevation. I may not be placed as high as the 'ethical other', but I am certainly higher than the rest of the world. I am a subject that is beyond, or “above being,” and with this movement upward, the possibility of ethics opens before me. But the light of (hu)man alterity is unbearably bright, so at the moment, I do not look in that direction. Right now, I am content to use my position, and this light, to illuminate the rest of the world. And from up here, the otherness of all other alterity on earth pales in comparison to the alterity of (hu)mans. (Hu)man alterity is entirely unknowable, whereas this world below me is already lit by my perspective on it. This is how Levinas begins the story of my relationship with the world. In the following two chapters, I describe what I believe to be the hidden assertion and safety mechanism underlying Levinas’s descriptions of the subject in the world—that is the fact that, as one such subject, I will not encounter both the world and its alterity at the same time.

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2 There are many writings by Levinas that deal directly with the transcendent notion of ‘above being’. See also: “The Transcendence of Words” (1949 (1989)) “Transcendence and Height” (1996), “From the One to the Other: Transcendence and Time” (1998), and “Transcendence and Evil” (1978 (1998)).
1

A hungry stomach without ears

In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not ‘as for me...’—but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach (TI:134).

Here, where he describes the isolated ego, Levinas says that I am entirely deaf to the Other. I am like a hungry stomach—that is, I am without ears. Now, the question that I ask is, if I am without ears, then what senses am I using to enjoy myself? If I am without ears, can I at least touch, taste, smell and see what I eat? Of all my senses, I would miss hearing the least when I eat. But if I could not see and smell what I am about to eat, if I could not taste what I am eating or savour its textures and flavours, then surely one or any of these losses would result in more disappointment than a soundless meal.

When Levinas says that, in enjoyment, I am a hungry stomach without ears, he is referring specifically to my deafness towards the other (hu)man. In Totality and Infinity, he refers again to this targeted deafness:

It is an existence for itself—but not, initially, in view of its own existence. Nor is it a representation of self by self. It is for itself as in the expression ‘each for himself’; for itself as the ‘famished stomach that has no ears’, capable of killing for a crust of bread, is for itself; for itself as the surfeited one who does not understand the starving and approaches him as an alien species, as the philanthropist approaches the destitute (TI:118).

Although Levinas has the ethical other in mind when writing about this deafness, deafness toward everything seems to be a repercussion, if not a deliberate outcome of

1 After reading Levinas’s paper “Secularization and Hunger,” it became clear that his reference to the “famished stomach that has no ears,” comes from Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel: “So Gaster was created earless.... He only speaks by signs” (Rabelais 1944:652). Gaster is a reference to “Messer Gaster”, which translates to ‘Mr Stomach’ (SH: Translator’s fn. 7). ‘Messer’ is also ‘knife’ in German.
enjoyment. As I am eating chicken soup, I am certainly deaf towards the starving (hu)man, but I am also deaf towards the chicken. However, I imagine that Levinas would say that there is no need to be deaf towards the chicken, for the chicken is not placing any direct ethical demands upon me. It cannot place any demands on me because it has no alterity that would open me to my guilt and responsibility. The world, as it is eaten, does not face me. Levinas says that I engage with the world, predominantly, as something that appears to be given over to my needs. In fact, how the world appears to me, is a major focus of Levinas’s explorations of (hu)man enjoyment. The world appears because I see it. And so, without saying much, Levinas confirms the deafness that I experience toward the rest of the nonhuman world. Instead of hearing, I use sight. In fact, Levinas’s descriptions of the privileged position that my visual relationship with the world allows me are in direct contrast to my absolute inability to use sight to relate to the other (hu)man. Levinas completely undermines vision and light in relationship to alterity, but not, it seems, in relation to the world. I focus in this chapter on Levinas’s descriptions of the spatial relationship between the world and the (hu)man subject, as facilitated by vision.

The world appears to me when I am alone and hungry

I return to “In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone” (TI:134), and I ask what is it to be alone without solitude? For Levinas, this seems to mean that I am separate from everything while still being in the world. I am amongst others, but I still hold them at a distance. “A being...frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance” (TI:116). As one such being, this means that I have

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2 There are several theorists who have dealt with Levinas’s description of the sensual relationship between the ethical other and the (hu)man subject, but have only brushed over Levinas’s rather traditional reliance on light and vision as mechanisms for describing (hu)man cognitive dominance over the world. For examples, see Wyschogrod’s “Doing Before Hearing: On the primacy of touch” (1980); Cathryn Vasseleu’s Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty (1998); Paul Davies’s “The Face and the Caress: Levinas’s ethical alterations of sensibility” (1993); Elizabeth Grosz’s ‘The People of the Book’: Representation and alterity in Emmanuel Levinas” (1987). As far as I can tell, there are very few theorists who have analysed in detail Levinas’s use of visual metaphors outside of the ethical encounter. Irigaray’s paper, “The Fecundity of the Caress: A reading of Levinas, Totality and Infinity section IV, B, ‘The Phenomenology of Eros’” (1993); Richard Cohen’s “Emmanuel Levinas: Happiness is a sensational time” (1981); and Alphonso Lingis’s “The Sensuality and the Sensivity” (1986), are the only examples I have come across.

3 In this chapter, I will undertake a close reading and analysis of Levinas’s descriptions of vision, enjoyment and separation, particularly as they occur in “Interiority and Economy,” “Sensibility and the Face,” and “Exteriority and Language” in Totality and Infinity (TI:109-80,87-91,295-7); as well as “The World,” in Existence and Existents (EE:27-44)Part II of Time and the Other (TO:58-66); and “Intentionality and Sensing” in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (OB:23-45).
managed to wrench myself away from the world.\(^4\) I have bundled up my loose ends and smoothed my edges so that everything that is with me in this separation soon begins to feel like me. My mind and my body are now consistent with what I think of as ‘myself’. I am a totality of myself. I am the same as myself. And as a consequence of this, I also realise that the rest of the world is other to me.

But I must qualify this statement: the world is other to me but it is by no means absolutely other to me. I give another example of how Levinas describes my separation from the world: “The I in the world has an inside and an outside” (EE:39). The inside of the I is what occurs in the mind that makes me think I am a totality. The outside of the I is what occurs outside of my mind, which makes my thoughts appear. But the result of this inside and outside of the I is that everything seems to be given over to my separation. The world appears as I think it to be. There is nothing outside of me that cannot also occur inside of me, represented by my thoughts. There is nothing in the world that is unthinkable.

This correlation between my inside (my mind) and my outside (the world) is made possible because of my sense of vision,\(^5\) because, according to Levinas and many others, there is a very close conceptual link between thinking and vision.\(^6\) Hans Jonas (1953:152),

\(^4\) Ajzenstat (2001:34) describes this process well: “From this [the throbbing of undifferentiated being], a human being wrenches herself, separating herself as a particular, a consciousness, an autonomous being…. Thus, she becomes able to see others as others, or to experience exteriority. But at the same time, and before she meets any others, she finds that in separating herself...she becomes her own sameness, which is to say, a being who is the same as herself, a being who understands herself to be herself, a being who, qua that being, is consistent with herself despite the possible existence of conflicts in the soul”. For a similarly vivid description of this separation, see also Wyschogrod’s “Derrida, Levinas and Violence” (1989:184).

An interesting parallel can be drawn in Julia Kristeva’s description of the role abjection plays in the creation of an autonomous self. The abject is pre-identity: It precedes the distinction between subject and object. (I will describe abjection in more detail in footnote 21 in chapter two.) Using Kristeva’s work, Oliver (1993:fn.10) describes the separation, which I have spoken of in the text, in terms of the subject’s earliest relationship to the object. “The prototypical abject experience...is the experience of birth itself. It is at the birth of the child, and not before, that the identity of the human subject is most visibly called into question. Before the umbilical cord is cut, who can decide whether there is one or two?” (Oliver 1993:57). According to Oliver, “between birth and birth” is also the place that Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as the object of our longing. “It is the space between our birth and our realization that we were born, a place forever lost to us” (fn.10,p.193).

\(^5\) Vasseleu (1998:78) says that for Levinas, “light is the sensuous element within which consciousness finds and sustains itself, and makes itself a home. Light is ‘first experience’, or the condition of the apprehensibility of sensibility”.

\(^6\) Thinking is often described in metaphors derived largely from the visual realm. One early visual metaphor can be found in Plato’s The Republic. In his analogy of the cave, Plato maps the path of ‘knowers’ as they leave a world of “darkness and illusory shadows to a world of light and objects genuinely seen” (Heldke 1992:205). Aristotle, in the first lines of Metaphysics, relates the desire for knowledge to sight: “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all the sense of sight. We prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason for this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things” (Aristotle 1924). Descartes also uses visual metaphors, to, as Lisa Heldke (1992:205) describes it: “...shin[e] the ‘light of reason’
through a thorough phenomenological explication of the relationship between vision and thought, demonstrates the way that the mind goes where vision points. I refer to his essay, “The Nobility of Sight,” to analyse how and why Levinas aligns thinking and vision.

There are several inextricably interwoven characteristics of vision that distinguish it from my other senses and help to facilitate my self-consciousness. Firstly, vision allows me to view many things simultaneously. In contrast, my other senses construct simultaneity in a time-bound, non-spatial way. For instance, using touch I must seek out an object in space. Then, to construct a spatial picture of an object using touch, I must move my hand around the object. Any sense I gain of its position in space and of its form comes over time: As I move my hand over the object’s surface, I gradually build up knowledge of what it ‘looks’ like. The same occurs in hearing:

In hearing music, our synthesis of a manifold to a unity of perception refers not to an object other than the sensory contents but to their own order and interconnection. Since this synthesis deals with succeeding data and is spread over the length of their procession, so that at the presence of any one element of the series all the others are either no more or not yet, and the present one must disappear for the next on to appear, the synthesis itself is a temporal process achieved with the help of memory (Jonas 1953:138).

In both hearing and touch, the knowledge base that I am gradually building can be torn down instantly. As I feel my way around a wall in darkness, I may think that I am inside a room, when suddenly, as one corner turns in the wrong direction under my hand, I realise that I am in fact outside. Or someone may be telling me a story that I think I have heard before, until they change the way the story ends. On the other hand, as soon as I open my eyes, the world is spread out before me. Jonas calls this “the copresence of things”. The scene that I see now is the same scene that was there before I opened my eyes; and unless things begin to move, it is the same scene that will continue to exist into the future. Over time, I may pick up more detail, but this is detail that was already there in the scene. In touch and in hearing there is a gradual building of knowledge, but in any one instant I never gain the whole picture. A whole seascape may surround me, but if my eyes are closed, I may only know that a cool breeze brushes my face, or that waves crash onto rocks far below my feet.

upon each of the objects of his consciousness, to determine whether they can be seen/known ‘clearly and distinctly’”. And Edmund Husserl’s (1982:151) phenomenology explicates a perceptual understanding reliant on a “circle of light”. What lies just beyond this circle is just beyond our intentional regard, so through intentional focus, this darkness can be converted into light.

7 “Sight is par excellence the sense of the simultaneous... An opening of the eyes, discloses a world of co-present qualities spread out in space, ranged in depth, continuing into indefinite distance...” (Jonas 1953:136).

8 “Only the simultaneous representation of the visual field gives us coexistence as such, i.e., the copresence of things in one being which embraces them all as their common present” (Jonas 1953:144).
But how does this co-presence of things available to me through vision invoke thought? The key to understanding this causal relationship is to remember the way that simultaneity seems to substantiate sameness.\textsuperscript{9} The transience of every moment that I may experience in touch and hearing is replaced with a certainty of my surroundings across time. And basically, this consistency gives me time to think: It gives me time to think 

\textit{clearly, so} that I can begin to \textit{know} certain things. I ask a question, such as the one Levinas poses when trying to ascertain the structure of thinking: \textit{“What shows itself in truth?”} (OB:27). Levinas could just as easily be saying (with vision as his aid), \textit{“What appears to me?”}. Because of the complicity between vision and thinking, we can take the two questions to mean the same thing. In looking at a scene, what \textit{appears} to me \textit{is} the truth. And because there is some consistency to this scene, I have time to compare what lies before my eyes.

This possibility is supported by two other characteristics of sight. Firstly, I am always at a distance from what I am looking at: \textit{“Our presence in the world is across a distance...we are separated from objects by a distance, which can indeed be traversed, but remains a distance”} (EE:39). Secondly, because of this distance, I need not engage in any way with the scene before me in order to see it. Without needing to engage with the scene, I not only have time to think, but I also have time to think about the interrelation and proportion of things to each other and myself. So not only is my vision the precipitate for my cognitive processes, it is also the reason I can think \textit{objectively}.\textsuperscript{10} One way to imagine this objective perspective that I can have in relation to the world is that I \textit{see} the world as if a pane of glass sits between the world and myself, preventing any physical contact.\textsuperscript{11} And light is

\textsuperscript{9} Steven Smith (1986:77) describes this sameness across time as a \textit{“re-presentation,”} or \textit{“a return to presence”: “The rationality of being stems from their presence and adequation. The operations of knowledge re-establish rationality behind the diachrony of \textit{becoming} in which presence occurs or is foreseen. Knowledge is a re-presentation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain \textit{other} to it”}.

\textsuperscript{10} “Thus,” Jonas states, “objectivity emerges pre-eminently from sight” (1953:144).

\textsuperscript{11} This description of the objectivity maintained by the (hu)man subject separated from the rest of the world is inspired by Heldke’s (1992:205) metaphor of the glass wall which she uses to explain the control humans like to exercise over the world: \textit{“Subjects stand on one side of the wall, objects on the other. The wall prevents any actual physical contact between subject and object, but, being glass, it allows subjects to make all ‘necessary’ observations of the objects. Controls are concealed on the subjects side of the wall; it is they who set up the conditions of observation, determine the questions which will be posed, and decide what counts as an answer to them. Although objects may surprise subjects—with unexpected answers, or with a refusal to provide answers—it is the subjects who set the terms of interchange. Thus, on the subject/object model for inquiry, not only are subjects separated from objects, but they also exercise autonomy and control over the objects of their inquiry. Objects, on the other hand, have comparatively little autonomy or control over subjects”}. Perhaps it is the architect in me that prefers to think about the relationship of sight and knowledge as viewing the world through a plane of glass rather than the way many philosophers seem to think about the relationship between sight and knowledge as the positioning of objects in relation to a horizon. Michael Purcell explains the use of a horizon of understanding in relation to Levinas’s work in \textit{“The Ethical Significance of Illeity (Emmanuel Levinas)”} (1996:126–7). The plane of glass is, in
coming from my side of the glass, so the things on the other side of the glass cannot even see me. I can make judgements about what occurs on their side of the glass free from the worry that I may be having an effect on these events.

Yet my other senses are always in the process of making the world appear to me, and therefore, when I use them I undertake a less detached engagement with the world. Take touch: When I touch, the object touches me as much as I touch it.\(^{12}\) In hearing, the object comes to me: I can only be a passive recipient of what the object does. Using either of these senses, I cannot maintain the active separation nor the autonomy that it would take for objectivity to be an outcome of my relationship with the world.

There is yet another repercussion of my visual relationship with the world. Because everything is already set out before me when I open my eyes, and my distance from the scene ensures that I need not interact with what I am viewing: I have the freedom to choose what I focus on. What I choose to focus on can be handed over, objectively, to my mind, as a thought. And as an abstraction or representation, the object of my intention takes on a new life.

The image is handed over to imagination, which can deal with it in complete detachment from the actual presence of the original object: this detachability of the image, i.e., of "form" from its "matter," of "essence" from "existence," is at the bottom of abstraction and therefore of all free thought (Jonas 1953:147).

In Jonas's description, what occurs when I see the world is an intentional choosing. There is no scope for anything that I cannot fix within my sight to become thought. This suggests that the intimate connections Levinas makes between thinking and vision are forged by a 'freedom of choice' that never chooses the invisible. I choose to remove alterity from the world: I never choose to see it—I always choose what I can see. Thus alterity is invisible to me.

Levinas describes this generation of truth through knowledge as the intentionality of "bonne conscience" (EFP:82).\(^{13}\) It is as if light streams out of me, like the messengers of my

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\(^{12}\) "The obtaining of the touch-experience itself is nothing but the entering into actual intercourse with the object: i.e., the very coming into play of this sense already changes the situation obtaining between me and the object. ...Subject and object are already doing something to each other in the very act in which the object becomes a phenomenal presence" (Jonas 1953:145).

\(^{13}\) In Otherwise than Being, Levinas undertakes a complex description of the structure of cognition. He contends that in order to think I must get out of phase with myself. That is, I must ask myself a question about a situation that I am already in. "Are you hungry Angela?", I say to myself. "Yes, I think I am," I answer. In the time it takes for me to ascertain this information, I have come momentarily unstuck. Wyschogrod (1980:180) : "In this passing of time, the being of the subject who knows stakes itself for an instant only to recover itself". If only for an instant, I have come
bonne conscience, illuminating the world with my intentions to know it. With vision as my aid, I can build knowledge with more certainty than I can with hearing or touch, or any other sense. I need not explore all the surfaces of a rock to know its form. I give this rock its form through my perspective on it:

Things have a form, are seen in the light—silhouettes or profiles.... As silhouette and profile a thing owes its nature to a perspective, remains relative to a point of view; a thing’s situation thus constitutes its being (TI:140).¹⁴

In appearing at all, the world seems to belong to my knowledge. “Objects appear as this or that; to be perceived is already to be perceived as something” (Wyschogrod 1980:181). More than this even, the material of the world is only given definition, only becomes lucid in the light of my bonne conscience. Thus, the illuminated world seems destined for me. Levinas says as much:

In existing, an object exists for someone, is destined for someone, already leans toward an inwardness and, without being absorbed in it, gives itself (EE:40).¹⁵

unstuck from my own being in order to question that same being. This, the “getting out of phase of the instant” Levinas says, is how “thought is awakened in being” (OB:28-9). I have moved from a position of being hungry, to a position of knowing that I am hungry. But in moving into this position, time has also moved on, and I am no longer present in that previous moment. Yet still, it is true—I know that I am hungry. I am hungry, but in order to know that I am hungry, I have had to interrogate myself, and in this instant lost through my interrogation, I gain thought. In fact, it is more accurate to say that thought has occurred through a process of recollection, or “a recuperation in which nothing is lost,” from one instant in my being to the next (OB:28). What I ‘have been’ is lost to me, in the moment of questioning myself, but is then re-established in the moment of answering myself. I have gained knowledge of what I already knew in some other way. In other words, my thought, which has arisen between the moment of asking myself the question, “are you hungry?” and the moment of my answering, “yes,” comes as a substantiation of what is already given. In his paper, “Nonintentional Consciousness,” Levinas says: “The exteriority or otherness of the self is recaptured in immanence. What thought knows or what it learns in its experience is both the other and thought’s self. One learns only what one already knows and what can be put into the interiority of thought in the guise of recallable, re-presentable memory” (NC:125). Wyschogrod (1980:180) describes this “recuperation” in terms of “fore-understanding”. “Fore-understanding lurks in the structure of intentionality itself, that which is fore-understood is lost and recovered by consciousness as a fulfilment of fore-understanding. And Levinas again: “The great principle on which everything depends: The thought [le pensé]—object, theme, meaning—refers back to the thought [la pensée] that thinks it, but also determines the subjective articulation of its appearing: being determines its phenomena” (NC:123). According to Wyschogrod (1980:186), even if my expectations had remained unfulfilled—that is, I realise, in answering my own interrogation that in fact I am not hungry—I “attribute falsity” to my fore-understanding rather than throw into doubt this ‘getting out of phase with the instant.’ Even if I realise that I am not hungry, I have still come unstuck and then recuperated my being in order to think.

¹⁴ “Form is that by which a being is turned toward the sun, that by which it has a face, through which it gives itself, by which it comes forward” (EE:31).

¹⁵ Levinas restates this relationship between the world and my intentions again: “The miracle of light is the essence of thought: due to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours in the horizon which precedes it; it comes from an exterior already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom” (EE:41).

And again: “Light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us” (EE:40).
Myself and the world are still separated. The world is still outside of me, but it now appears that the world is defined by what is inside of me. As Levinas says, “thought is always clarity or the dawning of a light” (EE:41). Light is the mechanism that allows my interior—my self—to envelop the exterior world without removing our separation. Perhaps this is why, then, when I am hungry—when I think that I am hungry—“the world offers the bountifulness of terrestrial nourishment to [my] intentions...” (EE:30). We remain separate, this world and I, yet it relinquishes its autonomy, as if it never had any autonomy, as if it were always mine. We are in relation, but this relation is not an encounter with any ethical resonance. It is a relationship in which what appears—that is, what is the same as me—predetermines the other.

Within the work of intentionality, the same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other (TI:124).

This ability I have to determine the other is what elevates me. I am eminent. My separation from the world can be understood as “an exaltation, an ‘above being’” (TI:119). And with this privilege, I am also taken a step closer (a step ‘upwards’) toward the possibility of an ethical encounter. Levinas asserts the importance of this step upward: “The I is thus the mode in which the break-up of totality, which leads to the presence of the absolutely other, is concretely accomplished” (TI:117-8). In order for the face to face encounter to be ethical, my totality—my separate, intentional existence—must break up. But, paradoxically, in order to meet face to face with the Other, I must first and foremost consider myself to be a totality. I cannot yet hear the call of the ethical other. I am without ears. What is not clear is how I can maintain this position long enough to encounter the other (hu)man ethically. So again, I look away from the face of the Other and turn my attention back to the world.

I am separate from the world, and the first repercussion of this separateness is that I am very, very hungry. As a finite being, I have always a limited amount of resources stored in my body to burn in order to live. I am a hungry stomach without ears. Ears alone do not help me find the food that I need. I am hungry, and I know that I am hungry, because I can see and I can think and I do this separately and in an elevated position in relation to the world. This allows me to see that below me there are many, many things for me to eat. But my elevated separateness also opens me to a slightly more precarious predicament. In a sense, I am like my vision: I am ‘noble’ just as vision, according to Jonas, is ‘noble’. And it is

And again: “It takes form not in an additional quality inhering in objects, but in a destination inscribed in its revelation, in the revelation itself, in the light. Objects are destined for me; they are for me” (EE:30).

Derrida (1978:92): “Everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself”.
this nobility that makes sight an incomplete relationship with the world.\textsuperscript{16} I, too, cannot survive merely by knowing or seeing that there is food for me to eat. What I am, \textit{alone and eminent}, cannot sustain me in my separateness. I need to feed and to grow and I must do this from what is separate from me, using more ‘vulgar modes’, from the ‘more vulgar’ aspects of the world. For, of course, I cannot feed off other nobilities;\textsuperscript{17} I will not eat (hu)man flesh. I have removed myself from the world, taken a step up, but in order to remain elevated—separate and alive in my separateness—I must constantly bolster what I am, using the world to do so.

With my hungry stomach leading the way, I deal with this need by climbing back down from my elevated position and immersing myself in what I have only just managed to separate from. But now that I must act upon my needs, will I not also sacrifice my elevation? To be certain, I maintain a separation from the world even when I am on the ground because of my visual distance, yet this does not necessarily ensure my ‘transcendent’ distance. Need my return to the world be a relinquishing of elevation? Perhaps what happens to my elevation can be understood by keeping this in mind: my position of eminence only has meaning if there are ways that my eminence can be practised. “A king with no subjects to rule over ceases to be a king” (Jonas 1953:149). I cannot simply look at what I need. I must have what I need. I must touch it. I must eat it. And with sight in charge, perhaps I can touch the world without any loss of eminence.

In order to explore this possibility, I return to that aspect of vision that deals with the unknowable. “The concept of intentionality is one specific direction; intention prohibits inundation by a field of undifferentiated sensibles” (Wyschogrod 1980:181).\textsuperscript{18} What this means is that the light that flows from my \textit{bonne conscience} illuminates everything in the trajectory of my vision, voiding the space between the things that I see and me. As Levinas puts it:

\textsuperscript{16} “Sight...is incomplete by itself; it requires the complement of other senses...its highest virtues are also its essential insufficiencies. Its very nobility calls for the support of more vulgar modes of commerce with the importunity of things. In this sense...eminence pays for itself the price of increased dependence...” (Jonas 1953:135-6).

\textsuperscript{17} It is interesting to note that, at one point in \textit{Totality and Infinity}, Levinas interchanges ‘the absolutely other’ with ‘nobility’ when he describes the difference between ‘man’ and ‘non-man’: “It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of treason—infinitesimal difference between man and non-man—that implies the disinterestedness of goodness, the desire of the absolutely other or nobility, the dimension of metaphysics” (TI:35).

\textsuperscript{18} Wyschogrod’s “Doing before Hearing: On the primacy of touch” (1980) has been useful in alerting me to a particular passage on the privileges of vision in \textit{Totality and Infinity} that I had initially overlooked and which comes into the discussion below (see TI:189-92).
The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. Vision is therefore a
relation with a ‘something’ established within a relation with what is not a
‘something’. We are in the light inasmuch as we encounter the thing in
nothingness. The light makes the thing appear by driving out the shadows; it
empties space. It makes space arise specifically as a void (TI:189).

Even when I am immersed in the world, I am not touching the world. If I have my
eyes open, then I am at a distance from the things that I am looking at; and if I am at a
distance then this distance is a void. This is fine if I am only looking at what I want to eat.
But how can this ability to pass over nothingness translate into my contact with food?

Levinas draws a direct correlation between touch and vision: “Inasmuch as the
movement of the hand that touches traverses the ‘nothing’ of space, touch resembles
vision” (TI:189). If I am intent in my actions, if I see what I want to eat and then grasp it in
my hand, then I will manage to traverse the void between me and my food. When I grasp
something, I remove some of the usual elements of exploration that touch involves. Instead
of moving my hand over an object to explore its form, by grasping the object I have taken
hold of it in a way that overrides any necessity to explore it. In seizing something, I
acquire it, and then, perhaps, I may turn it over in my hands using my eyes to illuminate
its form. For Levinas, grasping something is akin to comprehending it.

All the unfathomable mystery of a thing shows itself to us and is open to our
grasp. By virtue of its forms the world is stable and made up of solids. Objects
can be defined by their finitude: form is just this way of coming to an end [finir]
where the finite [le fini] is the definite and is already exposed to being
apprehended (EE:33).

Grasping something is always a matter of avoiding what I do not want to touch.
Grasping avoids the void; and in avoiding the void, it deems the void to be nothing. This
again, is a confirmation of how Levinas views the relationship between a subject and the

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19 Jonas (1953:141) describes the difference between a static touch and feeling: “Thus mere touch-
impression changes into the act of feeling. There is a basic difference between simply having a tactile
encounter and feeling another body. ...The motor element introduces an essentially new quality into
the picture: its active employment discloses spatial characteristics in the touch-object which were no
inherent part of the elementary tactile qualities. ...The touch-qualities become arranged in a spatial
scheme, they fall into the pattern of surface, and become elements of form”.

20 Levinas also says: “Presence is now ‘at hand’” (NC:125). It is as if the necessity to explore an object
through touch, into the future (point by point) is removed in this action. The future is deemed a
recovery of the present. What is still to be known is yanked out of the future with one swift grasp.
This grasping through knowledge, Levinas insists, should be taken literally: “The immanence of
the known to the act of knowing is already the embodiment of seizure” (EFP:76). This is a subtlety that
the translators of this Levinas paper “Non-intentional Consciousness” illuminate through their
explanation of the word ‘maintenant,’ the French word for ‘now,’ which means ‘maint [hand] and
‘tenant’ [holding] (NC:fn.1,p.243). “Grasping” something is also used by Levinas interchangeably
with “comprehending” something. I need not have it in my hand in order to grasp it.
Levinas also discusses Husserl’s epistemology in terms of grasping. See, “Beyond Intentionality”
(1983).

21 In Vasseleu’s words (1998:86), this is a sort of “immobilisation”.
rest of the world. As a subject that can think, that can see, that knows itself to be hungry, that can grasp what it needs, it is I who determines the fate of the other.

To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity. This result is obtained from the moment of the first ray of light. To illuminate is to remove from being its resistance, because light opens a horizon and empties space—delivers being out of nothingness (TI:44).

I am dependent on the world, but this need not compromise my eminence. In fact, Jonas suggests that it is perhaps the ability to grasp that separates (hu)mans from the rest of the world, thereby ensuring our elevation:

An organ for real shape-feeling exists probably only in the human hand.... There is a mental side to the highest performance of the tactile sense, or rather to the use which is made of its information, that transcends all mere sentence, and it is this mental use which brings touch within the dimension of the achievements of sight (Jonas 1953:141-2).

The world relinquishes its autonomy to my need and my comprehension because its separateness is based on nothing. My hand becomes an extension of the ray of light that beams from my eyes. It traverses the scene before me and is only stopped by the surfaces of things. It is as if the world is a folded surface that can be smoothed by my understanding. My eyes need not delve any deeper and nor need my hand. Any depth that these things contain can be uncovered, with a little probing. The resistance that I do feel in them—the pressure of their form against my hand as I grasp them—is simply power for the cause. It proves the world to be separate from me. Separate, and indeed, not transcendent:

If cognition in the form of the objectifying act does not seem to us to be at the level of the metaphysical relation, this is not because the exteriority contemplated as an object, the theme, would withdraw from the subject as fast as the abstractions proceed; on the contrary it does not withdraw enough (TI:109).

The world is either comprised of these opaque forms of things that display a little resistance to my grasp, or is transparent, displaying no resistance to the penetrating beam of my bonne conscience. It is as if the glass wall that separates me from the world in my objectifying gaze still exists when I grasp the world. Although now the glass wall can be seen for what it is—something to look through, not at. The glass wall is not a physical

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22 Martin Heidegger (1968:16) expresses the connection between grasping, hands and thinking in a slightly different, though concordant way: “Apes too have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence. Only a being that can speak, that is, think, can have hands…”.

23 Benso (2000:xxii) undertakes the important work of demonstrating otherwise in her book, The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics. I return to her work frequently throughout this thesis. She suggests that perhaps “things silently laugh at the illusory vanity of abstract philosophical speculation, which in its act of grasping irremediably loses exactly that which it thought it would be accessing”.


barrier; it is no barrier at all. I must always consider it to be nothing if I am to maintain my sense of eminence in relation to the world.

**Fleeting enjoyment, or being hungry again**

With my separation from the world, facilitated by my vision and my grasp, my (hu)man potential continues to drift upward. I can sustain my elevation—my separateness—by grasping the world with my eyes. The world appears as if given over to me, because, at this distance, it looks as if it is. But as a (hu)man, I am a series of endless needs, or hungers, that must be satisfied. I cannot content myself with surveying what I have already, through the light of my intentions, conquered. It is a little clearer why Levinas considers me to be a hungry stomach without ears. But there is a further part of the passage from Totality and Infinity that needs to be clarified. Levinas says: “In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself...without ears, like a hungry stomach” (TI:134). What is yet to be explained is why being a hungry stomach is the experience of enjoyment.

The interesting thing about hunger is that I do not experience it as a feeling of lacking in something. How could I, a (hu)man standing so solidly conscious of what I am—wrenched away from the world to make a refined totality—be lacking? No, according to Levinas: My needs constitute me as a lover of life. As a (hu)man, it is love of life that sets me apart from the rest of the world. It is not an attribute simply added onto being. As a (hu)man, life is love of life:

> Life is love of life, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear to my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth [prix] of my life (TI:112).

I love that I am a hungry being who must seek out food in order to be satisfied. And I love that I will feel content once this hard work has been done. In addition to this, my ‘elevation’ above the world is further secured in my enjoyment. Why? Because for Levinas, the fact that I would risk ‘being elevated’ for enjoyment proves that enjoyment is not an accident of being. It separates me from pure being, that is, from everything else that is not (hu)man, and it is in this sense that I ‘risk’ it.

One becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment which is also an exaltation, an ‘above being’. The existent is ‘autonomous’ with respect to being; it designates not a participation in being, but happiness. The existent par excellence is man (TI:119).

If I were a less ‘elevated’ being in the world, a tree for instance, then I would not, according to Levinas, be capable of taking such a risk. “The I exists as separated in its
enjoyment...and it can sacrifice its pure and simple being to happiness. It exists in an eminent sense; it exists above being” (TI:62-3). Levinas calls this elevation a sacrifice; I have lost what a tree maintains—that is, imperturbability in being. Levinas describes this ‘imperturbability’ as the “ataraxy” of pure being: there is no necessity, for a tree for instance, to generate meaning out of life. The difference for Levinas, then, between a tree’s existence and my existence is thus:

It [happiness] is an outcome, but one where the memory of the aspiration confers upon the outcome the character of an accomplishment, which is worth more than ataraxy. Pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment (TI:113).

The difference between loving life and purely existing goes some way towards demonstrating how I can maintain my ‘elevation’ even while being immersed in neediness. Happiness becomes my access to ‘height’.

Another way that Levinas deals with the discrepancy between the simultaneous elevation and groundedness of my position is by explaining my happy neediness as the conversion of my elevation above the world into a temporal dispersion. The explanation of this leads on from the importance that enjoyment plays in my life. Levinas describes the condition of being a (hu)man, who is separate but happy with the neediness that this incurs, as an “act that resembles its ‘potency’” (TI:113). That is, enjoyment gives (hu)mans a reason to exist. In fact, for (hu)mans, happiness is what makes the activity of living possible, “if activity means a commencement occurring in duration, which nevertheless is continuous” (TI:113). The potency of enjoyment comes in its temporality, which is built on the temporality of satiation. “Pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment. Enjoyment is made of the memory of its thirst; it is a quenching” (TI:113). I need the world, but I can see how to fulfil this need. I must grasp the world, eat it, and then I will no longer be hungry. However, I know this satiation will not last. I will be hungry soon enough. Being

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24 As a riposte to Levinas, we could consider “love of life” using the terms that Elizabeth Costello (the protagonist from J.M. Coetzee's eponymous novel), uses—that is, “an embodied soul”. On the surface, this is precisely the way that Levinas does think of (hu)mans. As Vasseleu (1998:86-7) says: “The body, as the event of position, is the very advent of consciousness. Levinas rejects the dualist notion that consciousness can be divorced from a substantive. Consciousness begins as a sense of corporeality; as a sense of consciousness's base or place, its point of departure, the condition of its inwardness or in-stance”. Although this does not seem fundamentally different to the way Levinas imagines (hu)man life being filled by its contents, in Costello’s description, this filling of the body by the soul extends to all animals: “To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is joy. ...To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes’ key state [cogito, ergo sum], which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell” (Coetzee 2003:75).
(hu)man means that my enjoyment will never last because my satiation never lasts, and therefore happiness comes again and again with every newly satisfied need. “Each happiness comes for the first time” (TI:114). This hunger and satiation and hunger again sets the condition for the continuity of living as a (hu)man. To be (hu)man is to live the beginning and ending of an infinite number of needs.\[25\]

Each moment of a need satiated marks an independence from the meaningfulness of just being alive. For Levinas, here again is proof that happiness is the mark of separation between (hu)mans and the rest of the world.\[26\] It is not that a tree is not happy, but that it is not aware that this is happiness.\[27\] Enjoyment is meaningless without recognition, by the tree, that the happiness that is with it for an instant will need to be replaced in the next.\[28\] On the other hand, I am reflective, and so I am aware that happiness does not last but instead must continually be reinstated. Separation is produced through my being a subject who is aware that I need the world but who can, over time, continually—although be it momentarily—overcome this need. In Levinas’s words:

To be sure, need is also a dependence with regard to the other, but it is a dependence across time, a dependence that is not an instantaneous betraying of the same but a suspension or postponement of dependence... (TI:116).

I am a needy being, but I am liberated in this neediness. Separation becomes the difference between my needs and their satiation. This, rather than simply the present moment of happiness, is what defines the eminent position of the I in relation to the world. It is now possible to make a more specific statement about the relationship between happiness and height: it is the temporality of my enjoyment that becomes my ‘height’ above the world.

\[25\] “Desire as a relationship with the world involves both a distance between me and the desirable, and consequently a time ahead of me, and also a possession of the desirable which is prior to the desire. The position of the desirable, before and after the desire, is the fact that it is given. And the fact of being given is the world” (EE:30).

\[26\] Let me, again, counter this argument with one made by Elizabeth Costello: “Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve. When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh” (Coetzee 2003:108).

\[27\] That is, a self-consciousness about happiness. Not all human emotions are accompanied by self-consciousness, but in the case of nonhuman beings, it seems that all emotions are without self-consciousness (Nussbaum 2001:126).

\[28\] What seems to be missing in a tree and limited in nonhuman animals is the ability to have “temporal emotions”, which are emotions that involve memory or expectation—or in other words, that involve “conceiving of a life as a temporal process with a beginning, a development, and an end” (Nussbaum 2001:144). For the case of the difference between human emotions, such as happiness, and other animals’ emotions, see Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (Nussbaum 2001:89-138).
A being...frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance. This distance can be converted into time, and subordinate a world to the liberated but needy being (TI:116).

Yet, the displacement of my elevation onto the fleeting nature of happiness places my transcendent potential in a precarious position. This is because if my happiness is only momentary, then I am not assured of always being happy. To be certain, I can, over time, again and again, rediscover happiness, but what if I cannot satisfy my next moment of need? According to Levinas, if I fail at happiness, then I suffer. Again, this suffering is not because I need, but because I need and cannot satiate my own neediness. I suffer because, from the beginning, my life is founded on happiness.

To despair of life makes sense only because originally life is happiness. Suffering is a failing of happiness; it is not correct to say that happiness is an absence of suffering. Happiness is made up not of an absence of needs, whose tyranny and imposed character one denounces, but of the satisfaction of all needs. For the privation of need is not just a privation, but is privation in a being that knows the surplus of happiness, privation in a being gratified (TI:115).

This is why Levinas describes my elevation also in terms of a sacrifice. “The I exists as separated in its enjoyment...and it can sacrifice its pure and simple being to happiness. It exists in an eminent sense; it exists above being” (TI:62-3). I have given up my pure and simple being to a life dependent on happiness and therefore vulnerable to suffering.

And without happiness, “life dissolves into a shadow” (TI:112).29

When one has to eat, drink and warm oneself in order not to die, when nourishment becomes fuel, as in certain kinds of hard labor, the world also seems to be at an end, turned upside down and absurd, needing to be renewed. Time becomes unhinged (EE:37).

Even if this does not mean death, death might prove more favourable than living life as a shadow.

The contents from which life lives are not always indispensable to it for the maintenance of that life, as means or as the fuel necessary for the ‘functioning’ of existence. Or at least they are not lived as such. With them we die, and sometimes prefer to die rather than be without them (TI:111).

So, with my happiness comes trepidation, because of the possibility of each moment of happiness being my last, and my life dissolving into a shadow. But what is this life as a shadow? We know that it is suffering, but is life as a shadow also life that has lost its separateness? For Levinas, is living as a shadow like living as an animal, or a plant, or an ocean, for whom awareness that happiness has been lost is not possible, for whom pure existence, happy or not, is the only possibility? In other words, is it that, as a lover of life, I

29 “When reduced to pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into a shadow” (TI:112).
am constantly at risk, because of the constancy of my neediness and my dependence on the world? Am I at risk of the world reabsorbing me? That is, I may not die, but I could become indistinguishable from all the other beings whose lives simply begin, then end? Might I lose my separateness? I am the one that must absorb the world in order to subsist in my happiness.

Such an explanation would situate separation as a (hu)man ‘experience’ or ‘privilege’, rather than an attribute intrinsic to (hu)man existence. If I were to be reabsorbed by the world then I would lose my ability to enjoy the world and my eminence would fall heavily from its elevation. But this is not so. According to Levinas’s description of being (hu)man, I cannot remain (hu)man and return to the simple being of the rest of the world. My very (hu)manness is shaped by my separateness from the world. “The unicity of the I conveys separation. Separation in the strictest sense is solitude, and enjoyment—happiness or unhappiness—is isolation itself (TI:117). If I lose myself in the world and become unable to rise above the risk it places in my future, then I do not simply accept this and fall into an apathy, or ataraxy, of the ‘simply existing’. No, if my happiness is threatened, then I do not fall from my eminence. I suffer in my separateness. I suffer, because from the beginning I am happiness. To suffer is to be separate but unhappy in this separateness. If I am inept at negotiating my separation and my need, for whatever reason, then I find myself in the precarious position of being needy without the potential to satiate my own neediness. I may find myself at the mercy of the world, with no control over what will become of me.

Let me put this in another way: I am still (hu)man—I still have a hand that has the intention to grasp the world, but I am now a shadow of that intention. In fact, it is on this nether side of (hu)man transcendence that I find the location of the ethical other. The ethical other lives life like a shadow. As a shadow, the ethical other has a hand of sorts, and perhaps even the intent, but not the ability to grasp. Instead of reaching out to grasp the world, the ethical other’s hand faces up, outstretched and open. Alphonso Lingis says: “He faces me with his eyes, unmasked, exposed, and turns the primary nakedness of the eyes to me; he faces me with a gesture of his hand, taking nothing, empty-handed” (1986:227). For Levinas, this is the absolute limit of (hu)man suffering. In order not to be hungry, in order not to suffer, the ethical other must rely on the world for satiation.

In the introduction to this section, I said that I would turn away from the height of the ethical other so that I might spend some time examining the world below. I have closed my ears to the call of the ethical other, and in the process, I have found enjoyment. What I am learning is that I need this enjoyment if I am ever to respond to the ethical other. If I am not happy and satiated, then how can I give anything away? But in closing my ears to
the ethical other, I have also closed my ears to the otherness of the world. I do not hear, or encounter, any otherness at all. And, as if in confirmation that there is nothing to hear, I also find that there is nothing to see. With my face turned away from the ethical other, I see only objects given over to my enjoyment. And between these objects and myself there is nothing. In my enjoyment, this nothingness that I cannot see is my only experience of the otherness of the world. As a consequence, I hardly experience this nothingness at all.
Eating sensibly and the anxiety of the il y a

Enjoyment does not refer to an infinity beyond what nourishes it, but to the virtual vanishing of what presents itself, to the instability of happiness. Nourishment comes as a happy chance (TI:141).

So far, I have written around the moment of satiation without directing my attention to what happens in the moment itself. We know what life is like just prior to satiation. I am separate and needy of the world. But I can see what I need and I can anticipate the satiation of my hunger. We know what life is like just after. I am full and happy, even if only momentarily. But during? Levinas says that, in enjoyment, I am a hungry stomach without ears. I know what this means for the world, and for the ethical other. Both will have their needs ignored. I will use my vision to turn away from the face of the ethical other and to make the world appear as given over to my needs. But still, what does this enjoyment, at the cost of the world and the ethical other, feel like to me?

To investigate this moment, I recap on the difference between myself with a need still requiring satiation, and myself with a satiated need: For Levinas, in both of these instances, there is a perceptual and spatial difference between me and the world. In both these cases, the otherness of the world is not my concern. Beyond the world’s slight resistance to my touch when I grasp it, and the sense of empty space that sits between me and the rest of the world, I do not seem to register any particularly potent otherness. Nothingness takes up the space between me and the objects of my need, and, mostly, I do not notice this space at all.

But there are two moments when the otherness of the world affects me more directly, and both occur in the temporal gap between need and satiation. In this gap, I find myself, not at a distance from the world, but absorbed by the world. The nothingness that once sat
behind and around the objects of my need, as void, floods into my immediate space, so that I cannot gain a perspective on it, so that I cannot see it, so that I cannot think it. If I maintain control over my life, then I can grasp things and not experience this flooding. If I let go into my life, either through enjoyment or anxiety, then this otherness grasps me. Sometimes Levinas calls this otherness the “element”. Sometimes he calls it the “il y a”.

In this chapter, I try to explain how my experience of the otherness of the world can change from being purely contented sensibility in enjoyment to utterly terrifying in anxiety.

Experiencing the contentment of sensibility

One of the best examples of the first way that I experience the otherness of the world is when I eat something. A moment such as this takes “I am a hungry stomach without ears” to another dimension. Up until this moment, being a hungry stomach without ears has meant that I have used my senses in a way that would maximise my capacity to glean sustenance from the world: I used my vision to locate what will satiate my hunger, and then I used my hands (facilitated by my vision) to grasp this food in a way that undermines the usual reciprocity of touch. In both of these engagements, I have maintained my distance from the world.

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1 In English, the il y a translates to “there is”.

2 Some contend that Levinas conflates the “element” and the “il y a” (translator’s note in TO:fn.15), while others that the il y a is the limit of the element (see also Wyschogrod 1989:186). This second position seems to be closer to Levinas’s explanation of the relationship between the element and the il y a. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas says: “The elemental extends into there is” (TI:142). Perhaps it is this limiting characteristic of the il y a that means that it is often used in negative terms by both Levinas and his commentators. Conversely, Levinas seems to use the term “element” when he is speaking of enjoyment.

In Existence and Existensts, Levinas uses the term “il y a” exclusively. See the sections “Existence with Existent,” and “Insomnia” (EE:51-64); in Time and the Other, Levinas uses the term “il y a” (TO:44-51); in Totality and Infinity, Levinas uses the term “the elemental” in “Element and Things, Implements,” “Sensibility,” “The Mythical Format of the Element,” and “The Home and Possession” (TI:130-2.5-40,40-42); in “Sensibility and the Face” (TI:190-1) he uses the “il y a”; and in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, Levinas returns to exclusive use of “il y a” in the sections entitled “Being’s ‘Other’,” “Sense and the There Is,” and at the beginning of the concluding chapter “Outside” (OB:3-4,162-5,76-8). In “Signature,” in Difficult Freedom, Levinas refers to the il y a (S:292) and in his essay “On Maurice Blanchot,” in Proper Names (OMB:127-70) Levinas describes the origins of the term “il y a”.

3 For examples of how others have interpreted the il y a and the elemental, see John Sallis’s “Levinas and the Elemental” (1998); Simon Critchley’s “Il y a—A Dying Stronger than Death (Blanchot with Levinas)” (1993), and his book Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature (1997:31-83); Philip Lawton’s “Levinas’s Notion of the ‘There Is’” (1976); John Caruana’s “The Catastrophic Site and Non-Site of Proximity: Redeeming the disaster of being” (1998); Edith Wyschogrod’s “Derrida, Levinas, and Violence” (1989); Maurice Blanchot’s Thomas the Obscure (1973:chapter two); and Danne Polk’s “Good Infinity/Bad Infinity: Il y a, Apeiron, and Environmental Ethics in the Philosophy of Levinas” (2000). Most of these theorists concentrate their readings on the il y a, with only brief reference to the elemental. However, Polk (2000:36-7) and Perperzak’s ‘Levinas on Technology and Nature’ (1992:475-6) describe the elemental in terms of enjoyment rather than (or as well as, in the case of Polk) horror.
But when I actually eat the food that I have gleaned, what then? I return to the chicken soup I was eating in the last chapter. I bring the spoonful of soup to my lips and sip. Once liquid is inside my mouth, I can no longer see it. And if I can no longer see it, I can no longer grasp it. All I experience of chicken soup now are the sensations of it in my mouth—how it feels on my tongue, against my teeth, how the broth deepens and then sours slightly as I swallow. Sight has lost its usefulness, and I discard it in favour of the enjoyment of savouring the taste and texture of my meal: I close my eyes.

And what happens to the distance between me and my food in this moment? It entirely dissipates. While I am savouring this mouthful of food, there is no physical distance between me and the world. I become my sensations. Food macerated in the mouth becomes me. Besides the lack of recognition I have of the nothingness that sits between me and the world, this is my first real experience of the otherness of the world. “The objects of the world, which for thought lie in the void, for sensibility—or for life—spread forth on a horizon which entirely hides that void” (TI:135). “Sensibility”4 is my experience of this otherness that Levinas describes as the “the elemental”.5

Once I am absorbed in the taste of this soup, I do not know what is happening—I simply live what is happening: “One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset” (TI:135). When I think, my self moves outward to encapsulate the world. In this sensibility, the element comes incessantly upon me,

...as the wave that engulfs and submerges and drowns—an incessant movement of afflux without respite, a total contact without fissure nor gap from which the reflected movement of a thought could arise. It is to be within, to be inside of... (TI:135).

If I am to enjoy something, I have no choice but to relinquish my separation from the world. I must surrender my distance to the pleasure of intimate contact. I cannot maintain a distance from this elemental experience, because it does not cling to something that I can distance myself from. In Levinas’s words:

The solidity of the earth that supports me, the blue of the sky above my head, the breath of the wind, the undulation of the sea, the sparkle of the light do not cling to a substance. They come from nowhere. This coming from nowhere, from ‘something’ that is not, appearing without there being anything that appears—and consequently coming always, without my being able to possess the source—delineates the future of sensibility and enjoyment (TI:141).6

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4 “Sensibility establishes a relation with a pure quality without support, with the element. Sensibility is enjoyment” (TI:136).

5 “Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it the elemental” (TI:131).

6 Here, Levinas says that these sensible qualities do not cling to a substance. But at other times he says that they do: “Sensibility does not aim at an object, however rudimentary. It concerns even the
His descriptions of the element coming always with its incessant movement—it seems as if my absorption in the element could go on forever. But why, after all the effort I have put into maintaining a safe distance from the world, would I allow such a situation of complete, and potentially infinite, absorption, to occur? I would suggest that I allow this immersion in the element, because it does have an end. From my previous experience, I know that the world eventually withdraws from me. I taste the rich complexity of the broth, I melt the silk texture of it onto my tongue, and then, gradually, its pleasures dissipate into memory. Until the next mouthful of soup, I am again separate from the world. I no longer taste it. Again and again, I dip into my bowl to reacquaint myself with the pleasure of immersion, and again and again, I manage to swim through this immediate sensibility and find myself separate on the other side. Once the bowl is emptied, I am satisfied. My stomach is full. I allow myself to be absorbed in the pleasure of these sensible qualities because I know that they will satisfy me. “Objects content me...” (TI:135). Nourishment, exemplified by alimentation, is this satisfying process of enjoyment:

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other...as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation (TI:111).

And once I am contented, I know that I will return to separateness. I know this because I remember being satisfied before. I know these things before I begin to eat. I know them before I lose my thoughts to the sensibility of the world. If I did not know such things before I took my first mouthful of soup, then I may not take it at all.

So, in this scene, my experience of the space between myself and the world has completed a circle. “Things come to representation from a background from which they emerge and to which they return in the enjoyment we can have of them” (TI:130). The middle state of immersion is exactly that: It sits in between my need and the satisfaction of that need as a finite space. I move from a state of separation, (albeit, a hungry, needy separation) to a state of immersion, back to a state of separation (with a full stomach).

elaborated forms of consciousness, but its proper work consists in enjoyment, through which every object is dissolved into the element in which enjoyment is steeped. For in fact, the sensible objects we enjoy have already undergone labor. The sensible quality already clings to a substance” (TI:137). In this passage, Levinas justifies this ‘clinging to substance’ through the object’s exposure to “labor”. Here, Levinas is beginning to set up an important distinction between the world that has undergone labor (and that therefore allows sensible quality to cling to it) and the world that has not undergone labour (and that therefore sensible qualities cannot cling to). I return to this distinction in part II of this thesis.

7 This phrase comes from a larger statement: “Objects content me in their finitude, without appearing to me on a ground of infinity. The finite without the infinite is possible only as contentment. The finite as contentment is sensibility” (TI:135). Later, it will be apparent that what is finite about objects is that they create containers for the otherness of the world.
Another way this movement can be understood is as a journey from illumination, to a time of darkness, back to a state of illumination. This middle space of sensibility, wedged between my need and its satiation, is the moment when I experience the mystery of life. But then, as Benso states, this mystery is “immediately recuperated through the awareness of one’s own sensibility and sensory perception” (2000:xxxiii). I experience this mystery, this darkness, because, momentarily, I relinquish my grasp of the world. I abandon myself to this darkness. I may even close my eyes in order to further enjoy the sensations in my mouth. (Am I a satiated stomach without eyes?) But on the other side, I regain my separation and the world returns to its distant place within my perspective. And what about the otherness of the world? Again, it becomes that void space between the world and me.

**Experiencing the horror of the il y a**

Sometimes, this scene is not quite so circular. Sometimes, instead of my consuming of the world going through a complete cycle of need to enjoyment to satiation to need and around again, it gets caught in the middle space of immersion. Levinas describes this as my being delivered over to the element:

Possession by enjoyment is one with enjoyment: no activity precedes sensibility. But to possess by enjoying is also to be possessed and to be delivered to the fathomless depth, the disquieting future of the element (TI:158).

Something goes wrong in that moment of pure sensibility that changes it from enjoyment to “horror” (EE:56-8). At such times, instead of the element serving as an access to satiation, it delivers me over to the world and its otherness. I am absorbed by the world, experiencing, with pure sensibility, intimate contact. I am swimming for the edge of this space of immediacy, and yet I cannot reach this edge.

Or, at least, I think that I will not find it. Both the light of my bonne conscience and my intentions for reaching the other side of this immediacy are absorbed by this nothingness surrounding me. I cannot see anything. This moment is terrifying: not because I have finally dissolved into this immediacy, never to be able to reunite the parts of my self that make me into a separated, elevated being, but because I anticipate such a future for myself. Perhaps I cannot find the edge of this space because I am so terrified of not finding the edge. This anticipation of failure is my second experience of the otherness of the world. Levinas describes this otherness as the “il y a”. He says it is a place in which nothingness

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8 I need not necessarily close my eyes in order to experience the sensible. The immediately sensible can also be visual, but this would be a visual experience entirely different from the detached distant vision that facilitates thought. Perhaps, it can be understood to be a little more like the visual experience of the ethical encounter. In the face to face encounter, Levinas describes both hearing and seeing as more akin to touch. “The visible caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches” (LF:118).
reigns. There are no things. There is no way that I can be there. The il y a is a space denuded of every thing, including me. Because I cannot be where there is nothing, substantiating the nature of this otherness of the world is impossible. I, as an ‘elevated’ (hu)man, must remove myself from the world, as well as relinquish my elevated perspective on the world. I must turn off the lights to my bonne conscience and try to hear or smell or taste what the world looks like—I certainly cannot see it. To see it would mean that I would create a world shaped by my intentions to know it, a world formed by my perspective. That is, according to Levinas, there is no formed matter without my need to make it manifest. Without me, there is only matter—pure materiality, an ‘existence’ removed of its ‘existents’ (EE:51). In order to understand the il y a, I must try to describe a scene that I can never witness, because it is a scene that exists without ‘me.’ For Levinas, though, what so usefully stands in for the impossible is my ability to imagine such a scene (EE:57-8; TO:46). So, I will imagine: I imagine I reach the il y a.

To reach the place of pure existence, it is necessary to imagine that everything around me has disappeared. First, the words I am reading vanish letter by letter, then the keyboard that I tap my words into falls away leaving the surface of my desk, then, the desk itself disappears, then the light cast through the form of my lamp, then the walls and floor of my room. As if setting up a chain reaction, every thing that touches some other thing, with this touch, passes on its own disappearance to the other, until there is nothing left—except, of course, me. I stay long enough to survey the expansiveness of this disappearance, and then, after the shortest of instances, even I am gone. Once I take my leave, I have reached a place that cannot be reached. There are no words to read, there is no lamp to see them by, or desk or room or city or a consciousness to witness this pure existence. If I were able to reach this place, I would not even be capable of knowing I was there. But what, then, is there? There is nothing. The world is left with nothing—yet still there persists something of this nothingness. And what persists is “the fact that there is” (TO:46).

This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term there is. The there is, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is ‘being in general’ (EE:52).

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9 Sallis (1998:154) on Levinas's strategy of employing the imagination to find the il y a: “In order to approach this existing without existents, Levinas calls upon imagination. Omitting all indications as to how imagination is to be construed here, how it is to be, as it were, detached from the complex of determinations it has undergone from Plato on, omitting also all indications regarding the complicity of imagination with the question of being, Levinas simply proposes that we imagine something, or rather, that we imagine—or try to imagine—nothingness”. See also Polk's (2000:36) paper, in which he describes Levinas's use of imagination to explore the il y a as a critical response to Husserl's famous passage in Ideas I, where he tries to imagine the total annihilation of the world. See also Wyschogrod (1989:184).
Although Levinas describes the il y a as a persistence of nothingness, this does not mean that he imagines it as a void. It is not a coalescence of the negative spaces remaining when the positive space of subjects and their objects disappear. Such a space would be an absence of any presence. Rather than a removal, the il y a is a submergence; it is a swallowing up of the possibility of individual beings by “being in general”. The disappearance of beings is achieved through the reappearance of being. So there is existence, but, according to Levinas, no thing to take up this existence. The il y a is full of the “presence of absence” (EE:60), full of the presence of nothingness, full of the absence of everything.

But the il y a is an absence of my presence. It is empty of the light of my bonne conscience; empty of materiality, corporeality and individuality. It is removed of me. There is no world as I know it, for the world is illuminated and given form through my bonne conscience. Because I cannot ever reach a place where “I” am not, anticipating the il y a is my only access to the il y a. It is always a potential, never an actual; It is an otherness I can never reach.10

I can imagine that this world of the il y a is not the world as it is now. I suggest that Levinas imagines that this is a world removed of every thing because of his crucial belief in the illumination and form that our (hu)man bonne conscience provides the world. But what if, rather than imagining this world as a world without things, we imagine it as a world without our bonne conscience? Thinking of the il y a in this way explains why I can experience the horror of the il y a when I am still conscious and in the world. The space of the il y a is not simply emptied of things as much as it is emptied of my bonne conscience. Levinas might say that these scenes are one and the same thing: Both the objects of the world and my consciousness of them are my presentations. One is the outside of me, and one is the inside of me. But a world emptied of my intentions is much more frightening to an elevated, needy being than a world without things. Without my bonne conscience, I no longer have a mechanism for shedding light on the world; I no longer have a way of understanding the world as given over to me. I can no longer grasp the world. And to be truly horrified, all I must do is imagine such a place. The world looks exactly the same; I can still see things, but I have no control over them. The il y a is full with the absence of my intent.11 The anticipation of the il y a submerges me, swallows up my expectation of the future

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10 Is this space of nothingness what Lyotard is invoking when he describes what happens when our sun explodes in 4.5 billion years? “Negation without remainder. No self to make sense of it. Pure event. Disaster.... Matter asks no questions, expects no answers of us. It ignores us. It made us the way it made all bodies—by chance and according to its laws” (Lyotard 1991:8-11).

11 Polk (2000:36): “to imagine the total annihilation of the world is to imagine the loss of intentional consciousness as well”.
based on the happiness of the past. It removes my control from every present moment, until all that is left is persistence in being—not my being, but being in general, or perhaps the being of beings that do not exercise such a conscious intent upon the world. The world is full with this absence of my intent, “like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence” (EE:59); or, perhaps, like the sounds of a language I do not understand, or of wind moving through trees.

Perhaps the answers to these questions can be sought in Wyschogrod’s description of the il y a: a space in which being in general persists and submerges all formation of beings, as “an ontological ‘black hole’” (1989:184). No formation of being can escape the pull of its undifferentiated space. Levinas calls it “nocturnal space” (EE:52). This gives us a hint at its appearance perhaps. But he clearly distinguishes between a phenomenological night, that is, the night that appears after day, and the il y a’s night of anonymous existence. If the il y a were understood as the night that is opposite to day, that is, as a duration of time without light, this would underestimate the indeterminacy of the il y a in two significant ways.

Firstly, a phenomenological night involves the dimming of light. On the other hand, the il y a is a darkness that would be better described as blackness, because blackness is more than a lack of enough light to illuminate the forms of the world. The blackness of Levinas’s il y a is a true blackness, the result of the absorption of all light. I could not project my consciousness to such a place to illuminate my existence, because this night absorbs the possibility before I can even formulate the intent. The il y a cannot be seen; the il y a can only ever be barely imagined by me. In the world that I inhabit, do I imagine this il y a sitting enclosed within the forms of things? Do I know it is there although I do not know what it looks like, nor will I ever know?

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12 Or, an “atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence” (TO:46).
13 Levinas draws on Blanchot for his depictions of the il y a as night; and Blanchot (1986:49) writes that the il y a is Levinas’s most fascinating concept. In Existence and Existent, Levinas takes a definition of the il y a directly from Blanchot’s Thomas l’Obscure: “The presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night, the horror of being, the return of being to the heart of every negative movement, the reality of irreality are there admirably expressed” (EE:fn.1,p.58). See also Levinas’s essay on Blanchot in Proper Names where he refers to Blanchot’s “second night” or “black light” (OMB:133,137), which are two variants on a series of terms Blanchot (1981:102) uses to describe the il y a, the others being “Night” or “other night”.

Many links have been made between Blanchot and Levinas. For examples, see Levinas’s own discussions of Blanchot in Proper Names (OMB:127-70). See also Purcell’s “The Ethical Significance of Illeity” (1996:128-9); John Caruana’s “The Catastrophic ‘Site and Non-Site’ of Proximity” (1998); Critchley’s Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature, and “Il y a—A dying stronger than death,” (1993); and Davies’s “A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas” (1990).
So how do I experience the terror of this blackness, if not with my eyes? In face of the knowledge that it is unseeable, still, I try to see it with my eyes. Faced with the fact that it is unknowable, I persist in trying to imagine it with my mind. Once, lost in the bush, I came close to the horror of the *il y a*. For two days, my friend and I trekked, looking but finding no way out. We were trapped, deep within a valley, forced through a stream bound on either side by bush and mountains. At one point, the stream turned a sharp corner and opening out before us were towering sheer cliffs. Nestled in the cracks in its face were dozens of egrets. Remembering that scene now, I can say that it was intensely beautiful. But at the time, I looked but did not see it. All that I had at that time was fear. I could ‘see’ no way out of this elemental space,\(^4\) I could see nothing in this space, devoid of my intent.

Secondly, the night of the *il y a* differs from a phenomenological night in how it persists, in its blackness, as a continuous indeterminacy enduring beyond the possibility of light (EE:53). The night that is the opposite of a phenomenological day ends with light. But the night of the *il y a* is neverending. This is the ataraxy of *purely being* (TI:113). It is the inability for ‘failure’ to shake being’s intent to *purely be*. This is the same ataraxy Levinas finds in the life of a tree, or the life of a nonhuman animal, or the life of the sea. However, my experience of this nocturnal ataraxy of the *il y a* differs from the way trees or animals experience it: from the outset, my life is ‘above being’. I cannot experience the imperturbable existence of a tree, because I will always think about imperturbability. I will

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\(^4\) At times such as this, I do not experience the element as something containable. “The element has no forms containing it; it is content without form. Or rather it has but a side: the surface of the sea and of the field, the edge of the wind; the medium upon which this side takes form is not composed of things. It unfolds in its own dimension: depth, which is invariant in the breadth and length in which the side of the element extends” (TI:131). Lingis, in translating this passage, uses “side,” rather than “face,” to translate this term, in order to reserve the English term “face” for the face of a (hu)man for “visage” (translator’s note in TI:131). I consider this to be quite an interesting turn: is the *face of the elemental* removed from its close association with the face of the Other through a translation? But then Levinas says: “To tell the truth the element has no side at all. One does not approach it. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element” (TI:131).

There are other moments when Levinas seems to create a more confused line between the *il y a* and alterity. In “God and Philosophy,” Levinas describes God as having a sort of ultra-alterity, “other than the other, other otherwise,” which takes God closer to the *il y a* than the face; “prior to the ethical bond with another 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*” (GP:165-6). Caruana (1998:41) explains the reason for this move by Levinas as thus: “For the later Levinas, it is structurally important to maintain the possibility of seeing in the *il y a* a face of an irate God who attacks the self in the Night of existence”. Wyschogrod writes that Blanchot reads the same alliance between Levinas’s concept of the *il y a* and transcendence: “Blanchot interprets the *il y a*...as an effort to describe the obverse of transcendence” (Wyschogrod 1989:183). Note that the ‘obverse’ is defined as a ‘counterpart’ of something, or that which complements something else. Interestingly, this reading of the *il y a* being complementary to transcendence has been slightly lost in the translation of Blanchot’s paper (1986:49), through the use of the word ‘reverse’ instead of ‘obverse.’ Still, the point is there: “The *there is* is...Levinas’s...temptation, too, since as the reverse of transcendence it is thus not distinct from it either”. 
always be separate from it; I will always be outside of it. And the ataraxy of pure being, when experienced from the outside, is terrifying. It represents a continuation of the future that is no longer mine to claim enjoyment from. The il y a when I was lost terrified me, because I could see no end to it. The egrets, trees and rocks were the only witnesses to my existence, and in their imperturbability did not care whether I lived or died.

According to Levinas, my fear in these moments is not a fear of death (EE:57). Vasseleu (1998:85) describes the nature of my fear as thus: “The presence of night—a collapse of things into indeterminate nothing, a horror which can also occur in the midst of daylight—erodes the continuity of consciousness”. It erodes my love of life (the temporality of happiness): The il y a is the potential for suffering. This is “the unforeseeable future of the element”:

...not because it exceeds the reach of vision, but because, faceless and losing itself in nothingness, it is inscribed in the fathomless depth of the element, coming from an opaque density without origin, the bad infinite or the indefinite, the apeiron (TI:158).

There is nothing to grasp.

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15 Levinas deals specifically with death in the following passages: Time and the Other (67-79); Totality and Infinity (232-40). Lawton makes the following points about Levinas's subtle analysis of death: (1) Levinas argues that death taken to be annihilation is impossible, because there is always “pure existence” or “il y a”. (2) Levinas rejects Heidegger’s notion that death is a liberty. Rather, he suggests that the relation with death is an experience of pure passivity; (3) Finally, for Levinas, suicide is a contradictory concept (Lawton 1976:75, n.30). On all these points, see also Critchley’s book: Very Little...Almost Nothing (1997:31-83). John Caruana points out that Levinas’s analysis of death paves the way for his conception of ethics. This is demonstrated in the way that Levinas reads Hamlet’s utterance, To be or not to be? as having ethics rather than ontology as its premise. “It is the human possibility to dread injustice more than death’ that reveals to us the truth of what it means to be a human being. And once again, Levinas concludes: ‘To be or not to be, is perhaps not the question par excellence’” (Caruana 1998:fn.5).

16 Interestingly, the narrator in Sue Woolfe’s novel, Leaning Towards Infinity (1996:274), is amused about the use of the word “apeiron” to describe infinity, because it means “something despised”. She continues “My mother’s scarlet pen had laughed about apeiron, the ancient Greek word: the word for infinity, meant something as dull, as grubby as a dirty handkerchief. (as my apron???) [The ancient Greeks] didn’t want anything so incomplete as apeiron.” This, Woolfe’s narrator speculates, is why the Greeks invented pi. “They wanted a simple, underlying pattern. So spell-binding, it stopped thought” (Woolfe 1996:304).

17 Levinas identifies his analysis of the il y a with Blanchot’s “disaster” (El:fn.p.50). Caruana (1998:42) investigates Blanchot’s (1986) use of the term in The Writing of the Disaster: “Blanchot exploits the rich etymology of the world désastre: to exist or live without a guiding star. The disaster (from the Italian disastro, no star) is the worst possible prognosis in augury, signifying that one is born either under an unlucky star or without a star with which to plan a course of life. For Blanchot, the disaster is dreadful, effrayant (frayer is to clear a path; hence, ef-frayant literally means to be without a path of direction). The disaster is absolutely terrifying because there is no direction or point of reference by which to orient life”.

Returning to the point I made in an early footnote (fn.11 in chapter one), addressing the use of a horizon to make comprehension of objects relational: in the il y a, rather than a horizon organising materiality, according to Levinas, “there is a swarming of points” (EE:53). These points in space do
The switch between experiencing the element as the very essence of sensual enjoyment and experiencing the element as the very essence of terror is dependent on anxiety. If I feel insecure about my future, my whole experience of the world can turn on me. Levinas explains:

The element suits me—I enjoy it; the need to which it responds is the very mode of this conformity or of this happiness. The indetermination of the future alone brings insecurity to need, indigence: the perfidious elemental gives itself while escaping (TI:141).  

In Existence and Existents, Levinas uses the example of insomnia to demonstrate the power of anxiety to turn a situation of pleasure into a situation of terror. In this case, the potential satiation of tiredness is turned into the impossibility of sleep:

The impossibility of rending the invading, inevitable, and anonymous rustling of existence manifests itself particularly in certain times when sleep evades our appeal. One watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful. The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held by being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence (EE:61).

With the power of this anxiety in mind, I return to eating and ask does eating also hold the potential of such terror? Eating does seem to present the possibility of a different spatial experience of the il y a. For, if I experience the terror of the il y a when I am lost in the wilderness, then it comes to me from the outside in—a gradual working away at me interiorly by the undifferentiated presence of the exterior world. In eating, I would experience this dissolution from the inside out. There are nonetheless similarities between the terror of the il y a that Levinas describes and the scene that I face everyday as I eat. I enjoy my food, I experience with pure sensibility its flavours and textures in my mouth. I

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18 Levinas refers to this ocean: “Nothingness is still envisaged as the end and limit of being, as an ocean which beats up against it on all sides” (EE:60).

In this sense, the experience of the il y a does not seem that dissimilar to the ethical relation. There is no place outside of the il y a from which to view it. Is this not how Levinas describes the face to face encounter, that is, as a relation with no relation? Caruana (1998:33) looks at the movement from the “unredeemed disaster” of the il y a to the “catastrophic redemption” of the face to face encounter. Whereas the disaster is terrifying because from within it, I have no sense of direction, no sense of how to hold onto the future for myself, it seems the catastrophe is an altogether different experience of the future. “The Greek katastrophe originally signified an overturning. ...‘catastrophe’ in the context of Levinas’s work has to be understood primarily in a Jewish manner, rather than a Greek one. ...In this particular context, catastrophe is inseparable from theophany—the manifestation of God as the agent of catastrophic events—and issues relating to justice and ethics” (42). In the disaster, there is no direction for me. In the catastrophe, “god” (re)directs my path.

19 Polk (2000:36) puts this anxiety in terms of “an attack”: “We fear this impersonal being because it is alien to the self; anonymous, it attacks us from the future; it dissolves the ‘here now’ into a ‘nowhere,’ into an impossibility of determination”.

20 Benso (2000:166) offers us another way of thinking about this—that is, that attention, or listening, which are two aspects of the ethical encounter, can also be likened to insomnia.
swallow. Once I swallow, I relinquish control over what happens next. As was the case while I was chewing my food, my eyes remain unable to keep the process in check. I lose my intentions to biological process. But on the possibility of eating provoking anxiety in me, Levinas remains silent. In the place of such a possibility, he simply writes: “Nourishment comes as a happy chance” (TI:141).

Interestingly, if I do see this process in action, then I tend to be repelled—not terrified, but I experience a form of disgust at what should be going on inside my body rather than outside. Vomit, faeces, people eating with their mouths open—all these things uncompromisingly expose me to the dissolving barriers between myself and the world. Kristeva refers to this as “abjection”. In a definition that could just as easily be used to describe my terror of the il y a, Kristeva (1980 (1988):135-6) says abjection “is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so…” When she introduces the notion in Powers of Horror, Kristeva (in Oliver 1997:230-1) uses the human relationship to food as a prototypical example of abjection. In the case of food, rather than to terrify, the abject makes me feel like throwing up. It is disgusting to me. “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly…. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream…”. I think that the reason it has this effect is the same reason that the il y a terrifies: the abject threatens my identity because it threatens the distinctions between subject and object, between what I intend and what I never intended. And for some reason, I feel better if this dissolution remains invisible to me—hidden by the body. For Kristeva, this abjection has a very important consequence- it helps me separate: ‘since this food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me,’ …I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. …I give birth to myself amid the violence of…vomit” (in Oliver 1997:231).

And some foods seem to “exude” the il y a even before I have begun to eat them. There are foods that look or taste or smell like bodily fluids such as the muclaginous okra; or foods that smell like acrid sweating bodies, such as blue cheese; or foods that smell like rotting flesh, such as the durian; or foods with eyes; or foods that bleed. See also Rosemary Pringle and Susan Colling’s (1993) work on the relationship between women and butchery and its link to the abject. “Kristeva argues that becoming abject is the body’s defence against cannibalism. If it is disgusting, it won’t be eaten” (in Oliver 1993:fn.10).
Returning to elevation (from a different perspective)

At this stage, as I am on my journey towards the ethical encounter, the potential of exposure to the il y a has a more potent hold on my actions than any potential of a face to face encounter with the Other. But if my enjoyment relinquishes my control over my future, then how will I ever reach the ethical encounter?

For Levinas, to encounter the face of the ethical Other, I must separate from and elevate above the world. In this movement, two relationships with the world crystallise, both intricately and inextricably interwoven with my neediness.

The first is a relationship built on happiness. I need the world, and my neediness is happiness. The world that I need I see from my elevated perspective. From here, I can see its limitations; from here, the light of my consciousness illuminates much of it, and what my light does not reveal is only in shadow. With the turning of the world, all its aspects will be revealed. Every part of it is within my grasp. It is shaped by my need. It is other to me, but only to the extent that it is not yet me. It is not other in the radical sense that (hu)man alterity is, that is, an otherness that defies my understanding. The world’s otherness is that which resists my sameness, but it is ultimately understood.

But the elevation I have established I must ‘re-embody’ if I am to enjoy the world. So, I come ‘down’ corporeally, materially, into the contents of my life. If love of life is happiness, then the contents of life become all important to me. “Contents...are not my being but more dear to me than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working,
warming oneself in the sun” (TI:112). Even those needs that are not about my subsistence
in being are all important to me as a lover of life. For the duration of my life, by the
temporality of my happiness, the contents of my life that I love become the point of my life.

The second is a relationship built on terror. With temporality, I risk suffering. In
separating, I have gone beyond being. I have released the world, and its ‘otherness’ now
attaches the things that I need to its nothingness. It attaches them, not to a fixed point that
I could perhaps sever, but to nothing. Re-embodied (eating, thinking, warming myself
under the sun) I must absorb myself in the elemental if I am to enjoy myself. And with
every moment of anxiety I feel at this prospect, I anticipate the il y a.

In my elevation, I set myself up for the enjoyment of the world but also for the terror
of the il y a. With the potential of my elevation to expose me to such suffering, I ask again
why does Levinas make elevation a prerequisite for the ethical encounter?

For Levinas, the ‘absence’ that (hu)man elevation creates in the world—an absence
that is taken up in the present by the il y a—devalues the existence of the rest of the world
subordinating it to (hu)man need. And by describing the il y a as horrific, so too the
nonhuman world is found to be inherently horrific. So with one upward stroke, Levinas
negotiates a departure for (hu)mans from the rest of the world. While (hu)mans are set on
a movement upwards, the rest of the non(hu)man world finds itself locked into a position
that allows for little movement. For now, the nonhuman world is held tight by two
opposing forces. From above, this world removed of (hu)mans is weighed down by the
neediness of (hu)mans. And from beneath, the world is tied firmly in place by the heavy
grip of nothingness. While (hu)mans have made a somewhat dubious escape, Levinas sees
no such future for the rest of the nonhuman world. The future of the world is dictated by an
existence that I am beyond. The things that I need from the world are suspensions of the il
y a. They do not elevate their own existence as I do mine. My elevation makes my future
distinct from the future of things: their future leads nowhere.

Things that arise from the il y a can never rise to my elevation, because the il y a sits
at the opposite end of the spectrum from my elevated position. In fact, it is my elevation
that brings the world into form. If it were not for the height of my elevation (the light of my
bonne conscience), then these things would have remained a part of the elemental
formlessness of the world. Levinas can describe things as giving of themselves to my needs
because it was my needs that gave them their form. Thus, the elevated position that Levinas
ascribes to (hu)mans allows me to feel at ease about using the world. But elevation does not
alleviate the possibility of suffering: it gives me the right to try my hardest at happiness by
using the world. And because the nonhuman world is unconscious to happiness, it
cannot—according to Levinas—suffer from my use or consumption of it. This is the most important consequence of Levinas’s positioning of (hu)mans in an elevated relation to the rest of the world.

Levinas’s notion of (hu)man elevation is also crucial to an understanding of how Levinas’s ethics manages to avoid the alterity of the (hu)man world. The spatial manifestations of avoidance will be considered in later chapters, but for now, I continue to chart Levinas’s dystopic path of the (hu)man subject toward the face of the (hu)man other. For, as it stands, I, as that elevated (hu)man subject, am not yet capable of the ethical encounter. Before I can proceed on my ethical journey, I must first find some security against the force of the il y a, a force that my elevation has released against my future. Instead of giving in to the recklessness of the il y a, I must find a way to resist the il y a. This ‘resistance’ is what Levinas deems to be the precursor to ethics—not a surrender to the immediacy of enjoyment that brings me up against the terror of the il y a, but an enjoyment that suspends itself, and, in being suspended, acts as security for me against the il y a. For Levinas, eating does not bring up immediately the terror of the il y a. But why, then, does eating bring up immediately the terror of the il y a in me?
Two

Levinas inadvertently tells the story of technological food production and the invisible food-making work of women

my being at home

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).
In part one of this thesis, I asked how and where I could encounter the other (hu)man. I summarise what I have so far determined: Separation is the first step that I must take to prepare for my meeting with this other (hu)man. According to Levinas, this step elevates me. I meet the Other at a height. But the necessity to ‘step up’ is contradicted by the fact that I must be in the world in order to maintain my existence. Therefore, the height of Levinas’s elevated self can best be understood as a transcendence, which, nonetheless, must occur at ground level. In fact, the separateness that marks the so-called ‘beyond being’ of (hu)man existence, rather than ‘being’ read as a ‘height’, can also be understood as ‘happiness’ that comes temporally. The temporality of happiness is the mark of (hu)man separation, and is the condition that allows me to meet the face of the Other. According to Levinas. But if the wonder of happiness is its temporality, at any moment I may suffer rather than enjoy my life. I am continually under the threat of the il y a that attaches all the things that I need to its nothingness.

The il y a is an aspect of the world’s otherness that I experience through anticipation, more specifically, as anxiety. How does this anxiety occur? The temporal expression of happiness in my life involves the cycling from need to satiation to need to satiation. This is the cycle of nourishment that introduces enjoyment into my life. But while being needy and being satiated are both states that separate me from the world, between these moments I must come into contact with the world. To sensually engage with what satisfies me, I must absorb myself in the indeterminacy of the element. If all goes well, this time of absorption is a time of immediate, sensual pleasure. But, if something disturbs me in this time, enough to make me anxious, the cycle of nourishment is broken. This disturbance within enjoyment: the period when I am searching out something in the world to satiate my
hunger. If I am anxious about the possibility of finding my next meal while absorbed in the enjoyment of my present meal then I may find myself relinquished of control—without security in this moment, without security in the future.

Does such anxiety matter to Levinas? If I am insecure about my future, if I am anxious about where my next meal will come from, will I have anything to offer the other (hu)man “oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world” (EFP:82)? As Levinas says, “nourishment comes as a happy chance” (TI:141). My nourishment, “or my ‘place in the sun,’” would depend on my chance in the face of the elemental? Thus my responsibility to the other (hu)man and this nourishment depends on chance? This is not good enough for me, nor for my encounter with the other (hu)man. Levinas says that I must enjoy the world and the bounty of its offerings, to be well placed for my encounter with the other ‘hungry’ (hu)man. So I ask in this part of my thesis how can I sustain my enjoyment of the world long enough to be able to prepare for my encounter with the other (hu)man? That is, how can I secure happiness so that I do not fall from ‘elevation’? How do I secure myself against the horror invoked in anxious anticipation of the il y a?

I must avoid anxiety during my sensual absorption in the world: I must be secure while I travel the world in search of the things that I need, the food that I eat—my nourishment. I cannot risk the completion of my cycle of nourishment. I cannot get lost somewhere in those instable regions between meals. What would secure the continuity of the cycle of need, satiation, need, satiation? How Levinas answers this question is the focus of part two.
3

Taming the stomach without ears

There is an affinity between this intelligibility of the Cosmos in which mind is equivalent to knowledge, equivalent to the correlation of knowing and being, to representation and presence, in which mind measures and equals itself, verifying itself reciprocally—between ontology and the good practical sense of men troubled by hunger, seizing upon things, perceiving; men called to take before consuming and thus to acquire and to store, to keep themselves in their houses, at home and to build and assure themselves of the presence of things and to represent these, and gradually to touch the very sources of the celestial light which one day shall be reduced to their physico-chemical essence. ...In the transcendence of the stars, men will have learned to exercise patience in regard to their appetites and to draw their technologies from the ground of theories (SH:8).

This quote from “Secularization and Hunger” is a rare summary, undertaken by Levinas, of one of the less frequently addressed aspects of the hungry (hu)man’s negotiations with the world. Here, Levinas describes the role that technology plays in calming the immediate anxiety facing a hungry (hu)man. To set the scene for this discussion, I revisit (hu)man hunger. I am hungry, and I know that I am hungry, because I am separated from the world. I am separate and needy, but because I am (hu)man, and I know that I am hungry—and I can see that the world stretching out before me exists to satiate my hunger—I am not anxious. I do not even need to sacrifice the distance I have established from the world to obtain the food that I need. This is because I have hands, and hands allow me access to the world in a way that is more akin to vision than to touch. That is, I can grasp the world. The space between my body and the things that I grasp does not touch me, because, as far as my eyes can tell, this space is nothing—it is space between (things and me). It is void.

But when I am in the process of satiating my hunger, my relationship with the world changes. When I eat, I am not distanced from the world: I am absorbed in it; I am
overwhelmed with it sensually. I taste it and feel it and enjoy the building sensation of satiation. This is my absorption in the element, and my first experience of the world’s otherness. Yet, there is the potential for anxiety while I am so absorbed. My experience of the world’s otherness could change—from enjoyment to horror. This is my second experience of the world’s otherness: It is the closest I come to the *il y a*.

But what can I do about this anxiety? To answer this question, it is first necessary to understand that, up until this moment, I am dealing with my cycle of nourishment in a very particular way. Levinas’s quote to introduce this chapter alludes to it—“men troubled by hunger, seizing upon things”—that is, I am continually grasping the world and then eating it *immediately*. I am living ‘hand-to-mouth’: I am hungry, I search for food, I find food. I satiate my hunger: then again. And again and again. If I am to continue in this cycle, there is good reason for me to feel anxiety about my next meal before I have finished my first.

How do I secure myself in the world while I am eating so that I will not be faced with the horror of the *il y a*? There are two initial steps I must take in order to secure myself. The first is the development of patience, allowing me to ignore my hungry stomach long enough to acquire possessions from the world to break the cycle of searching for food. As Levinas states: “...men [are] called to take before consuming...to acquire and to store”. The second step, already anticipated in the first, is to use my mind—my contemplative ability—to think, to strategise. Rather than having continually to search for my food, I think out strategies *to make food come to me*, “to keep [men] in their houses, at home and to build and assure themselves”. This is the work of technology; this is the creation of security. “In the transcendence of the stars, men will have learned to exercise patience in regard to their appetites and to draw their technologies from the ground of theories” (SH:8). In this chapter, I address these steps: the acquiring of possessions, and the work of technology.¹

¹ Levinas deals with these issues of possession and work almost exclusively in the section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled “Dwelling” (T152-74). In “Secularization and Hunger” (1976 (1998)), and “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us” (1963 (1990)), Levinas concentrates more specifically on the work of technology. There seems to me to be a remarkable lack of commentators in this area of Levinas’s writing. There are, of course, exceptions. Adriaan Peperzak, in his paper “Levinas on Technology and Nature” (1992), undertakes a detailed reading of these two most concerted efforts of Levinas’s, at delineating his take on technology. There is also Benso’s account of Levinas’s lack of love for ‘things,’ which draws on his descriptions of labour and possession. In particular, see the chapter “Without Love: The Disappearance of Things,” in The Face Of Things: A Different Side of Ethics (2000:45-56). There are many accounts of the feminine in relation to ‘dwelling,’ which I will address in some detail in the footnotes of chapter four.
Men are called to take before consuming, to acquire and to store

What is it, exactly, that Levinas says I must take from the world to satiate my hunger? Food. I take food as a possession—that is, I take it and keep it for a while. I keep it in a dark pantry or in my deep freeze. Without ‘acquiring’ food, I may find myself devouring it. If this were the case, rather than food becoming my possession, I may find myself becoming possessed by it. Being possessed by my food may be an enjoyable experience. ‘Being possessed’ is the experience of enjoyment. I can be ‘possessed’ by a most sensual pleasure in the time it takes for me to satiate my hunger. Or, I may find myself ‘possessed’ by the intangible, though immanently horrific, potential of the il y a. Without possessions, every next time I am hungry, I risk not being able to find anything to eat. Potentially, in the space between my last satiating meal and my next is anxiety. But if I have made possessions of the world, then I do not have to search for food when I am hungry. Instead, I can go to where I store my possessions—to my freezer, or my pantry, and see what takes my fancy. If I have stored my food conscientiously, when I get hungry I can eat. So even if I stay hungry for a while, I have the security of knowing that, in time, I will eat. I have stored acorns under the ground in anticipation of a long cold winter; I relish the possibility of future rather than immediate nourishment.

These acorns are possessable because they are graspsable. That is, it is possible for me to detach them from their surroundings. They are distinguishable from what can seem to be a rather indeterminate natural environment. And because I can grasp them, I can also move them around. Levinas says, “a thing is movable—a furnishing [meuble]” (TI:161). This may seem a simplistic point, but it is a crucial part of what makes possessions a form of security for me. If it were not for these removable and moveable aspects of the world, I may have to go wherever my hungry stomach takes me in my search for food. My movement around the world would be controlled by my needs and at the whim of the world. The fact that I can grasp parts of the world and bring them with me means that the world becomes oriented around my movements.

Instead of living ‘hand to mouth’, I acquire possessions. While my possessions remain in storage, they do not nourish me, rather, they secure me. Levinas writes that possessions are always “durables,” which also means that, to some extent, things or

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2 Levinas distinguishes between these scenes thus: “The possession of things proceeding from the home, produced by labor, is to be distinguished from the immediate relation with the non-I in enjoyment, the possession without acquisition enjoyed by the sensibility steeped in the element, which “possesses” without taking” (TI158).

3 “Possession removes being from change” (TI160).
possessions are “non-edible” (TI:161). When I take possessions from the world, even food, instead of consuming them immediately, I hold them ‘at arm’s length’. Levinas describes the role my hand plays in maintaining this status of possession as thus: “An organ for taking, for acquisition, it gathers the fruit but holds it far from the lips, keeps it, puts it in reserve...”(TI:161). This activity of possession, principally undertaken by my hands, what Levinas describes as the very en-ergy of acquisition” (TI:159), is the activity of “labor”:

Labor masters or suspends…the indeterminate future of the element. By taking hold of things…it disposes of the unforeseeable future in which being’s ascendancy over us was portended; it reserves this future for itself (TI:160).

Here is the creation of a new space. With every possession acquired, keeping, as Levinas describes it, “a certain proportion relative to the human body” (TI:161), another part of the world is changed. With its proportions now set in relation to my body, the world possessed does not have the opportunity to escape the boundaries my acquisition places on it. And while this possession remains within my grasp, it cannot return to the indeterminacy of the element.

The hand delineates a world by drawing what it grasps from the element, delineating definite beings having forms, that is, solids; the informing of the formless is solidification, emergence of the graspable... (TI:161).

From my body to the reach of my arm exists a space now suspended of its otherness, suspending of any possibility of immersing me in indeterminacy—removed of its ability to cause anxiety in enjoyment. And so each time I do decide to ‘use up’ one of these possessions—that is, to eat it—I do so in a very particular space. My absorption in consumption is tempered by a space surrounding me that comforts me with its lack of otherness. The space around me, defined by the reach of my arm and the edge of my possessions, marks out a part of the world where ‘sameness’—that is, what is not other—reigns.4

Benso (2000:49) refers to Levinas’s conception of things as a description of “fields of conquest”. In fact, this transition—from needing to go out into the world in search of the things, to finding the satiation I need in the space surrounding me—parallels the historical transition that (hu)mans undertook from hunting and gathering to farming and domestication, both of which have often been described as forms of conquest. To

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4 Irigaray (1993:232) writes the possibility of an entirely different relationship with life in “Fecundity of the Caress”—one that stays open to the uncertainty of the future, embraces it, and in embracing it, can never take possession, grasp, or control: “Life always open to what happens. To the fleeting touch of what has not yet found a setting. To the grace of a future that none can control. That will or will not happen. But while one waits for it, any possession of the world or of the other is suspended. A future coming, which is not measured by the transcendence of death but by the call to birth of the self and the other. For which each one arranges and rearranges the environment, the body, and the cradle, without closing the least dimension of a room, a house, an identity”.

domesticate animals 50 000 years ago, our ancestors developed tools, musical instruments, lamps, art and trade (Diamond 1999:39). The development of killing tools made the eating of animals more likely, but, still, hunted animals lived free from (hu)man control until they were tracked and killed. And there is now evidence that our ancestors understood, perhaps even better than we do today, that an animal killed quickly would have flesh that tasted better and lasted longer than an animal that lived and died in suffering. 5 11 000 years ago, we managed slowly to see that the benefits of controlling the movement, location and growth of animals outweighed the taste and ‘shelf life’ of wild, happy animals (Patterson 2002:6). First, animals once hunted were restricted in their movement. Then, herding6 gradually became farming by the capture of herds and the control of their mobility, diet, growth and reproduction through castration,7 hobbling, branding, ear cropping, leather aprons, whips, prods, chains and collars. (Hu)mans developed various ways of diverting animals’ milk for our use rather than for the use of the animal’s offspring. 8 These practices,

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5 Reay Tannahill, in Food in History (1973:8): “It is...possible that the late prehistoric hunter, expert on animals as he was, may have learned from experience what science was to later confirm, that an animal placid at the moment of slaughter provides sweeter meat than one that is nervous or exhausted. ...The muscular tissue of animals contains a small amount of glycogen that breaks down at death into other substances, including a preservative, lactic acid. But physical or nervous tension before death uses up much of the glycogen and so reduces the amount of lactic acid that can be produced”. Today, with other preservation techniques and flavourings, the taste of an animal who has died in distress may be less obvious.

6 For detailed descriptions of methods of restricting the movement of herds, see Charles Patterson (2002:10).

7 For descriptions of current practices of castrating and other reproductive control mechanisms for cows, cattle, horses, pigs, reindeer and camels, again, see Patterson (2002:8-10). Interestingly, it is rare for herders to tamper with the reproductive systems of female animals for reproductive purposes. There is one exception to this tampering, but for other reasons than reproductive control: “The Tuareg—Berbers of the Sahara—sometimes insert a small stone into the uterus of the she-camels they use for riding in the belief that it makes for a smoother gait” (Patterson 2002:8).

8 Some of these techniques, particularly those used by herders such as the Kasak, Tuareg, Nuer and Basuto include: making sucking painful by tying sharp instruments to a calf’s mouth; or killing the calf for food and then stimulating the mother’s ‘milk-ejection reflex’ by inflating her vagina with air (Cranstone 1969:254-60).

I mention these cases to demonstrate one key point: Of all the animals farmed for food, the females seem to go through the worst ordeals. Lori Gruen (1993:72) says, the “egg industry is the most acute example of highly centralized, corporate exploitation of female animals”. Female pigs fair only marginally better, and dairy cows only marginally better than the sows. Gruen on the cow: “After her first infant is taken from her at birth, she is milked by machines twice, sometimes three times, a day for ten months. After the third month she will be impregnated again. She will give birth only six to eight weeks after drying out. This intense cycle of pregnancy and hyperlactation can last only five years, and then the ‘spent’ cow is sent to slaughter. During the five-year period, the overworked cow is likely to be very sick. In order to obtain the highest output, cows are fed high-energy concentrates. But the cow’s peculiar digestive system cannot adequately absorb nutrients from such feed. ...Because her capacity to produce surpasses her ability to metabolise her feed, the cow begins to break down and use her own body tissue.... One-third of all dairy cows suffer from mastitis.... The most common mastitis is caused by environmental pathogens that result from squalid housing conditions, particularly from fecal contamination. Treatment includes spraying the teats with disinfectants and injecting antibiotics directly into them. Both treatments are becoming increasingly
some of which, if applied to (hu)mans would be called torture, are what others describe as the price domesticated animals pay for their ‘evolutionary freedom’.

From these ‘fields of conquest’ I acquire the possessions that will form what Levinas calls my “home” or “dwelling”. It is in dwelling that I will find respite from the uncertainty of the element: “The element is fixed between the four walls of the home, is calmed in possession. It appears there as a thing…” (TI:158).9 It is through being “at home with oneself” (TI:33) that (hu)mans ensure the cycle of nourishment, or what Levinas also describes as “the interval required between vision and grasping and the consumption of terrestrial nutriments” (SH:7).

So dwelling in the world works by allowing me to develop a feeling of security rather than an actual security against future hunger.10 I gain a sense of “self-sufficiency” (TI:118). With dwelling, I possess the ability to say or think I can. “I can” is the state of knowing that “dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence, or thanks to it, free” (TI:37). So, rather than thinking of the dwelling as merely a static point or geographical location that I then fill with what I take from the world, dwelling can also be a movement. “The ‘at home’ [Le ‘chez soi’] is not a container but a site where I can…” (TI:37). I can venture into the world confident of my potential to possess the world wherever I may tread. The world is the site (“lieu”) of my dwelling. “Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is comprehended” (TI:111, 37-8). Therefore, my dwelling is a space, but it is a space that moves with me, like an extension of my body, like a secure bubble, continually mediating between the world and me. This is why Levinas also describes dwelling as a sojourn (“séjour”) in the world. To sojourn is to journey in a way that continually renews the sameness surrounding me by acquiring possessions, suspending the world’s otherness. “The way of the I against the ‘other’ of the world consists in sojourning, in identifying oneself by existing here at home with oneself [chez soi]” (TI:37).

However, dwelling is also a static location. Dwelling is also the place I return to once I have acquired the possessions of my sojourn. The walls of my dwelling are built from these possessions that I bring ‘home’. But the possessions I do not bring home from my sojourn revert to their otherness. The world outside reverts to its otherness. My dwelling, my

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9 “The ecstatic and immediate enjoyment to which, aspired as it were by the uncertain abyss of the element, the I was able to give itself over, is adjourned and delayed in the home” (TI:156).

10 See footnote 15 in this chapter, where I describe the way changes in food production and distribution can have massive effects on food security.
‘home’, is thus the only place where I can continuously suspend otherness, and therefore prevent my dissimulation into the element\(^{11}\) (an illusion of control).\(^{12}\)

The hand’s rigorously economic movement of seizure and acquisition is dissipated by the traces, ‘wastes’, and ‘works’ this movement of acquisition, returning to the interiority of the home, leaves in its wake. These works, as city, field, garden, landscape, recommence their elemental existence (TI:159).

Still, my home does not leave me stranded in the wildness of the elemental. As Levinas says, “the home does not implant the separated being in a ground to leave it in vegetable communication with the elements” (TI:156). My home, which protects me from the elements, also provides me with a selective perspective. “It is set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river” (TI:156). It has a street front, a fence, and a neighbourhood, each of which marks, to varying degrees, a zone of security for me.

The overall effect of this selective, protected positioning of my home is the reconstruction of the visual separation that I have described in chapter one—my ‘elevation’. I return briefly to this metaphor of the glass wall, to begin to draw a clearer image of the current situation. In chapter one, I wrote that in the moment of needing the world I am separated from the world as if by a glass wall. From my side of the glass I can see the whole of the world, and in the light of my bonne conscience I see it as a world that finds form through my intentions for it. Because the light is coming from my side of the glass, the view is uni-directional. This means that the world does not view me in the same light. In fact, the world does not view me at all. From my position behind this glass, the world seems to be shaped into things that are given over to my needs. But in order for me to satiate these needs, I must come into contact with the world, which of course, cannot occur if I continue to stand behind this physical barrier. Luckily, my vision supports a very particular form of touch that can maintain my separation. As I suggested at the end of chapter one, with vision as my guide into the world, I no longer need the glass wall because I can grasp the world while still maintaining my separation. The glass wall is made redundant, and dissipates into the void of space that exists between myself and what I grasp.

Yet, in my dwelling the wall of glass again finds a role:

\(^{11}\) The reason my static dwelling suspends otherness continually is because I am continuously there. If I am not, then it may also return to otherness. This reminds me of what it feels like to come back to a house that I am moving out of, or have half moved out of. It always feels like it is rejecting my presence to the same extent as I have rejected it.

\(^{12}\) Irigaray (1993:232) refers to this static, safe dwelling in “Fecundity of the Caress”: “A subject already ‘fixed.’ Not ‘free as the wind.’ A subject that already knows its objects and controls its relations with the world and with others. Already closed to any initiation. Already involved in initiatives that exclude the unknown. Already solipsistic. In charge of a world that it enjoys only through possession”.

The dwelling remains in its own way open upon the element from which it separates. The ambiguity of distance, both removal and connection, is lifted by the window that makes possible a look that dominates, a look of him who escapes looks, the look that contemplates (TI:156).

It seems that the dwelling remains open “in its own way” to the element, via the window.13 Firstly, the window allows me visual access to the world outside my dwelling without me having to actually be outside my dwelling. However, the dwelling is “set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river” (TI:156). Instead of the dwelling’s being surrounded by these elemental environments, it is surrounded by spaces that are in various states of possession by me. So what Levinas means by the dwelling remaining open to the element, “in its own way,” could mean that the dwelling is open to its own depiction of the element. The window exposes the dwelling to a world that has been specifically tamed. It allows me to ‘connect’ to the world in a way that still ‘dominates’. I am still connected by this transparent edge, it still protects me from those aspects of the world outside that might affect me with anxiety. I can see the outside while remaining hermetically sealed from it. Like life in a hermetically sealed apartment block (rather than a rambling old ‘Queenslander’),14 I may see the wind blowing outside, but not feel the cold it brings. I can see the view of the city, returning to its anonymous flows, but not suffer the perpetual drone of its traffic. I am free to contemplate the world from inside my dwelling because I believe myself to be truly separate from it. Furthermore, from inside this home, behind this window, I am free to believe what ever I want to believe, because I am out of sight from the gaze of all those things that I gaze at. The glass that sits between myself and the world is still uni-directional. “The window makes possible…the look of him who escapes looks”. What I present to the world is not what sits within the depths of my dwelling. My dwelling “has a ‘street front’, but also its secrecy” (TI:156).

But how—if I am to remain entirely inside my dwelling, and how if the world that I do ‘connect’ with immediately outside my dwelling is already selectively removed from the elemental—can I sojourn to acquire the possessions that I need to suspend otherness and

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13 Levinas makes mention of the “windows” to my dwelling in one other passage: “The feat of having limited a part of this world and having closed it off, having access to the elements I enjoy by way of the door and window, realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought, anterior to the world to which it is posterior” (TI:169-70).

14 Although, rambling old Queenslanders do have their own ways of securing interior spaces from the otherness that blows in from the street, as this passage from David Malouf’s 12 Edmonstone Street (1985:20) demonstrates: "A veranda is not part of the house. Even a child knows this. It is what allows travelling salesmen, with one foot on the step to heave their cases over the threshold and show their wares with no embarrassment on either side, no sense of privacy violated. It has allowed my mother, with her strict notion of the forms, to bring a perfect stranger in off the street and settle her (for ever as it happens) in one of our squatter's chairs. Verandas are no-man's-land, border zones that keep contact with the house and its activities on one face but are open on the other to the street, the night and all the vast, unknown areas beyond".
sustain my dwelling in the first place? It would seem that labour would require that I reach outside ‘home’, in fact, reach right into the depths of the elemental. How can I do this without anxiety and enjoy the security of my home? How can I acquire the possessions that I need to satiate me without sacrificing my window-framed perspective on the world?

According to Levinas, for many centuries, this problem has been dealt with through the worship of the elements, via pagan gods and mythical rituals. However, Levinas says that to deal with the problem of having to negotiate with the elements in such a way, is to invest in them as if they were transcendent. Rather than being at the mercy of nature, Levinas suggests that instead, we are best to dominate it, using technology. In fact, technology helps to de-mythologize the “pagan gods” of nature. In “Secularization and Hunger,” he writes:

Technology strips [the pagan gods] of their divinity and teaches us—beyond the power that it gives us over the world—that these gods are of the world, that is to say of things, and that these things are no ‘big deal’ after all, and that there is deceit in their resistance and their objectivity, debris in their splendor, and one should laugh about them rather than cry. This secularising technology is inscribed among the progressions of the human spirit or, more precisely, it justifies or denies the very idea of progress and is indispensable to its spirit, even if this technology is not its end (SH:9).15

15 In “Levinas on Technology and Nature,” Peperzak’s (1992:472) writes: “As far as I know, none of [Levinas’s] numerous texts contain an elaborate analysis of technology and its dangers”. Benso’s (2000:49) words: “Although his analysis of labor lacks a complete and sophisticated account of labor’s most modern affiliate, technology, Levinas does recognize the dangers intrinsic in modern technology”. In “Secularization and Hunger,” although Levinas does offer some offhand criticism, he does, in effect, write off the violence of technology as a teething problem.

Firstly, there are the contradictions and miscalculations that seem to haunt technology. For example, there is the possibility that technology has encouraged the formation of a new type of slavery, which is hypocritical of an enterprise that is meant to liberate humans from elemental nature. Levinas also concedes that technology seems to have a polluting and poisonous character: “No one is mad enough to fail to recognize the contradictions and the miscalculations of technology and its new, murderous dangers and bondage, and the mythologies with which it threatens, and the pollution which results from it and which poisons, in the literal sense of the term, even the air we breathe” (SH:9). Yet in retort, Levinas surmises that perhaps these contradictions are still provisional because of the experimental stage we are in with technology: “To tell the truth, the balance of gains and losses we are drawing up does not rest upon any rigorous principle of accountancy. The contradictions noted may merely signify an unfinished dialectic” (SH:9; see also HGU:231).

Secondly, there is also the potential that new myths are being created, with modern heroes of technology being portrayed as god-like. Although, Levinas disparages this possibility, comparing it to the more credible danger of the anti-technology movement, which begs for the return to the veneration of Nature (see also Peperzak 1992:472-3). Why is technology less dangerous? Because modern technology creates the possibility of ‘developing’ the ‘third world’ and nourishing the millions of people there. If technology is condemned without any alternative for addressing these issues then our primordial responsibilities are being ignored: “the denunciation of mythologies engendered by the technological era, which would compromise its supposed rationalism, rests upon the purely formal notions of the myth and the sacred. This does not suffice for the proper appreciation of the attacks which, unbeknownst to us, the new idols to human emancipation could deliver. The condemnation of technology—which moreover is disseminated within public opinion by means of all the perfections of the technology of broadcasting—has itself become a comfortable
According to Levinas, technology is the mechanism that allows (hu)mans to possess and store the elemental as a possession, but also as the elemental. According to Peperzak:

The modern mode of production... challenges nature to supply energy, which, then, is stockpiled and used for various chosen purposes. Nature is treated as a reserve supply of energies to be exploited according to human needs. The earth becomes a collection of mines and fields for mechanized food and energy industries; the rivers are functionally reduced to sources of electrical energy (Peperzak 1992:470).  

As for the labour of my body, it might have traditionally or originally been used to produce my own possessions, but this is now more likely to be carried out by machines and machine-like networks of (hu)mans. At the very most, I need only step out into the immediate vicinity of my dwelling, which I deem to be ‘home’, and collect the possessions

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16 Peperzak describes this stockpiling of materials and energies that can be “provoked, extracted, stored, rearranged and purchased” as fundamentally different from Greek “poièsis”. “Poësis is being responsible for a certain mode of coming to the fore, coming to presence and monstration. In it, nature or humans allow a being to display the splendor of its possibilities. ...Poësis is a way of bringing to light what was hidden, of un concealing or un hiding what was concealed, of being responsible for the presenting of a present...” (Peperzak 1992:470). According to Peperzak, Heidegger’s criticism of modern technology’s modes of ‘stockpiling’ is that it obscures our relationship with “that which hides itself and governs within that mode: the non-technological ‘essence’ of technology” (Peperzak 1992:471).
that have been made available to me by the work of others. This means that the task of
securing the world as food for me can be carried out far from my direct gaze—that is, far
from the view of my window.

Technology thus provides a means of displacing and detaching labour from my body,
and from my bonne conscience. I may have conscious intentions to gain sustenance from
the world, but the actions that go into making these intentions a reality are removed from
the places my hand can reach or my eye can grasp. My body is no longer the body to carry
out my intent—to find the possessions to satiate my needs. I am now separated from the
labour that is needed to sustain my bodily needs, and the chances of encountering the il y a
are dramatically reduced. Other bodies, in other places encounter it for me. This is how I, a
‘city-dweller’, separate myself from the many processes involved in securing and procuring
food. But it is particularly my separation from the process of procuring animals as food that
will most clearly demonstrate the significance of Levinas’s concept of dwelling.17

Masculinisation of labour, unpalatability, and a brief history of animal slaughter

Some (hu)mans remain intimately and inexorably involved with procuring food from
animals. They must use their own bodies (farm, hunt and gather) to carry out their intent,
to gain sustenance from the world. They must leave ‘home’. Other (hu)mans, who can
afford to, have abandoned this and established production processes for securing and
procuring food that they have refined over time, to allow them to detach and separate
completely from animals.18 Factory farming of animals, ‘processing’ of animals as food, has
reached a level of detachment such that ‘stay at home’ (hu)mans can see nothing of the
“repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing” (EFP:82) from their windows.19,20

17 However, I could have just as easily used the example of the mechanisation of plant agriculture.
Indeed, this process perhaps better describes the way in which technology can also be thought of as
what Shiva would describe as the “masculinisation of agriculture” (Shiva 1998). Initially, the
development of plant agriculture was the work of women, rather than men (see Tannahill 1973:17).
18 I am not suggesting that these pre-industrial practices are worth returning to unquestioned, or
that they necessarily all inflicted less suffering on the animal world. But they are, overall, arguably
more diverse and less destructive in their relationship to the world. See footnote 30 in this chapter
for an example of this fact.
19 In the footnotes for this section, I will describe some of the parallels that have been drawn between
the killing practices in slaughterhouses, and the Holocaust. The same comparison has been made, by
Heidegger, between the more general mechanization of agriculture and mass murder: “Agriculture is
now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas
chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries
to famine, the same things as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990:31-40 in
Benso, 2000). Benso (2000:xxxiii) draws our attention to an even more generalised comparison
between mass murder and the mass production of things, where they become “the objects of an
endless reproduction and confirmation of the manipulative abilities of the subject”.

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(footnotes continued on next page)
Such connections have not been without their criticism. See Roger Gottlieb’s (1994) paper, “Levinas, Feminism, Holocaust, Eccide,” Raimond Gaita’s (2002) The Philosopher’s Dog, and Levinas himself in “The Name of the Dog, or Natural Rights” (ND). In David Clark’s (1997) paper, “On Being ‘The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany’: Dwelling with animals after Levinas,” he examines how Levinas’s argument in “The Name of the Dog” deals with the conflation of “the ‘noncriminal’ putting to death of the animal” and “the ‘noncriminal’ putting to death of the European Jews” (170). So as not to risk simplifying Clark’s fascinating reading, I quote from him at some length: “About what the two thoughts say to each other, Levinas is pointedly silent… For a scandalous instant, Levinas acts the part that Bobby [the dog] will more of less play at the end of the essay, that is, as the one who, in the absence of others and in the absence of a respect for the other, testifies to the worthiness of the imprisoned and the murdered. …Here, it is he, not Bobby, who witnesses the biologicist, naturalized, and consecrated degradation of the other. The testimonial logic of his essay’s narrative could then be expressed in this way: first, human (Levinas) on behalf of animal, then, animal (Bobby) on behalf of human. The momentous implications of this chasmsic ethical exchange are irresistible. As John Llewelyn (1991:235) argues, Levinas here ‘all but proposes an analogy between the unspeakable human holocaust and the unspoken animal one’. For all his perspicuity about Levinas’s essay, however, Llewelyn may slightly underestimate what he sees there. By characterizing the essay as doing everything but making such a proposition, we must be careful not to shrink from its double scene of sacrifice. For is not this exactly the proposition that Levinas is making, and especially if he does not literally write it out for us to read? Levinas proposes this analogy between sacrifices by not proposing it, in a whispering gesture that is strategically affirmative and negative: ‘yes,’ because there is no denying the implications of Levinas’s opening meditation on what it means, what it really means, to be an eater of flesh; ‘no,’ because Levinas does not simply equate the two events, much less call them by the same name, l’Holocauste. Perhaps the point is not so much that Levinas makes the analogy between animal sacrifice and human murder, but that this analogy once made, is so difficult to read. Perhaps it is not that the ‘unspeakable human holocaust’ is so distant from the ‘unspoken animal one’ that it can only be denigrated by the comparison, but that the notion that animals are murdered is elevated, if only provisionally, to the highest thought” (170-1). Nonetheless, it still seems to Clark that “the lightness of Levinas’s touch reminds us that, for him, nonhuman animals cannot make the same morally relevant claims upon us as human ones” (1997:171). (Clark is in the process of refining this argument. See his work-in-progress “At Odds with Animals: Philosophical Modernity and the War on Brutes” (2004).)

Returning to Heidegger’s position on the holocaust and the motorised food industry, which he argues are “in essence the same”: On first glance, Heidegger’s claims seem to resonate with those made by Levinas—that, perhaps, animals ought to demand a level of responsibility on a par with the responsibility humans demand. However, Clark suggests that Heidegger’s words could also be received in the context of his comments about the difference between a human’s capacity to ‘die’ and an animal’s capacity to ‘perish’: “Being and Time distinguishes between the dying [Sterben] of Dasein and the perishing [Verenden] of beings that are merely alive: the human properly dies, whereas the animal simply ceases to live” (171). Where as Levinas never calls the two the same horror, Heidegger, equates the one with the other. Levinas proposes that we “think two distinct thoughts together, and in doing so safely preserves the incalculable differences between feeding people in the industrialized West and murdering them” (Clark 172). But if Heidegger finds that animals merely cease to live, and if the Jews were exterminated as if they were animals, what does this say about how he views Jewish life? His comparison “carelessly pronounces the death of the difference between their demise and the murder of the European Jews” (172). If both are, as Clark puts it: “essentially similar ‘fabrications’ of the military-industrial-agricultural complex, they cannot be human; which is to say, because the military-industrial-agricultural complex fails to distinguish between animals and certain animalised humans, it slaughters them both with impunity. … In Levinas’s memorable phrase about Heidegger’s failure to remember, the German philosopher proceeds ‘as if consenting to horror’ (CH:485). And so he embodies everything Levinas has fought against: namely, the murderous indifference to difference by which alterities are compelled to be im Wesen dasselbe [‘in essence the same’]” (172).

This position corresponds with the emotive argument described in Coetzee’s novel, Elizabeth Costello (2003:94), by a respondent to Costello’s comparison between the holocaust and factory farming: “At the kernel of your lecture, it seemed to me, was the question of breaking bread. If we refuse to break bread with the executioners of Auschwitz, can we continue to break bread with the slaughterers of animals? You took over for you purposes the familiar comparison between the
Specifically, I suggest that there are two ways that we have managed to increase our detachment. The first is through physical separation from the processes involved; the second is through increasing the speed and mechanisation of the processes.\textsuperscript{21}

Slaughterhouses, like many industrial factories, have been placed further and further away from city centres.\textsuperscript{22} Initially, slaughterhouses and cattle pens took up conspicuous positions within cities. Skaggs (in Patterson 2002:55) describes their place in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, soon to become New York:

Along the palisade, which later became Wall Street, slaughterhouses straddled the ditch which carried the blood and guts of butchered animals into a small stream called “Bloody Run,” which emptied into the East River.

By the mid-1600s, New York was to become the slaughter capital of North America, and its residents, wanting to be spared the visual, auditory and olfactory distresses of the killing, won the battle to have the slaughterhouses moved to the other side of the stockade barrier that ran along Wall street. And, as New York expanded, the slaughterhouses kept getting moved north. By 1830’s, they were restricted to the area north of 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street; by the Civil War, they had been moved north of 80\textsuperscript{th} Street (Skaggs in Patterson 2002:55).

murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. This is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstood wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow the cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way”.

Despite this argument’s legitimacy, for the purposes of this chapter, there still seems to me to be some usefulness in describing the empirical similarities between the human and ‘nonhuman’ holocausts.

\textsuperscript{20} Many T4 personnel (Germany’s eugenic campaign), as well as Himmler and Höss, (the commandant of Auschwitz and another strong supporter of eugenics), had farming backgrounds. In fact, the original plan for Auschwitz was as an agricultural research station for the eastern territories. “By the summer of 1942 Auschwitz hit its stride as a full-service eugenics center for the improvement of Germany’s human and animal populations, complete with stockbreeding centers and the Birkenau extermination facility for the culling of Jews, Gypsies, and other ‘sub-humans’” (Patterson 2002:103).

\textsuperscript{21} Scientists such as Carl Sagan (1977), Richard Leaky and Roger Lewin (1982), point out that our ‘dominant’ status as a species in this world looks ludicrous next to the length of our existence on this earth. As Patterson (2002:4) describes it, we are the last line of a 1000-page book, and recorded history is the last word on that page. Some would argue that ‘improvements’ in technology, or, as Druyan describes it—“our ubiquity, our subjugation (politely called domestication) of many animals, our expropriation of much of the primary photosynthetic productivity of the planet, our alteration of the environment at the Earth’s surface”—have supported this dominant status (in Sagan 1992:363).

\textsuperscript{22} There are exceptions to this. The Central Markets in Hong Kong, where chickens cramped together in tiny cages are sold and slaughtered, plucked and cleaned for the buyer as they wait, while the other chickens wait (and watch on?). There are also some ‘quality of life’ advantages to this system, because the chicken farms are relatively small ventures. However, the ‘bird flu’ epidemic is signalling the end to the live chicken trade in Hong Kong, and it looks likely that this demise will be accompanied by mass farming practices that can maximise sterile chicken production conditions (Chiverton 2004).
But it was the Union Stock Yards in Chicago that demonstrated the most major shift of the slaughterhouse away from (hu)man eyes and ears. By 1865, the Union Stock Yards were the largest animal processing facilities in the world.

Meatpacking companies like Armour and Swift employed more than 5,000 workers each in their facilities inside the Yards. By 1886 more than 100 miles of railroad track surrounded the Yards, with trains every day unloading hundreds of cars full of western longhorn cattle, sheep, and pigs into the Yards’ vast network of pens (Patterson 2002:57).

Factories such as these are now placed so far away from most modern cities and large towns that I do not see, smell or hear them as I drive across country in my secure ‘dwelling-on-wheels’. Instead, when I look out my window, I see the bucolic idyll of picturesque pastures with scatterings of dairy cows and sheep; and from my city dwelling I look out at happy pets in the backyard and possums fat from our scraps. The millions of animals killed for food are nowhere to be seen. Even their transport by trucks to decentralised abattoirs happens at night (Thomas 2004)—again, out of grasp.

Speed and efficiency, at the site of the slaughterhouse again increases my distance. Where once slaughterhouses involved the handling of every animal before and during their deaths, the introduction and mechanisation of production lines has allowed the killing to occur much more quickly. Speed and efficiency, which are the major developments in factory farming, are partly promulgated for the sake of the ‘humane treatment’ of these animals (Friedlander 1995:93). However, in many cases, these developments benefit us—contributing to an increased productivity and profitability. They have little to do with the minimisation of animal suffering. To handle the growing volume of livestock that was

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23 Coetzee’s (1999:53) protagonist Elizabeth Costello comments on Chicago: “Chicago showed us the way; it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies”.

24 “Some drovers and farmers killed the pigs at the stockyards and dragged the bodies through the dirt streets to the slaughterhouses (called a packinghouse because it was where they processed and packed the meat); others preferred to drive the pigs to the door of the packinghouse where they beat them into submission with clubs and slit their throats...” (Patterson 2002:56).

25 “At killing centres, those who arrive sick, weak, or injured interfere with the efficient running of the operation. Each center has to find ways to deal with those who can’t keep up. ...Calves and pigs kept since birth in small crates and stalls have an especially hard time. After being confined in crowded trucks, the animals arrive only to be met with workers who hit, kick, and jolt them with electric prods. On the way down slippery ramps, animals fall, break bones, get trampled. Animals too weak or injured to get up are called ‘downers,’ ...In 1989, Sanstedt captured on film the plight of downed animals at the United Stockyards in South St. Paul, Minnesota. The scenes she filmed were not unlike those described 124 years earlier in the Times editorial: downed animals left in holding pens for days unable to reach food or water; injured cows dragged by their hind legs behind trucks with heavy chains tearing their sockets and breaking their bones; bulldozers scooping injured cows up off the ground and depositing them on ‘dead piles’” (Patterson 2002:113-5).

26 Minimisation of animal suffering may be one consequence, but a more likely result of increased production speed and efficiency is obliviousness to animal suffering. In many factory farms, you may be hard pressed to even find a human (Thomas 2004). Hilberg makes a link between the humane killing of animals and the human killing of Jews in the Holocaust: “The ‘humaneness’ of the
transported by rail into the Union Stock Yards, the conveyor belt was introduced. The slaughter of animals became the world’s first mass-production industry (Barrett 1987:20). The chief investigator for the Humane Farming Association (HFA) writes that during the 1980s and 1990s “more than 2,000 small- to mid-sized slaughterhouses were replaced by a handful of corporate plants capable of killing several million animals per plant per year” (Eisnitz in Swart 1998:29). In the case of chickens, each bird is killed with hardly the touch of a (hu)man (Farm Sanctuary 2004). If each animal must still be killed by hand, as is the case, the destruction process was an important factor in its success. It must be emphasised, of course, that this ‘humaneness’ was evolved not for the benefit of the victims but for the welfare of the perpetrators” (Hilberg in Patterson 2002:135).

In small-scale slaughterhouses, it is unclear how speed or efficiency benefits either party. Sue Coe (in Patterson 2002:66-8), a political artist, describes a “knocker” in small-scale slaughterhouse: “Inside is a cow. She has not been stunned and has slipped and fallen in the blood. The men have gone to lunch and left her. Time passes. Occasionally she struggles, banging the sides of the steel enclosure with her hooves. As this is a metal box, it becomes loud hammering, then silence, then hammering. Once she raises her head enough to look outside the box, but seeing the hanging corpses, she falls back again. The sounds are blood dripping and FM radio playing over a loudspeaker. It’s The Doors, a complete album side”. Patterson continues this description, paraphrasing Coe’s words: ‘the weight of the cow’s body has forced milk from her udders. As the milk flows in a small stream toward the drainage area, it mixes with blood so they go down the drain together. One of the injured cow’s legs is sticking out of the bottom of the steel enclosure…. When the workers return from their lunch break, they tie on their yellow aprons and get back to work. Only two men work on the kill floor itself…. The other man, who stands twenty feet off the ground on a platform, does the skinning with a power saw. After he finishes, the conveyor belt takes the cow along to another area…. ’ Coe sees a man she hadn’t noticed before come in. He kicks the injured cow hard three or four times to try and get her to stand up, but she can’t. Danny leans over into the box to try to shoot her with his compression stunner...when he thinks he has a good aim at her head, he fires and ‘there is a loud crack...’. Danny goes over to a remote control device, presses it, and the side of the pen rises up, revealing the slumped cow. He goes over to her, chains one of her legs, and swings her up. She struggles, and her legs kick as she swings upside down... Danny goes next door and electrically prods the next cow forward. There is a lot of resistance and kicking because the cows are terrified... He then returns to the line of decapitated carcasses and pushes it down to make room for the next one. ‘The next cow watches everything.... Then her turn comes’”.

In large-scale slaughterhouses, speed and efficiency combine to make the humans who do the killing and packing into arms of a much larger controlling machine—as this description of Coe’s in a large, high-tech plant in Utah suggests: “Conveyor belts extend as far as the eye can see. In one room the size of an airport hangar, Coe sees hundreds of skinned heads on a conveyor and hundreds of hearts on another conveyor moving along at the same speed. Workers in another room are working ‘with inhuman speed’ on front and hind quarters as they bob and weave around swinging carcasses. Wearing black harnesses to keep their arms from coming out of their sockets, the workers look ‘as machine-like as it is possible to imagine’” (Coe in Patterson 2002:69).

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27 The credit for the title of ‘world’s first mass production industry’ goes not to Henry Ford, as many historians have suggested, but to Swift and Armour of the meatpacking industry. Ford’s role was the further development of the assembly line method and the launching of a vicious anti-Semitic campaign. According to Patterson (2002:73), “in 1931, when a Detroit News reporter asked Hitler what Ford’s portrait on the wall meant to him, Hitler said, ‘I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration’”. Patterson (2002:81) continues: “Henry Ford’s propaganda war against the Jews and his slaughterhouse-inspired assembly line were not isolated instances of American influence on Germany. They were part of a much broader cultural phenomenon that included efforts to upgrade the populations of both countries. Those efforts, which were inspired and guided by the breeding of domesticated animals—breeding the most desirable and castrating and killing the rest—led to compulsory sterilization in the United States and to compulsory sterilization, euthanasia killings, and genocide in Nazi Germany”.

case with cattle, (hu)mans have to deal with each death at such a speed that their actions become more like a machine’s than their own. “Men [become] mere accomplices, forced to conform to the pace and requirements set by the assembly line itself” (Rifkin 1992:120). Speed is used to minimise the chance of any panic or resistance by animal or (hu)man, which would disrupt the process (Patterson 2002:110). Corporate slaughterhouses kill up to 1,100 animals per hour. This means that a single worker has to kill an animal every few seconds. In the United States alone, this results in over eight billion chickens being killed a year, or in general, twenty-five million animals killed a day (FARM report in Patterson 2002:71).

Through its various processes, technology removes the animal’s elemental edge, suspends it, grasps it for me, and therefore turns it further and further into a dissimulated product of a highly specialised food industry. But this product, ‘work’ as Levinas calls it, is not yet something that could overcome my anxiety in eating. It is, according to Levinas, “hard and cold”. He continues:

It can neither clothe those who are naked nor feed those who are hungry; it is impersonal, like factory hangars and industrial cities where manufactured things remain abstract.... This is the spirit in all its masculine essence (JF:32).

What these ‘works’ have managed is a break from the elemental. However, the ‘masculine essence’ that has achieved this break does not belong inside my dwelling:

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28 According to Neil Kressel (1996:199), organisers of genocide need to make mass murder as routine, mechanical and repetitive as possible. “By reducing the need for thinking and making decisions, the routinization of the massacre diminishes the chance that participants will recognize the moral dimensions of their acts”.

29 In cities, this speed and efficiency in killing dressed up as “humane” treatment is only rarely seen for what it is. In the case of the live animal export industry in Australia during 2003, when over 50,000 sheep were stranded in impossible conditions for three months in the middle of the ocean, at that moment, Australian television screens and newspapers brought into my dwelling images of the realities of the meat industry, brought in anxiety, during my meal. But even then, journalists reported that the thousands of animals that suffered and died over those months from disease and dehydration, watching each other die, and then being thrown overboard, were simply “disposed of”.

30 As I suggest in an earlier footnote (see fn.17 in this chapter), Shiva would agree. She calls this increasing advancement in the technology of food production the “masculinisation of agriculture” (Shiva 1998). For example, in North India, wheat is called kanak, or gold, providing the livelihood and nutrition for millions of people. The flour is produced by millions of women working at a household level; “the rolling pin used for making flatbreads from wheat flour has always been a symbol of women’s power” (2000:87). Yet this decentralised, small-scale process, involving little capital and infrastructure, is viewed by large-scale agribusiness as “underdeveloped”, so steps are being taken by industry players to destroy the local production of flour as one step in the process of “modernization of the food chain” (2000:87).
It lives outdoors, exposed to the fiery sun which blinds and to the winds of the open sea which beat it and blow it down, in a world that offers it not inner refuge, in which it is disorientated, solitary and wandering, and even as such is already alienated by the products it had helped to create, which rise up untamed and hostile (JF:32-3).

Masculine essence roams the earth homeless. Although it manages to pull works from the elemental, it finds no security in them. It cannot even secure these works from their slow dissolution back to the otherness from which they have been suspended. These works of ‘meat’ and ‘corn’ and ‘flax’ still accept what Levinas describes as “an insurmountable ‘rawness’” (JF:32). I receive them as anonymous goods, detached from the world. The hands (or the machines) that grasped these things from the elemental no longer hold them; they are already reverting to the element right here, at the doorstep of my dwelling—making me anxious all over again. Technology achieves the first blow, which, in a sense stuns and suspends the world’s otherness so that I may acquire it. But what makes this cold, hard ‘work’ something that I would be prepared to eat?

Levinas admits that the food that reaches my door is not yet palatable: “Man brings home corn—does he chew corn? He brings flax—can he clothe himself in flax?” (JF:32). What I now need is some way of bringing life back into this dead part of the world in order to make it palatable. Levinas paints not much more than a sketch of a transformation that occurs inside the dwelling to eradicate the remnants of the elemental that may stubbornly persist in my food. He describes this as the making of “good soup”.
4
Making the raw into the cooked, or the invisible work of women

The food that arrives at the doorstep of my dwelling has been grasped either by the labour of men or the work of machines. I recap: The world is grasped in order to suspend its otherness—otherness that absorbs me either in enjoyment or anxiety. The switch between them can occur immediately. By acquiring possessions, I am acquiring security against the switch. My well-stocked (windowless) pantry of future satiations (b)locks out the horror of the il y a. This is why ‘grasping’ has been such an important feature of my negotiations with the world. The world grasped is the world controlled.

The otherness of the raw meat delivered to my doorstep has only been temporarily grasped and suspended by masculine labour. No matter how ‘well’ this meat was killed, its otherness persists; I cannot yet eat it, I cannot grasp it with my eyes nor my hands long enough to eat it. Entering with the raw meat is the animal itself; and enter the il y a into my secure dwelling.

Neither detached grasping from elevation using vision nor grasping using machines will result in food I can eat. A detached perspective cannot result in a meal. As Levinas says, “we live from ‘good soup’” (TI:110). I suggest that what Levinas is not saying, but which I infer from this statement, is that I can change the ‘rawness’ of a kill or a harvest from its hostile masculine origins into a palatable food by making it into a meal. And to make a meal necessitates not grasping, but touching.¹

Grasping involves no reciprocity. Touch is necessarily reciprocal.

¹ For a discussion on how this ‘touching’ differs from Levinas’s “caress”, see footnote 16 in chapter 5.
Grasping occurs when, rather than being orientated by that which is to be touched, touch lets itself be determined by the needs of the one who touches (Benso 2000:164).²

The cow killed for this meat was not touched. It has not been thought of as a warm being capable of enjoying the stroke. In a factory farm situation, if the cow is touched at all, it takes the form of a lashing to force it up a ramp to its slaughter. Or, in the case of milk production, the touch is removed entirely: metal fingers grasp the cow in place of (hu)man hands. This relationship of grasping preserves the separation of subject and object, as my window preserves the separation of dwelling and slaughterhouse.

But to make a meal, I must ‘touch’ my food. But such touch will necessarily dissolve the separation between the world and my body that grasping has sought to preserve: The touch of meal making will expose me to the touch of ‘the touched’. The touch of ‘the touched’ breaches the security I have created in my ‘home’. In this chapter, I explore how Levinas sets up the possibility that ‘good soup’ can be made without exposing me to the risk of the touch of ‘the touched’.

The feminine that is gentleness

What happens when flour and water are made into bread? Maintaining a separation from the world by a window, or by my grasp, becomes impossible when I make bread. My hands reach out and touch flour and water. Dough is kneaded, fingers bury deep into the sticky mass, its gluey substance lodges under my nails and flour finds it way onto my cheek. The intermingling of subject and object is central to the nature of this practice:

...kneading is an essential part of the theoretical-and-practical process of making bread—a part in which subjects’ and objects’ boundaries necessarily meet, touch and overlap (Heldke 1992:206).

Hands must be involved. Contact must be made. The boundary between inside my dwelling and outside my dwelling must be crossed: The touched must be touched. For Benso (2000:160), in touching something, “the one who touches is also the one who is touched”.³ For Aristotle (1984), this reciprocity is a demonstration of the mortality of (hu)man

² Benso (2000:164) continues: “That is, the ethical possibilities of touch are betrayed when touch ignores the obsessive appeal from things. In so doing, touch betrays its own nature...a nature made of vulnerability and exposure to what remains exterior to it”. For Benso, what this amounts to is a failure to listen to the other.
³ According to Aristotle, the most remarkable thing about touch, is that it alone out of all the senses perceives by immediate contact. There is nothing between my touch and that which is touched (Aristotle 1984:423b.17). Benso uses this point to demonstrate the parallel between experiencing another through touch and encountering the ethical other, for the latter presents an absence of any intermediary substance as well (Benso 2000:159-72 especially 60-2). See also Levinas on this ‘proximity’ in (OB:81-98) and (Lingis 1987:109-26). For a discussion of the ethical and non-ethical
beings. Without touching the world, we cannot exist, but in touching the world, the world touches us, and it is thus that we expose our vulnerability (435, b14, 17). This is the ‘omnivore’s paradox’: As omnivores, we have non-specialised feeding requirements—we can live just about anywhere and find there a diet to support us. But because we are intent on eating many different foods, we also must live with the fear that one of them will kill us (Fischler 1980:945). For Levinas, this is an exposure to the elemental and the horror of the il y a.

How is it, then, that the security of my dwelling can be breached by this external threat? What strategies have I in place in order to mediate this threat? The relationship of touch between a subject and an object has no intermediary. It is direct contact, which is why it is so dangerous. But if something or someone else does the touching, then this something or someone actually becomes the intermediary for the relationship between the (hu)man subject who dwells and the food object to be eaten. To investigate the usefulness of an intermediary, I turn to the distinction between the “raw” and the “cooked” most famously investigated by Lévi-Strauss in a paper entitled “The Culinary Triangle” (1997). It is not evident in Levinas’s writing that cooking is the necessary requirement for palatability. Rather, a food (soup) mediated from foods already offered by the world (rather than food, (such as a fruit) received directly from ‘nature’), is the example Levinas seems to use to demonstrate the changes that must take place to the ‘raw works’ of masculine labour. But according to Lévi-Strauss:

In any cuisine, nothing is simply cooked, but must be cooked in one fashion or another. Nor is there any condition of pure rawness: only certain foods can really be eaten raw... (Lévi-Strauss 1997:29).

Take what Lévi-Strauss would categorise as a “boiled food”. He would say that boiled food is “doubly mediated” from nature—first by the water that the food is immersed in then

dimensions of touch in Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, see Glen Mazis (1979) “Touch and Vision: Rethinking with Merleau-Ponty and Sartre on the caress”.

4 Fischler (1980:945) continues: “Thus, on the one hand we have what P. Rozin calls neophobia, conservatism, and on the other hand, we have neophilia, curiosity towards potential new foods”. See also Rozin’s “The Selection of Foods by Rats, Humans and Other Animals” (1976), and “Development in the food domain” (1990), as well as Ryan, Edwards and Occhipinti’s (1999) “Must have been the Chinese I ate: Food poisoning, migration and national digestion”.

5 Humans had eaten their food—and much of it meat—raw for hundreds of thousands of years. Sometime between the first deliberate use of fire and the appearance of the Neanderthals, cooking began. According to Tannahill (1973:13), essentially, this discovery of cooking meant a vast broadening of what could be eaten. “Whether or not it came as a gastronomic revelation can only be guessed at, but since heat helps to release protein and carbohydrate as well as break down fibre, cooking increases the nutritive value of many foods and makes edible some that would otherwise be inedible”.

6 In addition, Claude Lévi-Strauss adds a third category—the “rotted”. So, if we look at all foods as existing somewhere between these three categories, their relationship says even more about the importance of some foods over others.
by the receptacle from the fire that cooks it. Compare this with cooking by roasting. With roasting, food is directly exposed to the fire realising an unmediated relationship (Lévi-Strauss 1997:29). Roasting is on the side of nature, boiling is on the side of culture: 7

because boiling requires the use of a receptacle, a cultural object; symbolically, in as much as culture is a mediation of the relations between man and the world, and boiling demands a mediation (by water) of the relation between food and fire which is absent in roasting (Lévi-Strauss 1997:29).

Perhaps, these distinctions between cooking methods are appreciated by Levinas: he does specifically use “good soup” to describe the enjoyment of living in the world. And more often than not, soup is a boiled food. However, Levinas does use bread (basically, a roasted food) in many of his descriptions. I suggest that in Levinas’s case, the necessity for a mediation between what is outside (the elemental, the world) and what is inside (the dwelling, the subject) is what is important to maintain here, rather than a type of mediation. In fact, he alludes to the existence of just such an intermediary. For Levinas, it seems that the ‘wife’ becomes mediator between the world and the (hu)man subject. In a sense, she becomes the touch, and in becoming touch, she becomes, for Levinas, gentleness itself:

She makes the corn into bread and the flax into clothing. The wife, the betrothed, is not the coming together in a human being of all the perfection of tenderness and goodness which subsists in themselves. Everything indicates that the feminine is the original manifestation of these perfections, of gentleness itself, the origin of all gentleness on earth (JF:33).

What is made clear from this passage is that, while the role of the masculine may be to harness nature through labour in order to make it edible, gentleness is the quality that “the feminine” imparts to raw ingredients in order to make them into something called a meal. And, here, Levinas describes “the wife”—“the betrothed”—as a manifestation of gentleness. 8 In this passage, there is no clear distinction between ‘a wife’ and ‘the feminine’. But, in other texts, such as those in Totality and Infinity that concentrate on ‘the feminine’ and ‘woman’, Levinas makes a very clear distinction. 9 Even in the paper “Judaism and the

7 Links have been made between roasting as a form of food preparation and masculinity (the ‘aussie barbeque’ for instance). See T.A. Adler (1981).

8 Again, Benso (2000:166) does the work in making a link between ethics and reciprocal touch, or listening, all the way to tenderness, which is another way of saying gentleness.

9 There is a progression in the way that Levinas has thought about the feminine, which theorists such as Tina Chanter (1995:198-207) and Stella Sandford (2002) deal with in some detail. In Time and the Other (84-90) and Existence and Existents (86, 98-9), Levinas uses Eros rather than ethics to demonstrate an encounter with alterity. However, it is not Eros itself that exposes alterity, “but rather in the sexual heterogeneity of those related, in the formal structure of sexual difference itself” (Sandford 2002:140). But even more specifically, for Levinas, this means that alterity is the feminine, because it is “the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other” (TO:85). And although this may seem like Levinas at his most progressive, I tend to agree with Cohen (1994:205), who argues that the presentation of Eros from Existence and Existents (1947) to Time
feminine” (from which this passage is cited), the feminine is a manifestation of gentleness, and elsewhere in the same paper, the woman is something altogether more concrete. Levinas, citing the Talmud, says: “The house is woman” (JF:31). Before I describe in detail how “gentleness” makes the raw food of masculine labour more palatable, I first investigate the relationship between this “feminine” that is “gentleness itself,” and this “woman” that is “house”.

I set up this difference with a certain sense of amusement at the idea of woman occupying the metaphorical space of a house, but in actuality, this description is not far from where Levinas leaves woman in his analysis of the feminine aspects of dwelling. For, crucial to Levinas’s description of the gentleness that makes raw food a meal is a distinction between what is feminine and what is woman. This difference has often been overlooked or clouded by discussions about whether or not Levinas’s use of the feminine and woman is metaphorical or literal. Such arguments miss a more subtle point: although his language does not always reflect this consistently, Levinas relies on ‘feminine’ being non-coincident with ‘woman’.

That is, the feminine is not ‘embodied’ in woman—more specifically, not respectfully embodied in woman.

and the Other (1947) to Totality and Infinity (1961) is fairly consistent. I say I agree with Cohen on this point, although it is for a different reason than the ones he gives. It seems to me that Levinas’s earlier work is perhaps not as progressive as Chanter (1988:52; 1991:134; 1995:234) suggests because in this early work, Levinas still describes the feminine as being distinct from empirical women.

For the moment, I will leave this argument aside to consider the ways in which the feminine has been imagined, specifically in relation to my concerns about dwelling and the il y a, and I will concentrate this discussion on Levinas’s explication of the feminine in Totality and Infinity. Specifically, the following footnotes are a reading of Section IV of Totality and Infinity entitled “Beyond the Face”. In particular, I will concentrate on the first four parts of this section.

Levinas’s description of the feminine in Otherwise than Being is, again, superficially different from his earlier work, but nonetheless, in Chanter’s words (1995:234), remains “in its external appearance...thoroughly male”.

For detailed critiques of the relationship between the metaphorical trope of the feminine and empirical women, see Sandford’s “Levinas, Feminism and the Feminine” (2002:153-6), and Llewelyn’s Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics (1995:87-146) and The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience (1991:22,203-13). I will return to the question of Levinas’s literal or metaphorical use of ‘woman,’ ‘wife’ and ‘the feminine’ later in this chapter. As I suggest, such questions seem to work as distraction from other, more pertinent questions, such as why and how Levinas separates the feminine from woman? Irigaray does important work in dealing with this issue, particularly in “The fecundity of the Caress” (1993), which is her reading of Levinas’s sections entitled “Phenomenology of Eros” in Totality in Infinity. I will continue to present Irigaray’s reading of Levinas’s erotic descriptions in the footnotes, as they fulfill a similarly crucial function to the work of the other writers that I have consigned to (or perhaps allowed to take over would be a better description) the footnotes.

However, the power and resonance of Irigaray’s work seems to have been entirely overlooked by theorists such as Cohen. In Elevations: The Height and Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (1994:fn.1,p.195-6), he belligerently rules out Levinas’s descriptions of ‘woman’ and ‘the feminine’. The essay is also published in Re-reading Levinas
What do I mean by non-coincident? In Totality and Infinity, and particularly in his descriptions of the feminine in “Phenomenology of Eros” and “Fecundity,” the feminine is seen as something that is badly translated within a woman’s body. Rather than being in alignment with a concrete ‘feminine’ body, the feminine is on the edge of being, fragile in its hold on existence. Levinas first depicts this fragility of the feminine in “Phenomenology of Eros”. The feminine, or “the way of the tender” (already alluding to its potential ‘gentleness’) “consists in an extreme fragility” and, Levinas adds, “a vulnerability”. He continues:

It manifests itself at the limit of being and nonbeing, as a soft warmth where being dissipates into radiance, like the ‘pale blush’ of the nymphs in the Afternoon of a Faun, which ‘leaps in the air drowsy with thick slumbers’, dis-individualizing and relieving itself of its own weight of being, already evanescence and swoon, flight into self in the very midst of its manifestation. And in this flight the other is other, foreign to the world too coarse and too offensive for him (TI:256).

It seems that the feminine in Levinas’s passage is fragile because it does not fully reveal itself in the immanent presence of a body. It sits on the edge of being and non-being. This is its fragility. It is vulnerable; the edge is precipitous. The feminine may try to leap away, relieving itself momentarily of its edgy existence in the world, but already finds itself

(Bernasconi & Critchley 1991), which is what Cohen cites, and there is no evidence that he has read Irigaray’s other piece on Levinas. This is strange, because “The Fecundity of the Caress” is published in Cohen’s edited Face to Face with Levinas (1986). Perhaps, if he had, or if he had visited Irigaray even briefly through Margaret Whitford’s The Irigaray Reader (1991), where “Questions...” is also published, or Whitford’s other text, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine (1991), he might not have made the mistake he has in chapter nine of Elevations—of conflating Levinas’s description of woman with his description of the feminine. Nor would he have made the mistake that many other critics of Irigaray have made—of assuming that her readings of philosophers, based on her accused ‘essentialist’ position, are simple paintings of yet another “sophisticated intellectual male chauvinist pig” (Cohen 1994:196) who submerges the ‘pure experience’ of woman under a patriarchal discourse. For examinations of these—as Grosz would say—”profound misreadings”, see Naomi Schor’s “Previous Engagements: The receptions of Irigaray” (1994), Grosz’s Sexual Subversions (1989:111-3 & notes 7-14), and Whitford’s The Irigaray Reader (1991:2) and Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine (1991:28). For examples of these ‘misreadings’ see Toril Moi (1985:143-7); Ann Jones (1981:224-5,253); Monique Plaza (1980:8,14); and J. Rose (1986:136).

In fact, even in Cohen’s own reading (1994:207) of Time and the Other and Existence and Existents, he demonstrates Levinas’s potential to envisage sexual difference, in just such a way that would have drawn Irigaray to Levinas in the first place. “A concrete instance of metaphysical excess occurs in carnal erotic embrace, where two beings, lovers, make intimate contact without fusion, experiencing each other’s alterity, drawn together while remaining separated...”. Perhaps Cohen’s emphasis comes from his deep knowledge of Time and the Other as its translator? In my reading of Levinas’s description of Eros in Totality and Infinity, it is apparent that Levinas finds the feminine to be non-coincident with woman. Furthermore, it is this non-coincidence that allows him to subordinate the ‘alterity’ of the feminine to the alterity of the (hu)man, and to imagine any sexual encounter that does not contain the intent of procreation as profane. It is through Irigaray’s readings of Levinas that the potential of imagining sexual difference as the ethical relationship par excellence—rather than as a relationship that opens up the possibility of ethics—is brought to the fore.
in that moment, returning.¹¹ This is not a quality that rests easily inside any body.¹² It is not the quality of a self-reflective, intentional mind. Rather than emanating the direct light of consciousness, its luminosity as warmth dissipates into radiance. It is evanescence, a fading, an effacement.¹³

Levinas’s feminine does not inhabit a body. Yet at the same time, Levinas’s feminine must make corn into bread in the dwelling. How can the feminine do this without inhabiting a body? And how, then, could the feminine be in the dwelling and at the same time be on the edge of existence? Does the feminine’s fragile grasp on being, seen as vulnerability by Levinas, justify, in his eyes, ‘the trapping’ of the evanescent feminine in the dwelling? Would this even be possible for something in the process of dissipating? And still, where is the body to do the work of kneading?

First we must remember that the dwelling is not a dwelling for more than one body. Nor does the dwelling simply contain a body. The dwelling is one (hu)man whose body ‘extends’ to encompass the (hu)man’s possessions. This does not mean that the dwelling takes on the shape of a normal (hu)man body. There is more space in this dwelling than there is concrete flesh and bone to fill it. This dwelling extends in space to whatever the

¹¹ This capacity Levinas describes as a flight, rather than a transcendentdal elevation. It is always a transient lifting away. There is no security in this height. This is not a separation from the world bolstered by a dwelling. In fact, it is questionable whether this is really a separation—that is, the fundamental separation that makes a (hu)man ‘human’—at all. However, this ‘edginess,’ looked at from a different direction, shows how the feminine finds a certain release from the world that is unavailable to a (hu)man, who must always dwell in the world. The feminine manages to leap into an air drowsy with slumbers. This world, which I can no more than hold at bay, which remains heavy to me even in sleep, the feminine can escape from, even if only within a moment.

¹² In a woman, the feminine is frozen in a state of “exhibition” by her beauty. It is as if the female body were no more than a sculpture, one of several representations of love. Irigaray (1993: 237) reads Levinas’s take on femininity as a reflection of the way that man reduces woman to a static image, that ends up disfiguring her: “Analysed in images and photographs, a face loses the mobility of its expressions, the perpetual unfolding and becoming of what is alive. Gazing at the loved one, the lover reduces her to less than nothing if this gaze is seduced by an image, if her nudity, not perceived in its ever unceasing palpitation, becomes the site of a disguise rather than of wonder at that which does not stop its inward movement. The loved one’s vulnerability is this unguarded quality of the living, revealed in a form that is never definitive. If he thinks he leaves her like a dead body, could it be that the lover discovers in her what is terrible about the limits of nudity, or dredges up what he needs to move on to a place beyond what is alive?”

¹³ Rather than ‘evanescence,’ Irigaray (1993: 234) describes this feminine other as “efflorescence”—a bursting forth, a spilling over with light like the exuberance of growth, which is more akin to flowers and crystals than to pointed illumination of (hu)man consciousness. “Opened up from having flowed to the depths of what nourishes it again and again. Not a mask given or attributed once and for all, but an efflorescence that detaches itself from its immersion and absorption in the night’s most secret place”. Irigaray (1993: 232) leaves the term ‘evanescence’ to the potential for the distinction between subject and object to dissipate between two lovers who do not reduce each other to the same: “Voluptuousness can reopen and reverse this conception and construction of the world. It can return to the evanescence of subject and object. To the lifting of all schemas by which the other is defined. Made graspable by this definition”.
(hu)man possesses, to whatever is, in a sense, the (hu)man. Perhaps, it is within this extruded dimension, in this extramaterial realm, that the feminine finds some room. Because there is no distinction between what is the (hu)man’s body and what are the (hu)man’s possessions, everything within the dwelling becomes (hu)man. Another way to think about this is that it is as if a (hu)man is stretched or made less dense than surrounding space. The space of his dwelling becomes a lower pressure system. So, in an osmotic sense, there is room for the feminine to drift into or be absorbed by this space, to equalise the density inside and outside of the dwelling. And because the (hu)man continues to acquire possessions, that is, continues to extend his body to fit an ever-increasing dwelling space, the dwelling is always less dense than outside. This is how the feminine becomes ‘trapped’ in the dwelling.\textsuperscript{14}

In fact, Levinas describes the fragility of the feminine as a “paroxysm of materiality” or “ultramateriality” (TI:256). In the only clarification Levinas offers, he describes what it is by what it is not. The feminine is not simply an “absence of the human in the piles of rocks and sands of a lunar landscape, nor the materiality that outdoes itself, gaping under its rent forms, in ruins and wounds...” (TI:256). Levinas’s feminine strives to reveal itself, to become material, ‘to become’—to be seen. Yet the (hu)man cannot see it. Levinas describes the feminine as “essentially hidden throw[ing] itself toward the light, without becoming signification. Not nothingness—but what is not yet” (TI:256). The feminine strives ‘to become’ enough to be seen by the (hu)man. It is always striving, but never ‘becomes’; it is always ‘not yet’. Its ‘not yet-ness’ is thus secret. And this is why it is fragile.

From within this extramaterial space of the dwelling, the feminine persists in secret, persists in striving for what it is not yet. Here, Levinas’s (hu)man protects his fragile feminine. Not from the world, not from other (hu)mans, but from the (wo)man. He protects her from being \textit{badly translated} into a woman’s body. Rather, the (hu)man translates the ultramaterial feminine into his extramaterial body, to facilitate his eating without anxiety. So the question is how does the feminine facilitate his eating without anxiety? For Levinas, it is the feminine’s striving for presence, its ‘fragility’ or ‘gentleness’ that food requires for it to be made palatable. In the (hu)man’s extramaterial space, the

\textsuperscript{14} The feminine, as Levinas describes it, is trapped within the dwelling. But this is not the feminine that is the alterity of woman. This alterity of woman (which for Levinas does not exist), Irigaray (1993:239) finds annexed by dwelling: “Annexing the other...in a language that possesses as its chief, and internal, resources only the consumption, consumption, and speed of its contradictions”. Whereas Levinas would see this dwelling space as a sanctuary for the feminine, Irigaray (239) sees it as a cage that limits through the guise of ‘protection.’ She continues her description of dwelling: “Deployment of a network that extends over everything and deprives it of its most intimate breath and growth. A garment that first and foremost paralyzes the other’s movement. Protecting it, like the shield of the hero who defends the loved one from the conquest of some rival.”
feminine has room to move toward the light of his bonne conscience. But still, it can never be seen. It has room to act out this futile process, without any risk of being badly translated into a woman’s body. Its fragile grasp on the edge of being, its ultramateriality, becomes gentleness and slowly wears away the rough edges of food, with a light touch, so soft it cannot even be felt.\textsuperscript{15} This is “the way of the tender” (TI:256).

This explanation of the role that gentleness plays in making the world palatable satisfies Levinas, but it does not satisfy me. I point out at the beginning of this discussion that the task of changing raw food into a meal, breaches the divide between myself and the world. If the feminine is a quality of interiority (not a body), then how does it physically contact with raw food (the elemental) to prepare a meal? How can it keep the (hu)man free from breaching the divide from inside and out? I believe that Levinas’s feminine does nothing of the sort. The work of meal making is left instead to some ‘body’ else: the woman.

\textit{The woman that is house}

Making raw food into a meal requires an intimate contact with the world that is not tolerated within the dwelling. The body that carries out this dirty work, in order to find it, we must try and find woman’s body. Where is woman’s body if it does not follow the feminine into the extramaterial space of the dwelling? The woman is not \textit{within} the dwelling: this is the realm of the (hu)man and his extramaterial feminine. I suggest that woman, in fact, is the mediation—the walls, the floors, the doors, the passages, separating dwelling from world, but touching both. She is the vessel that holds the water that cooks the ‘good soup’.

I return to Levinas’s statement “the house is woman’, the Talmud tells us” (JF:31). I am risking reading this statement more literally than others have before.\textsuperscript{16} Woman is that material mediation between a (hu)man’s dwelling and the outside. As mediator, she is removed of her ‘flighty’ femininity and so becomes stable. She is not the subject of the

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\item\textsuperscript{15} I have suggested that this need for gentleness inside the dwelling is one reason why Levinas insists that the feminine is non-coincident with the dwelling. The other reason, which will become more important later on, is that it makes it more difficult for a woman to present her alterity, as an ethical subject. If the female body were to present an alterity to the subject, she may ‘command’ as an ethical other in a way that is yet to be imagined by Levinas. She may, for instance, be able to reignite the possibility of the sexual encounter being the ethical relationship \textit{par excellence}. Therefore, Levinas must construct woman in such a way that she cannot access the ‘alterity’ that she mistranslates through her body’s manifestation of the feminine. By forbidding the woman to have access to the feminine, the feminine becomes a quality that the (hu)man can utilise for the dwelling.
\item\textsuperscript{16} For Peperzak (1993:158): “We must understand that the ‘feminine’ presence by which a building becomes a home is a metaphor for the discreet and silent presence of human beings for one another that creates a climate of intimacy indispensable for a dwelling”; and Derrida (1999:44,83): while Levinas’s description of the feminine can be read as “a sort of feminist manifesto” the feminine must nevertheless be distinguished from “the fact of empirical women”.
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dwelling, who is presence, nor is she the feminine, which persists at trying to be present. She is stable in her absence. Levinas explains: “the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman” (TI: 155). She is ‘discreetly absent’, because the dwelling does not reveal her absence, as the dwelling does not reveal a need for her. The meals are made, the separation with the world is maintained, by the ultramateriality of the feminine. But woman is there, inherent in the materiality of the dwelling: the dense material spaces of the dwelling—walls, floors, doors, passages.

The woman who finds herself thus ‘solidified’, is what Levinas calls the ‘betrothed’. He marries her to the idea of ‘family’ and children. The production of a child is fundamental to Levinas, for like eating, reproduction allows the (hu)man access to a future that secures his presence. In eating, this future is the future of the (hu)man’s own body—His future is lived vicariously through a son. Woman as mother makes it possible for the (hu)man to live on, as an ‘Other’, in his son. This commitment by a woman also works for the feminine. Rather than the woman’s taking the feminine into her body, in bearing a son, she creates security for the feminine—creating the potential of another dwelling, the son’s dwelling, where the feminine will eventually find space to persist. Woman finds her use as the security of the dwelling—the mediation and filter for whatever needs to enter the dwelling, whatever needs to be nourished. She is the condition for the extramateriality of

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17 An erotic relationship that produces a child, Levinas describes in terms of “fecundity”. With this comes the recognition that at least a type of sex (procreative) is necessary. Therefore, the female body as ‘erotic other’ acts as a vehicle, in fecundity, for the creation of a son: “The son is not only my work, like a poem or an object, nor is he my property. ... I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other...is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this ‘I am’ being is no longer Elean unity. In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I am my son. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence (TI: 277). Irigaray says: “As the lover’s means of return to himself outside himself, the son closes the circle”.

Furthermore, this son is an ethical other who must also obey: “And because the son owes his unicity to the paternal election he can be brought up, be commanded, and can obey, and the strange conjuncture of the family is possible” (TI: 279). Such a love, that the father has for a son who must obey the one who loves, is what Levinas describes as a sort of love to aspire to, in every relationship of love. “The son resumes the unicity of the father and yet remains exterior to the father: the son is a unique son. Not by number; each son of the father is the unique son, the chosen son. The love of the father for the son accomplishes the sole relation possible with the very unicity of another; and in this sense every love must approach paternal love” (TI: 279). Irigaray (1993: 245) says: “When recognized only in the son, love and voluptuousness bespeak the lover’s vulnerability, on the threshold of difference. His retreat and his appeal to his genealogy, his future as a man, his horizon, society, and security. Turning around in a world that remains his own. Contained within and by himself, without a dwelling for the beloved, except for the shelter that she gives to the son—prior to his birth”.

For discussions on the possibility that Levinas’s son could instead by a daughter, see Oliver’s, Family Values: Subjects Between Nature and Culture (1997: 211-4), and Cohen’s “The Family and Ethics: The metaphysics of Eros in Emmanuel Levinas’s Totality and Infinity” (1993).
the dwelling; she is the condition for a (hu)man’s unborn son; she is the condition for securing further dwellings for Levinas’s conception of the feminine.18

Levinas makes life and future life conditional on woman, but gives her no corporeality: She is a no-body. She is discreetly an absence; she is a metaphor.

‘Man brings home corn—does he chew corn? He brings flax—can he clothe himself in flax? The woman is the light of his eyes. She puts him back on his feet’ (JF:32).

Need one add that there is no question here of defying ridicule by maintaining the empirical truth or countertruth that every home in fact presupposes a woman? The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place—and the empirical absence of the human being of ‘feminine sex’ in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling (TI:158).19

Her corporeality, her role as intermediary, are both silent and invisible: “Those silent comings and goings of the feminine being whose footsteps reverberate the secret depths of being...” (TI:156).20 Many feminist theorists focus on these silent footsteps. Arlene Avakian

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18 The womb is the space that holds the potential of the son. Beyond the cervix, where a man as lover cannot penetrate, there seems, for Levinas, to exist this place that is not even possessed entirely by a woman. At least, she cannot know its potential and so to this extent, cannot possess its possibilities. Levinas’s conception of the feminine does not reside in the womb, as if it were a place to dwell. Rather, the womb holds potential for the feminine, in the production of a son who will eventually dwell in the world thereby creating an extramaterial space for the feminine. Irigaray (1991:178) argues that female sexuality has been made invisible, reduced to the womb: “It is the culture of men-amongst-themselves, and in particular the monopoly of divine power by male gods, which is responsible for female sexuality, in so far as it is visible at all, being kept from the light and left without representation in terms of the divine. During the period when there were female goddesses, the woman’s sexual organs always appear in the representation of the bodies of women, particularly goddesses, and not merely in the form of the triangle indicating the womb, but also in the form of the labia, an inscription which will later be erased. The cult of goddesses who are exclusively mothers, and mothers of sons, is a late episode in the history of women. In the symbolism of social exchanges, it is accompanied by the representation of the woman’s sexual organs as the figure of the triangle representing womb and standing as a symbol of the maternal function”.

19 Irigaray (1993: 246) writes of this dissipation of woman’s body, in order that the man shall have a place, an identity, a visibility that gives him his stability: “He will have taken away from the loved one this visibility that she offers him, which gives him strength, and he will have sent her back to the nocturnal. He will have stolen her gaze from her. And her song”. And she (250) imagines woman calling out for that feminine other, that song, which has been removed from her: “Dwelling place, which becomes that of the matrix of the lover’s identity. She, having no place of her own? Hiding her dereliction in terror or irony, she calls for complicity with something other than profanation, animality, infancy. She calls—and sometimes in her dispersion—to the feminine that she already is, secretly. Wanting to give herself over without resignation or violation of her intimacy”.

20 And again, Levinas writes of the silent footsteps in “Judaism and the Feminine Element”: “[In the bible, the world that is depicted] would not have been structured as it was—and as it still is and always will be—but for the secret presence, to the verge of invisibility, of these mothers, these wives and daughters, but for their silent footsteps in the depth and opaqueness of reality, depicting the dimensions of interiority itself and making the world habitable” (JFE:32). According to Martin Jay (1993:560), this role of women as the “unobserved observers” is paralleled in Heidegger: “Heidegger’s Heimat only becomes truly a home with a woman’s invisible nurturance, which opens
(1997:6), in Through the Kitchen Window, states that food preparation forms part of that aspect of life that is “absolutely central to our survival”, it is also this “kin work” that is taken most for granted. According to Marjorie DeVault in Feeding the Family, terms such as ‘food preparation’ and ‘shopping’ work as effective mechanisms for maintaining the status quo. The ineffectiveness of language to describe the feeding and caring relationship parallels the silent footsteps of women who, in the majority, still carry out this work.

If the activity is thought of only in terms of relationships and emotions, the necessary and arduous work of physical maintenance disappears. If it is thought of only in terms of the tasks, like those of wage-workers—as discrete ‘products’ or ‘services’—the most significant interpersonal dimensions of these tasks are missing (DeVault 1991:10).\(^21\)

Only a few generations ago, many more households were agricultural, worked closer to home and ate together three times a day, largely because there was nowhere else to eat (Symons 1982:44). Moreover, cooking was time consuming, heavy work. Now, new products and appliances have made the material tasks of cooking faster and easier, and the processing of foods has largely been transferred to the market. Large corporations have increasingly taken on what Levinas would describe as the ‘masculine’ side of food preparation for large numbers of people. This change redoubles the importance of the invisible work that women do in the gap between the ‘works’ production and the ‘dwelling’. Supplies must be funnelled from what are relatively few large organisations with anonymous products to very particular and idiosyncratic households, while still managing to gain enormously in palatability.

Some researchers claim that technological changes have not significantly reduced the time spent on housework; they have changed the type of work not the amount of work

up the dimension of intimacy lacking in men with their lofty yearnings for fame in the glare of the public realm”.

And Irigaray (1993:249) writes of this silence: “In order to keep the secret, she must keep quiet, no song or laughter. Her voice would give her away. Reveal that she is not what the lover thinks or searches for. That she is only a cover for what he is seeking, through and despite her”. And again: “The loved one would be mute, or reduced to speaking in the spaces between the consonants of the lover’s discourse” (249).

\(^21\) Dorothy Smith (1987:50) calls this gap in social knowledge a “line of fault”. According to DeVault (1991:5): “The categories of ‘work’ and leisure,’ for example, emerge from a kind of paid labor that has become typical for men in Western industrial societies. The terms accord reasonably well with men’s experiences, which usually include temporal separation between the job and family, and travel from workplace to home, but difficulties arise in the attempt to apply these concepts to women’s daily activities. Whether or not they work for pay, women typically take responsibility for a wide variety of household work tasks at home. It is difficult to divide their activities into ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ because these women are always on call, and their household work is often fragmented, picked up and put down intermittently as they respond to new demands. Many of women’s family activities seem to combine ‘work’ and ‘leisure’”. According to Richard and Sarah Berk (1979:13), even in a structured research situation, women seem reluctant to categorize many of their activities in this way, instead labelling them “both”.


(Cowan 1983). The “convenience foods” that flooded the market after World War II, praised for their time and labour-saving benefits, sold an illusion of decreased housework for women. In reality, many women were pressured into doing extra preparation on top of these already processed foods, to add that ‘home-made touch’. And according to Joanne Vanek (1974), from the 1920s to the 1960s, even if the time it took to prepare food had decreased somewhat, the time it took to shop for food more than made up for the decline.

And the form of feeding has changed dramatically. Waged workers leave early and often work far away from home; children are often at school or child care all day. Cooking is less necessary with new products, restaurants and fast food outlets. But the same problem posed by cookbooks in the 1950s still permeates our negotiations with the food prepared for homes now—that is, what happens if the ‘caring work’ done by women were to dissipate? Would man be any better at chewing his fast food, day after day, than he was at chewing his corn? Who will “put him back on his feet”, what will happen to the “light in his eyes” if woman is removed? It is not that we worry that supermarkets and fast food will replace women’s roles of caring for others—rather, that they will overshadow the important, albeit silent, role food and women play in our lives.

One reason we shrink from gender equity is our fear that it will breed a world without such a sense of responsibility; in which no one cares for us if women do not; in which no one cooks for us—except a fast-food chain restaurant (Stimpson 1991:ix).

Woman sacrifices her subjectivity, her place within the dwelling so that the (hu)man can eat secure that the meal set before him will sustain his future—as nourishment, as fullness of potential. This does not mean that she is the food. (Levinas does not mention the possibility of woman giving milk as nourishment. If she were the food rather the mediator between food and dwelling, the (hu)man could still be exposed to the horror of the il y a, because, again, there would be no separation between him and the world. No, she cannot

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22 See Joan Gussow’s “The Fragmentation of Need: Women, food and marketing” (1987); and Jessamyn Neuhaus’s “A Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender roles, domestic ideology, and cookbooks in the 1950s” (1999).

23 Woolfe (1996:62-3), in her novel Leaning Towards Infinity, tells the story of a woman writing to her mother about the birth of her daughter: “When they brought me to her afterward, I looked around at all the other mothers sitting up on their beds. Every breast in the room but mine was roundly ample. Just the pressure of a tiny finger, still wrinkled, making a glossy dent on those glossy globes, and milk would gush. Whereas my breasts were heavy with reluctance. I didn’t know how to feed my baby. I mean, how would I? How do you know anything?

“Offer her the breast, they said, as if my breast was a plate of cheese at a party. But I did. It felt a very generous act, this offering of my body to a stranger. It was a surprise when the baby’s cheeks ballooned with sucking. Even then, I couldn’t believe it. When everyone went to dinner and left their white rumpled beds behind, I licked milk off her pursed lips. She scarcely notices the dry brush of my tongue. Her blue eyes held as little judgement as the sky. She just assumed she’d arrived in a world where mothers licked their own milk. It was sweet. Watery. It didn’t taste like milk. It didn’t really taste like love either”.
be food; she is the durable, inexhaustible procurer and securer of food. She is the threshold that allows him to pass into an interior filled with the inviting smells of the “good soup”).

So, what of the woman who will not or cannot be reduced to a space that others may dwell in? What of a woman who refuses to let go of the feminine, which she sees as hers to embody? What of a woman that does not want to be a wife? Or does not want to be a mother? Or does not want to have sex with a man? Where do we find these women? Perhaps Levinas would tell us to look in the world where “materiality...outdoes itself, gaping under its rent forms, in ruins and wounds...” (TI:256). The only relationship that Levinas seems capable of imagining with women is a procreative relationship, but such sexual encounters come with a caveat. A female other who attempts to embody the secrecy of the feminine, without the intent of opening her womb to a third, is a reprehensible being. To have sex with such a woman is to follow her on a path to profanity, to reach into the nocturnal darkness of the il y a.25

This brings me to question if Levinas’s dwelling subject is a man, a (hu)man, and not a woman? If a woman profanes her sexual function of reproduction, then she takes the same path to the profane as those that worship the nonhuman; if she chooses to carry out her reproductive role, then she finds herself solidified in the walls of a dwelling, protecting the dweller from the rawness of the world. Can I, a woman, use a first person voice to speak of dwelling, because I am my mother’s daughter, and I, too, use her body and her work to protect me from the ravages of the world? But perhaps, my stay here is only temporary? Perhaps I must give up this dwelling, to become a house in turn. But then, if I do not give it up, if I am to hold onto my future as my own, and am to dwell in this interior made gentle

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24 In Eros, “the simultaneity of the clandestine and the exposed” Levinas argues, is what “precisely defines profanation.” (TI:257).

25 In contrast to a woman’s profanity, the feminine is always virginal. This does not mean that the feminine is not wholly profane, rather, always yet to be violated: “what is not yet, bringing us back to the virginity, forever inviolate” (TI:258). In every erotic caress, the door to the profane is opened, yet the feminine is still knocking. It is the future in the present. It is the potential of the son.

So the door to profanity has two keys. The first is held by woman, the second—by the elemental. “Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the there is extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnia the night of the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of the virgin, simultaneously uncovered by Eros and refusing Eros—another way of saying; profanation” (TI:258-9). With both of these worldly presences, the (hu)man must find ways of harnessing its ‘alterity’ for the good of ‘the other’ (hu)man. However, in negotiating with these forces, the (hu)man risks following woman, or the elemental, to what may as well be the same destination. By worshipping the elemental, or by engaging in Eros without fecundity, the (hu)man is destined to a world without ethics.

At the same time, Levinas is careful to maintain a distinction between the profanity that comes from ‘desiring’ this non-coincidence of the feminine with the female, and the profanity that comes from ‘worshiping’ the il y a. Simply put, the latter will never lead to a son, while the former can. Still, it is important that the line between Eros and paganism is not made too distinct, as it is also the line over which the female body can be thrown if she does not comply with the restrictions placed on her body.
by the feminine, then am I not doing an injustice to the feminine? Am I not, then, one of those lascivious women that Levinas condemns to wander the world bound for profanity? For Levinas, I am either a wife, or a profanity. There seems no way, then, to explain my lived reality. My sense of dwelling finds no legitimacy in Levinas. But, still, I dwell?
Now I am again safe at home, sitting down to my soup, separated, mediated and ready to eat. I am secure here, Levinas assures me (go on, have a spoonful, you’ll be fine). I absorb myself in the enjoyment of my food; I taste it, its textures, its flavours, and I savour it in my mouth. But how can I know now, Levinas, that I won’t feel anxiety after I swallow?

When I swallow, I relinquish control over what happens between the soup and my body’s digesting it. I have secured myself against the horror of the *il y a* coming to me from outside my dwelling; but is it not possible that the *il y a* could come to me from inside my body? So now enter anxiety, not about my next bowl of soup, but about *digesting this spoonful*?

Levinas has not theorised a safe context for eating, because he believes he has secured me in the dwelling. For Levinas, eating does not involve a dissolution of any boundaries; instead of boundaries dissolving, when I digest my food, I simply ‘slip’ over food: “We can indeed penetrate it; but that penetration does not break up, but slips over the form” (EE:39). So forms do not break up—they remain solid, no matter how they are dissimulated (TI:160). No matter how many times I chew, no matter how my digestion works to dissimulate it, the food will suspend its elemental nature. From being a spoonful of soup, to a mouthful of soup, to a partly digested soup in my stomach, food holds its form, suspends its otherness. For Levinas, eating is always safe.
This idea of ‘slipping over food’ when I eat also slips over ‘slipping over’—as if it were really so easy. And if it were so easy, why then does Levinas say “nourishment comes as a happy chance” (TI:141)? The idea of slipping over perhaps gains in credibility if I explain Levinas’s concept of “familiarity” (TI:154). In familiarity, I grasp the world. I expect certain things from it as I expect certain things from this soup. I expect it to sit well in my stomach; I expect that it will be good soup. This is the familiarity that comes from a world already (hu)man. Already, a meal is security against the il y a; already it is a part of me.

Woman makes it so by making food into good soup. I can grasp it until it reaches my stomach, until it reaches my cells, until finally what my body can’t use passes through me. There is no anxiety in this soup because there are no surprises in it. It is a “recollection”:

familiarity and intimacy are produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things. ...The intimacy which familiarity already presupposes is an intimacy with someone. The interiority of recollection is a solitude in a world already human. Recollection refers to a welcome (TI:154-5).

Woman, in her absence, becomes, in Levinas’s words, the “condition for recollection” (TI:155). She is the condition for habitation, for interiority, and for security in eating. Recollection is a freedom from immediate contact with the world. It is a return to what I know already. It is already secured in the past. It is a welcoming home. Recollection gives (hu)mans the freedom to think about their future. “Recollection...designates a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one’s possibilities, and the situation” (TI:154). Woman gives (hu)mans that freedom, by sacrificing her body to mediation.

There is, however, a consequence to this familiarity. My enjoyment in eating, is no longer exciting. But such is the price I pay for security.
Three

Unravelling the roles that food, the elemental and my dwelling play in Levinas’s story about guilt and responsibility toward the other (hu)man

spaces belonging to the other man

*My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).*
So far, this has been a story about avoidance. “My being-in-the-world” has been full of “acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping killing” that I have not had to face. As far as I am concerned, I have been living my life to enjoy my life. “Life is love of life”. What else can I do but strive for happiness in every moment? For me to live life in this way, I must secure myself. I must create a home against the calamity of a world ruled by imperturbable beings. I must make sense of this world so that I can consume it. And I have the contemplative ability and the vision to see how this can be done. I have the collective knowledge and humanity. So now, here I sit, safe in my home (my place in the sun), fairly sure that I am going to enjoy the steaming bowl of soup in front of me. For me to be in this position—contented, a little hungry yes, but ready to ease this hunger with what I am sure will be a nourishing meal—I have avoided dealing with the world in any directly reciprocal manner. I have avoided contacting the world in a way that could destabilise my grasp on what I hope to be many years of happy life to come. With a spoonful of soup raised in the air, I pause for a moment, letting the broth cool slightly.

This thesis has also been a story about my development as a (hu)man subject. Now, it is time for a radical step in development. This next step is not one that I would choose to take if I could see it coming. And although I have become habituated in avoiding the unexpected, nor is this a step that I have foreseen. So, with no foreseeable reason to hesitate, at Levinas’s urging, I swallow my first mouthful of soup. At just this moment, there is a knock on the door.1 What awaits me on the doorstep? Everything that has arrived here thus far I have seen, grasped and placed within my own four walls. Until now, there

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1 Levinas uses a similar description in “Enigma and Phenomenon” (EP:66,70), except he says “when someone rings the doorbell”. C. Fred Alford repeats this description for the title of the first chapter of his book, Levinas, the Frankfurt School and Psychoanalysis (2002).
has never been a knock on my door. But the force that knocks now will forever change my relationship with my soup, and with myself. What awaits me on my doorstep is what Levinas calls “ethics,” and it is the focus of part three.

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2 “A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (TI:43).
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My ‘hunger’ for hunger

The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfil it, but deepens it. ...It is a generosity nourished by the Desired...it nourishes itself, one might say, with its hunger (TI:34).

Insatiable Desire—not because it corresponds to an infinite hunger, but because it is not an appeal for food (TI:63).

According to Levinas, I am elevated. With the benefit of the separation and detachment of elevation, even when my elevation must be ‘embodied’ in the world, I can be ‘happy’. And I know that I am happy. This is the prize of my elevation—I can think: I can know that I am separate; and I can know this and see this by the light of my bonne conscience. I can think away all the dark corners and possess the world—eat it. And if I eat the world then it seems that I will never be eaten myself. How can I be eaten if I am the one eating? John Caputo (1993:200) describes me, this ‘inedible’ thinker, in appropriately gustatory terms:

It leaves nothing outside itself, no remains or leftovers. It finishes up every last morsel. It eats everything—nothing is indigestible to it—while not being itself eaten. Preying without being preyed upon, a sovereign eagle-like predator, it is the fullness of energeia; it does not slip into reverse but moves forward, higher, including, incorporating, assimilating, subsuming, consuming everything in its path.3

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1 For Caputo (1993:200), the link between thinking and eating is established through the terms “being,” “substance,” and “spirit”. In his words: “There is...an implicit if repressed ‘metaphysics of eating’ in metaphysics. ...Eating offers metaphysics an excellent model for being. Being and eating belong together because the essence of being is a kind of eating”.

2 Although he uses the term “Spirit”.

3 Caputo is not writing here specifically about Levinas, but Levinas does nonetheless play a key role. The book, as its title, Against Ethics suggests, is an intriguing argument against ethics from a man...
Levinas would perhaps enjoy this description of the indigestibility of his (hu)man. Is not ‘indigestibility’ what I am achieving by dwelling in the world? Dwelling maintains my separation, its windows a secure position from which I can see my predators approaching (from a distance), its door which I may lock against their threats to eat me, and my pantry which protects me from my having to eat myself—for it is not as if I will be holed up in this dwelling without nourishment, relying on my own body’s fat stores while I wait for my predator to retreat. I have enough in my cupboards and deep freeze to outlast any predator before the situation need turn to starvation. Levinas would be happy with my being ‘indigestible’. That is, until the knock on my door. Until that knock, eating the world and enjoying food as a (hu)man in complete control of my own status as ‘prey’ and as ‘predator’ is my life and I love it. But now I am to be faced for the first time with something that I have no intention of eating. On the contrary, for the first time, I find myself wishing I were hungrier than I am.

Desire and alterity

I open the door and face, for the first time, something I did not invite and do not recognise. What I am exposed to here is unlike anything I have ever faced before. Everything that I have so far faced in the world has been something that I can think about. Standing on the doorstep of my dwelling, I have been able to illuminate, to grasp, whatever I see. But not now. I am faced with something altogether different. I open the door to the face of ‘the Other’.

Levinas also calls this “alterity,” “infinity” and “exteriority” (TI:24). The thing about alterity is that I cannot grasp it. Any thoughts about alterity have already lost alterity by transforming it from ‘alterity’ to ‘thought’. Alterity cannot be grasped by the mind: “To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity” (TI:44). Alterity is removed from thought when I think, and removed from food when I eat.

To grasp being out of nothing, or to reduce being to nothing—are both acts that involve what Levinas describes as “disclosure” (TI:28). Disclosure seems to involve a peeling away of extraneous detail to “disclose” what is beneath. In this instance, exposed to alterity at my door, Levinas says that I am without the power of disclosure. And any alterity who, in his own words, “always made it [his] business to defend ethics” (2). But now, he compares his argument against ethics as thus: “My situation is to be compared to a man who discovers that the ground he hitherto took to be a terra firma is in fact an island adrift in a vast sea, so that even if he stands absolutely firm he is in fact constantly in motion” (3). Caputo says that “obligation happens”, but its call is “finite” and its caller “not identifiable” (15). Of Levinas, Caputo writes many words of both admiration and critique (including the criticism that he is “too pious” (15)).
that allows itself to be disclosed is not really alterity at all. For example, the alterity of the world, or the alterity of the feminine, are both fallacious because of their relationships to disclosure. In the case of the world, its ‘alterity’ is suspended when I take possessions from it. In the case of the feminine, it strives to be disclosed, even if, in the end, I can ‘not yet’ see it. If this alterity at my door were in any way playing with the idea of being disclosed, then perhaps, I could imagine that it was merely slipping through my fingers, resisting my attempts to possess. As Levinas says, alterity “is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative…” (TI:38-9). My intentions have no effect on this alterity. It does not merely resist my disclosure but in fact contests it. This is because, as Levinas says, alterity is already naked.

The nakedness of [alterity] is not what is presented to me because I disclose it, what would therefore be presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perceptions, in a light exterior to it (TI:74-5).

Therefore, any intent I have at disclosure becomes an intent not to strip alterity but to clothe it in all the inadequate images I conjure in my mind in an attempt at comprehension. Another reason why alterity’s nakedness ‘contests’ rather than simply ‘resists’ my possession is because it does not exist in the same moment as my body and its thoughts. It comes to my mind as no more and no less than the presence of an absence. It is something that seems always to have-been-already, or is yet-to-be. This means that alterity has never been co-existent with my being, my presence. As this inscrutable absence, alterity binds presence without itself having any boundaries. The boundlessness of alterity absorbs the simple presence of being in an absence that can never be thought.

Levinas would not describe what is occurring at this moment on my doorstep as an experience. ‘Experience’ already involves the imposition of a concept. To experience something involves having some way of recollecting what has taken place in a moment. Rather, what I am faced with at this moment occurs with an immediacy that cannot be thought at all, let alone recollected or imagined as Levinas explains:

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4 “To be sure my own most inward sphere of intimacy appears to me as foreign or hostile; usage-objects, foods, the very world we inhabit are other in relation to us. But the alterity of the I and the world inhabited is only formal; as we have indicated, in a world in which I sojourn this alterity falls under my powers” (TI:38).

5 “I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession. (What is absolutely other does not only resist possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it.)” (TI:38).

6 The first sentences of Totality and Infinity, suggests just this: “The true life is absent.’ But we are in the world” (TI:33).

7 “Alterity…exceeds all borders, boundaries and constraints the subject wishes to impose on it” (Grosz 1987:34).
The relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it. Its very *infinitud* is produced precisely in this overflowing. The relation with infinity will have to be stated in terms other than those of objective experience... (TI:25).  

Strangely, this encounter with (rather than experience of) alterity is somewhat similar to the way the *il y a* presents itself when I am anxious. With the *il y a*, it is not as if I can ever exist at the same time as it; the *il y a* is always a space removed of my self-consciousness, if not my entire body. The *il y a* is ungraspable, because its nothingness is removed entirely of my intentional possession. Its nocturnal darkness comes as a result of my intentionality, my self-consciousness being met with no-*thing* to be conscious of. But, right now, what I am exposed to is not the black night of the *il y a*. It is most definitely light, albeit, an unusual one.

It is not the light that beams, like a searchlight, from my bonne conscience, illuminating the world. I do not recognise what is bathed in this light, because there is no thing, or being, to recognise but the light—and I do not even recognise the light. Normally, vision allows me distance from experiences; it allows me to think about what appears in front of me before it is upon me. In fact, this is the role of my dwelling (affording me a position of detached visual distance, allowing me to grasp the world).

The alterity I now face remains ‘distant’, but it is not visually distant. And there is absolutely no physical distance between me and it. Spatially, there is no way to step away from this alterity and no way to step closer. But, at the same time, this alterity and myself are not the one thing. This is not an encounter of assimilation between myself and another, or of disintegration of our boundaries. According to Levinas, it is:

...a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same... (TI:41).

My encounter with alterity is entirely other to an experience of sameness, because my infinite closeness to this alterity is accompanied by an infinite gulf between us.  

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8 However, Levinas continues: “...but if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word” (TI:25).

9 Vasseleu (1998:78-97) describes it as a “scintillating lighting”.

10 Recalling earlier discussions: “To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity. This result is obtained from the moment of the first ray of light. To illuminate is to remove from being its resistance, because light opens a horizon and empties space—delivers being out of nothingness” (TI:44).

11 Lingis (1986:228) suggests that it is this encounter that extends the realm of space rather than any relationship that I may have with the rest of the world: “For Levinas, what extends space is not the nothingness that separates and frees the entities of the world to be as they are where they are; it is rather contact, contact with what is other and withdraws in the midst of contact. He first worked out
faced by this other, I am both immersed in its closeness and alienated by its distance. Levinas calls this spatial contradiction “proximity”.12 The distance between this alterity and me is infinite because we have never experienced a co-presence of our being. If this alterity had ever been present to me, then what it is, or was, would have once been graspable. Even if I did not know it now, perhaps, if we had once been present together, then my not knowing it now would be a symptom of memory loss. But no number of remembered past lives could unite nor unite our presence. I am stunned by its unknowable-ness. Nothing about it can I assimilate. Its light source is impossible to pinpoint; its luminous-ness envelops me and refuses to dissipate. Every intention I have to illuminate something about this alterity is overwhelmed by the light it radiates toward me. My vision, faced with the unknowable site of this light, is confounded. Without actually losing my sight, I find myself blinded.13

‘Blinded’ by this alterity, instead of experiencing the horror of the il y a (horrified that I may not be able to satiate my hunger again), I encounter what Levinas describes as “metaphysical desire”—unlike any other form of need:

The other metaphysically desired is not ‘other’ like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this ‘I,’ that ‘other’. I can ‘feed’ on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends towards something else entirely, toward the absolutely other (TI:33).

the notion in the example of the neighbor whose proximity, whose nearness, consists in his touching us, affecting us, while remaining uncomprehended, unassimilable, by us. In this move he is other, shows himself to be other. It occurs when the other faces us, that is, appeals to us, contests us”. Levinas also describes this as distance which is both “untraversable” and “traversed”: “Truth is sought in the other, but by him who lacks nothing. The distance is untraversable, and at the same time traversed. The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good” (TI:62).

12 “The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to a simple ‘representation’ of a neighbor...” (OB:100-1). Levinas uses the term “proximity” only occasionally in his earlier work (see TO:32,94,104,108). For detailed discussions on Levinas’s use of the term proximity, see Caruana’s “The Catastrophic ‘Site and Non-Site of Proximity: Redeeming the disaster of being” (1998), Donna Jowett’s “Origins, Occupation and Proximity of the Neighbour” (1994), and Joseph Libertson’s “Proximity, Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication” (1982).

13 I make this point about ‘seeing but remaining blind’ because it demonstrates how Levinas’s descriptions of the nocturnal night of the il y a and the ethical encounter are evocative of each other. Levinas does not say this in so few words, but as I soon show, he changes sight into something more like touch, so that, in the end, it is possible for him to describe ethics in terms of sight, but not sight as it has so far been understood: “Ethics is an optics. But it is a ‘vision’ without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalising objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type...” (TI:23).
By no means a straightforward relationship of hunger and satiation, I desire something that can never be grasped, nor, then, consumed. “The metaphysical desire...desires beyond everything that can simply complete it” (TI:34). This desire is partly fuelled by hunger; however, it is a hunger that cannot be satiated. Yet, this is not “because it corresponds to an infinite hunger,” rather, “because it is not an appeal for food” (TI:63). What I desire is not consumable—it does not relieve my hunger and nor would I want it to. Rather, alterity intensifies my desire for it. In fact, this deepening of my desire is my desire’s ‘nourishment’. While ‘food’ is what nourishes need, this desire, according to Levinas, “nourishes itself...with its hunger” (TI:34).14

Accordingly, there are already a couple of quite strange collusions. First there is an infinite closeness to alterity that exists alongside an equally unfathomable distance from it. Then there is the nourishment of my hunger for alterity through an insatiable desire. Finally (in a bizarre twist on his sensual description of my visual encounter with alterity) although alterity is encountered as light, I am blinded by it. Consequently, instead of seeing this light, I feel it. “One sees and hears like one touches” (LP:118). But even stranger than this: I do not actually feel anything when I feel this light. Normally, touch begins at a point of contact with something, then, my hand moving away from the point of contact, and, moment-by-moment, piece-by-piece, my head constructs an image of what lies beneath my fingers. However, in this encounter with alterity, my intention to touch is not met with the reciprocal pressure of a body, or a thing or a form slowly revealing itself under my hand. Alterity does not even exist in the same moment as my hand; I can never actually touch it.

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14 Levinas says a similar thing in Ethics and Infinity: “I have tried to describe the difference between Desire and need by the fact that Desire cannot be satisfied; that Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers and is augmented by its satisfaction” (EI:92). This desire is not the satisfaction of a sublime hunger. If it were, then it would be an ‘impure’ desire, like love, that is taken to be just that: “Love itself is taken to be the satisfaction of a sublime hunger. If this language is possible it is because most of our desires and love too are not pure” (TI:34). In Existence and Existents, Levinas explains this confusion with the example of a “love-bite”: “There is also the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and love-bites. It is as though one had made a mistake about the nature of one’s desire and had confused it with hunger which aims at something, but which one later found out was a hunger for nothing” (EE:35). (Interestingly, this quotation demonstrates that in his earlier writing, Levinas did deem the relationship between two lovers to be worthy of the status of ‘ethical,’ even though he didn’t use this term. In Existence and Existents, erotic love, for Levinas, is a hunger that grows without limit, just as my desire for alterity when we reach Totality and Infinity grows without limit.) To continue: “The other is precisely this objectless dimension. Voluptuousness is the pursuit of an ever richer promise; it is made up of an ever growing hunger which pulls away from every being. There is no goal, no end in view. Voluptuousness launches forth into an unlimited, empty, vertiginous future. It consumes pure time which no object fills or even stakes out. ‘Satisfaction’ is not a remaining in the beyond, but a return to oneself, in a univocal and present world. There is nothing comparable in this fall with satiety, whatever we may say when we put what is involved in love in economic categories, along with appetites and needs’ (EE:35).
But nonetheless, I try: I fail at touching alterity, but this failure, strangely, drives me to continue to ‘touch’ and fail.¹⁵

At various moments, Levinas names this failure within touch “the caress”:

The caress...is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the other seeks. The...caress does not know what it seeks (TO:51).¹⁶

¹⁵ Wyschogrod (1980:199) says that for Levinas, “touch is not a sense at all, it is in fact a metaphor for the impingement of the world as a whole upon subjectivity...to touch is to comport myself not in opposition to the given but in proximity with it”.

¹⁶ I say sometimes, because he seems to use the caress to describe metaphysical desire in Time and the Other, but then changes its meaning in Totality and Infinity. In the former, the erotic still has ethical potential. In the latter, Levinas distinguishes between the erotic and the ethical by using the caress solely as a description for the erotic. Of metaphysical desire Levinas says: “Desire is the desire for the absolutely other...where no gesture by the body to diminish the aspiration is possible, where it is not possible to sketch out any known caress nor invent any new caress. ...This does not mean that desire can dispense with acts. But these acts are neither consumption, nor caress, nor liturgy” (TI:34-5). In Totality and Infinity, the caress becomes the way the man reaches past the woman in his search for the feminine. The caress begins as a transcendence of sorts. It is sent off, by the subject, in search for the feminine that exists beyond the material presence of the body of a woman. However, before the caress can find the feminine, it is intercepted by the immanent presence of a body. The caress is thrown back into the world, flummoxed in its search for the feminine by the sheer erotic presence of the female body. And so the body becomes an object of love, and, as with all objects in the subject’s life, this object presents itself as a possible satisfaction of a need, an erotic need. The caress, which begins transcendently ends immanently: “a movement ceaselessly cast forth, an interminable movement toward a future never future enough—broken and satisfied as the most egoist and cruelist of needs. It is as though the too great audacity of the loving transcendence were paid for by a throw-back this side of need” (TI:254). On the other hand, as I soon show, metaphysical desire becomes the mechanism by which the subject is opened to the bodily presence of the Other.

It is thus that in Totality and Infinity, Levinas makes clear that the erotic relation—one of only two relationships where he specifically addresses the “feminine”—is not ethical. In “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas,” Irigaray (1991:180) suggests a reason for this: “He knows nothing of communion in pleasure. Levinas does not ever seem to have experienced the transcendence of the other which becomes immediate ecstasy [extase instante] in me and with him—or her. For Levinas, the distance is always maintained with the other in the experience of love. The other is ’close’ to him in ‘duality’. This autistic, egological, solitary love does not correspond to the shared outpouring, to the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath, abandoning the relatively dry and precise outlines of each body’s solid exterior to enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons [de la dualité] becomes indistinguishable, and above all, acceding to another energy, neither that of the one nor that of the other, but an energy produced together and as a result of the irreducible difference of sex. ...In this relationship, we are at least three, each of which is irreducible to any of the others: you, me and our work [œuvre], that ecstasy of ourself in us [de nous en nous], that transcendence of the flesh of one to that of the other become ourself in us [devenue nous en nous], at any rate ‘in me’ as a woman, prior to any child”. For Levinas, at best (as I discuss in chapter three) the erotic can be useful to the ethical by providing a son. Again, Irigaray (1991:181-2): “He substitutes the son for the feminine. ...The son should not be the place where the father confers being or existence on himself, the place where he finds the resources to return to himself in relation to this same as and other than himself constituted by the son”. Irigaray’s point in describing these two reasons why Levinas cannot consider the erotic and therefore the caress in ethical terms is this: “No one can be radically substituted for the other, without depriving the other of identity. ...What Levinas does not see is that
Perhaps this continual failure to touch cultivates my desire to continue to reach out to what I will never be able to touch—because it is not as if I am reaching out to touch what gives me nothing in return. But what I receive in return does not come from alterity towards me, it arises in me as desire. This is why Levinas describes desire as a revelation: “Desire is an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its ‘object’; it is revelation—whereas need is a void of the Soul; it proceeds from the subject” (TI:62). Desire for alterity opens within me a space, not one that I might attempt to fill with food, to comfort me or to fill an emptiness in me, but a space that I cultivate, as a new part of me.\footnote{Michelle Boulous Walker (2002:302) uses Weil’s work on “gravity” and “grace” to elaborate the difference between the bolstering of the self that occurs through possessing the world (gravity) and this new-found space arising out of desire (grace). According to Boulous Walker, “Gravity refers to all that we might consider in terms of usual human relations with one another. Its effects are typically self-centred and self-aggrandizing. …Gravity concerns the self and continues to offer this self an egoist weight”. On the other hand, grace “delivers us from the weight of our grave existence. Its effects are supernatural and rare. For grace to touch us with the unbearable lightness of being we must find within ourselves a void” (2002:302).}

Guilt and the face

So far, my relationship with alterity has been a series of strange perceptual collusions. First, there was the infinite closeness alongside the unfathomable distance of alterity. Next, there was the light of alterity that I am blind to. Then there was the nourishment of my hunger to know alterity by the insatiability of my desire to know. Finally, there was the touch that never touches. My encounter with alterity cannot end with these series of synaesthetic experiences. For my encounter to become \textit{ethical}, its aim cannot simply be a continuation of these strange states of desire. How could desire for what can never be \textit{be} this encounter? \textit{Some thing} has had to summons up presence enough to knock on my door? This strange light, this untouchable alterity that cannot itself touch? What has interrupted my meal with its ‘touch’ at my door? Why has this strange desire come over me? Why can I be standing here, facing a light that cannot be seen, yearning to touch what cannot be touched?

the locus of paternity, to which he accords the privilege of ethical alterity, has already assumed the place of genealogy of the feminine, has already covered over the relationships between mothers and daughters, in which formerly transmission of the divine word was located”.

Then, almost as a correction, Levinas returns to the caress its relation to alterity, in an essay, “Language and Proximity,” published six years after \textit{Totality and Infinity}. However, now it is a submerged sensibility, entirely removed of any sensual description: “The caress is dormant in sensorial or verbal contact; in the caress proximity signifies: to languish in the presence of the neighbor as though his proximity and vicinity were also an absence—not a remoteness still admitting of being understood in intentionality, but an inordinate absence which cannot even be materialized or incarnated into a correlative of an understanding. An inordinate absence that is infinity, in an absolute sense, invisible, that is, exterior to all intentionality” (LP:125). For a detailed discussion of sensibility in this essay, see Davies’s (1993) paper “The Face and the Caress: Levinas’s ethical alterations of sensibility”.
That something has touched or knocked on my door brings me back to reality—‘a slap in the face’. While I am yearning to contact alterity, entranced by its ungrasppablenss, reaching out and out into what seems to be an infinite scintillating light, I find myself suddenly in collision with another (hu)man. However, in order to conjure up the potential of this three-fold relationship between self, the physical presence of another (hu)man and alterity, Levinas describes the encounter not with a (hu)man body, but with a (hu)man face.

The necessity for me to have this direct collision with another (hu)man presence is captured in this word—face—yet, Levinas continually denies the simple, corporeal reality of a face:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me... (TI:50-1).

Levinas says the face is the way the Other presents 'himself', exceeding the idea I have of him. In order for the Other’s face to exceed the idea of the Other in me, I must already have had an idea of the Other. This idea of the Other is catalysed by the actual presence of another (hu)man face. I can hold an idea of the Other in my head by recalling an image of his face. However, the Other’s face is not his actual face, nor the idea I have of his face, but the manner in which this idea is exceeded. Face is the way that I encounter both the Other’s alterity and the Other’s physical face, as a series—perhaps even an infinite series—of ruptures and reformulations to the way that my mind conceives of this face. It is

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18 A human knocks, a human slaps me in the face—many theorists have argued that it is the hand that defines a human as human. Heidegger: “Apes too have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence. Only a being that can speak, that is, think, can have hands” (Heidegger in Clark 1997:165).

In “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject,” Derrida (Derrida & Nancy 1991:110) says that by making this radical alterity ‘possessable’ by another (hu)man being, one is already violating alterity: “the other must remain nonreappropriable, nonsubjectivatable, and in a certain way nonidentifiable, a sheer supposition, so as to remain other...”. Again, in “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida (1978:104-5) says that using the word ‘Other’ to somehow pick up this alterity, is also demonstrative of the disorder of trying to conceptualise alterity: “Despite all appearances there is not concept of the Other. We would have to reflect upon this word ‘Other’ [Autrui] in an artisan-like way, in the realm where philosophy and philology constrain each other...this word ‘Other’ circumscribed in silence by the capital letter...and which we use so familiarly, even though it is the very disorder of our conceptuality”.

19 Perhaps Levinas uses the face to take on both the characteristics of the corporeal (hu)man and (hu)man alterity because, even as a face is traditionally understood, its presence is decidedly ambiguous. The face is both a surface impression and an opening to the unperceivable depths of another (hu)man’s being.

20 Because Levinas always describes the other as him, I will also do so for consistency. (After all, this thesis is an acting out of his descriptions.)
In using the word *face* to describe my encounter with both alterity and the physical presence of another (hu)man, Levinas forces me into a similar series of ruptures and reformulations with his writing. Every time I see the word *face* on a page, I recollect what a ‘face’ is to me only to find my image discarded by what Levinas’s writing about the *face*. Every time I see the word *face*, I experience a collision of sorts with the page—as a surface, a ‘face’—that interrupts my comprehension.

This confounding of my actual encounter with the Other (by my desire for the light of his alterity), changes mode. Up until now, I have desired the Other—facelessly. If my encounter had continued to be exclusively with the alterity of the Other, then there would never have been anything arising out of my desire besides desire. I may experience a desire

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21 Levinas says, “alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different colour eyes, another character. It is not difference. It is alterity” (PM:54).

For an extended discussion on why Levinas uses the *face*, see Susan Handelman (1991:208-28,fn.5,p.359). Ajzenstat (2001:fn.20,p.339) suggests that is important not to take the *face* too literally. She also says that perhaps Levinas’s shift away from the *face* to other terms is a response to other theorists’ shallow interpretations of the *face* as being entrenched in ontology: in other words, exactly what Levinas is trying to escape from in his descriptions of *face*. According to Ajzenstat, Levinas argues on at least two occasions (DF: 295; GW:82) that the figures described in *Totality and Infinity*, though described using ontological language, are all metaphors.

On the other hand, I think that it is important not to underestimate how useful it might be to take the *face* literally. Take Irigaray’s vocabulary of ‘body language’: “Because of the innately nonreferential nature of language, a key word in Irigaray’s vocabulary such as *lips* can never not be figurative, not a catechresis” (Schor 1994:10). I agree with Irigaray’s work of ‘body language.’ Take also Jane Gallop’s (1988:99) comment on this aspect of Irigaray: “Although we cannot embrace simple unquestioned referentiality, neither can we unproblematically deny referentiality. For if Irigaray is not just writing a non-phallomorphic text...but actually constructing a non-phallomorphic sexuality, then the gesture of a troubled but nonetheless insistent referentiality is essential”. Following, with relevance to Levinas, if we are to acknowledge that Levinas is not just writing a non-ontological text but trying to construct a non-ontological ethic, then is not the gesture of a troubled but nonetheless insistent referentiality (or ‘body language’) as essential for Levinas as it is for Irigaray’s non-phallomorphism? If, on the other hand, we are to take the stance that Levinas himself proposes on occasion, that he means the *face* to be absolutely a metaphorical gesture, then perhaps we must also agree with Cohen (1994:198) when he insists that feminists are rather silly for being outraged at Levinas’s use of ‘feminine’ to describe the welcome of the dwelling: “Identifying or specifying the particular type of personal alterity constitutive of habitation—gentle, sheltering, familiar, intimate—with the term ‘feminine,’ used metaphorically, is a purely conventional gesture, like the expression ‘mother nature’”. I ask what work does a metaphor do if it is removed of its referentiality?

22 Levinas alludes to this effect at the end of the “Preface” to *Totality and Infinity*: “The word by way of preface which seeks to break through the screen stretched between the author and the reader by the book itself does not give itself out as a word of honor. But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights” (TI:30).
that is nourished by its own hunger, but still, with only alterity as a catalyst, it would be reasonable to ask what is the consequence of this hunger? Without the face, I would desire, without any consequence attached to my desire. But now the face, like the surface of the page, collides. Suddenly, instead of blindly ‘caressing’ an alterity that I will never actually touch, I now see the face. I now see the face in an entirely different way to the way that I see all other things.

My vision until now has illuminated the world as a place full of things given over to my needs. Until now, my vision has established and maintained an active relationship with the world that has, in turn, remained the passive recipient of my intentions. I have viewed the world as if it were always mine, as if what I see were predetermined by me. Recalling my earlier discussion of Levinas’s description of intentionality:

Within the work of intentionality, the (hu)man subject is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the (hu)man subject; it is always the (hu)man subject that determines the other (TI:124).

The Other has been, until now, in a passive relationship with me. Now my metaphysical desire for the Other puts me, rather than the Other, in a passive position. I have not been able to see this Other: It has ‘blinded’ me. I have tried to touch this Other but failed, my gesture leaving me exposed—tentatively waiting for some sort of revelation that is only catalysed by the continued absence of revelation. I am a passive receiver of anything that may come my way. In this position, I am now open to alterity. And then my collision with the face: Suddenly my hands retreat from my blind caressing and with open, passive eyes I see the Other’s face.

I am now stunned, vulnerable, desiring and passive—and more to the point—‘eatable’. The alterity of the Other leaves me open to my own consume-ability. Caputo (1993:201) suggests that this knowledge opens me up to what it means to be “flesh”:

[Flesh] can never achieve absolute inedibility, absolute invulnerability, absolute freedom from consumability.... Flesh is always liable to be consumed, already exposed, left open....

Now that I am exposed to my own flesh, I see how absurd it was for me to ever think that I could be immune from being eaten. I am now in the right state to see the Other standing here at my door, because now I too am exposed in the way the Other is exposed.

Levinas says that what I now see is a “word”—“the primordial expression...the first word” (TI:199). The interesting thing about this word is that, although Levinas says that I see it, it actually comes to me, not as a word, but as a ‘sentence’. I see the word on the face
of the Other, but I receive it, not as a simultaneous image taken in by a single look, but as something said; that is, as something heard rather than seen. Levinas states:

In sound, and in the consciousness termed hearing, there is in fact a break with the self-complete world of vision. In its entirety, sound is a ringing, clanging scandal. Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its contents. A real rent is produced in the world, through which the world that is here prolongs a dimension that cannot be converted into vision (TW:147).

In other words, hearing exemplifies the open, vulnerable, eatable state that the Other has put me in. Hearing is a sense that always requires me to wait for the Other to offer up a sound. I cannot take in the Other actively as until now my vision allowed me. Hearing necessitates that I listen. I must remain open, waiting for the Other to speak, and so the word comes to me, not as something I grasp with a single look, but as something delivered over time to my ear. But Levinas says I see the word. This, I suggest, is because the consequence of this sentence I have heard comes to me as suddenly as if I have seen it. I hear the sentence over time but I accept the word instantaneously—like ‘a slap in the face’.

What is this word? The word is “You shall not commit murder” (TI:199). This word that is a sentence, received like a command to me, shocks me. Levinas says that I see it on the face. You shall not commit murder. It is said as if I had some intention to commit

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23 Vasseleu (1998:88,91) describes this way of seeing as an “eye that listens” lighting the face “discursively” rather than visibly. Levinas often makes a direct link between language and proximity. (See “Language and Proximity” (1967 (1987))). In fact, thinking about the face to face encounter in terms of discourse explains how proximity can be “a contact across a distance” (TI:172). Language allows just such a contact to occur.

24 “In hearing, it is true, there is also no doing on my part, but all the more on the part of the object. And since it is an event of which sound informs me and not merely the existence of things in their total configuration, my choice of action is determined for me by the acoustic information. Something is going on in my surroundings, so hearing informs me, and I have to respond to that change, which affects me as an interested party not free to contemplate: I have to strain myself toward what may come next from that quarter, to which I am now bound in a dynamical situation” (Jonas 1953:146).

25 Again, Jonas (1953:fn.3,p.146) explains this enforced attentiveness created through sound: “...not even considering the fact that sound may be specifically addressed to me—that its uttering, in outcry, growl, or speech, is meant for my heeding: in this case, communicative intent reinforces the dynamical claim peculiar to the acoustic situation as such. (Visual signs have not this intrinsic, or natural, power to enforce attention, but only acquire some of it through symbolic convention.)"

26 For a detailed discussion of this command and its expression in the face, see Jill Robbins’s “Visage, Figure: Speech and murder in Levinas’s Totality and Infinity” (1994). Caputo (1993:199) pokes fun at this command, with at least a little of his jest aimed at Levinas: “Thou Shalt Not Kill’ says the law. But that law, which is so filled with exceptions that it is hard to remember that there even is a law, and even harder to see what the law prohibits, was never meant to include animals. Animal flesh is the flesh of the other (uncapitalized) which is not the Other (Other Human Beings). ‘Thou shalt not kill—except animals.’ It is perhaps easier to remember the law if you put it in the affirmative: ‘Thou Mayst Kill Everything—Except Other Human Beings.’ To this is added a little codicil, a dangerous supplement: ‘And Sometimes, When It Is Necessary, thou Mayst Kill Other Human Beings’ (or at least keep an army, should the occasion arise”). Clark (1997:183-4) points out the repercussions of this logic for animals: “If ‘Thou shalt not kill’ means ‘Thou shalt not kill—except in certain cases, for
murder. This makes the *word* even more shocking to me, because I *have* no intention of killing the Other. Up until now, I have been *minding my own business*. My life has been lived satiating my own needs. Right up until I heard the Other knock, and I opened the door to it, I did not even know that he existed, let alone that I would be charged by him with the accusation of wanting to kill (and eat) him.

But what is important to remember is that this *face*, which delivers the *word*, is not only the *presence* of a (hu)man, it is also the absence of alterity. The *face* is paradoxically both what I could reach out and touch and what I will never be able to touch; it has never and will never exist in the same moment as me, because *my presence* continually silences its alterity. My separateness, my satiety and security in the world all rely on silencing alterity. My ‘inedibility’ relies on everything in the world’s being consumable except me. For me to be capable of even thought, I have had to remove the possibility of what cannot be consumed: I would not, I *could not* encounter alterity. Now, *already*, these acts of thinking and presencing and consuming and possessing are acts of violence toward the Other, acts that annihilate the Other, *already then I have ‘killed’.*

This is the first meaning carried by the *word* on this *face* before me.

To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. It is still power.... The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill (TI:198).

_example, in battle,’ then the privilege of this murderous exception also lies entirely with the human. Humans ‘hunt’ animals and ‘labor’ with nature, to be sure, but because the objects of these confrontations lack a face, Levinas claims, it cannot accurately be said that ‘warfare’ or ‘violence’ is carried out against them. (Interestingly, by the time he writes his essay on Bobby [the dog], Levinas will recognize this denegation of murder for what it is—making killing into a kind of sport.) By extension, it could be argued, it is argued, that the agricultural-industrial-technological complex does not carry out warfare against the natural world; it ‘develops’ and ‘cultivates’ the ‘wilderness,’ that is, that which lies outside of the neighbourhood of ‘civilised’ ‘Man’.

In similarly ironic fashion, Derrida (Derrida & Nancy 1991:112) points out the way the command “Thou Shalt Not Kill” maintains the logic of “carnal-phallogocentrism”, which requires the maintenance of strict distinctions between ‘symbolic’ and ‘real’ objects of sacrifice: “Thou shalt not kill thy neighbour. Consequences follow upon one another, and must do so continuously: thou shalt not make him suffer, which is sometimes worse than death, thou shalt not do him harm, thou shalt not eat him, not even a little bit, and so forth”. According to Clark (1997:177), what this means in the sense of carnal-phallogocentrism is that humans can consume and be consumed in many symbolic ways, but are forbidden to be carnivores of each other. Accordingly, ‘real’ cannibalism is “animalising behaviour *par excellence*, the very mark distinguishing ‘advanced’ from ‘primitive’ societies”. Only that which is nonhuman can be put to death without question. In Derrida’s words again, “Such are the executions of ingestion, incorporation, or introjection of the corpse.... An operation as real as it is symbolic when the corpse is ‘animal’ (and who can be made to believe that our cultures are carnivorous because animal proteins are irreplaceable?)” (Derrida & Nancy 1991:112).

27 Levinas writes of the Other’s death in the same terms as he writes of the *il y a*—that is, as something that watches me: “As if the invisible death which the face of the other faces were my affair, as if this death regarded me” (*Paix et Proximité*, p.344 in Critchley 1997:75). Critchley asks: “must the face of the other always be a death mask?” (74).
I see this *word* on the face of the Other, and, like a slap in the face, my desire for the Other’s alterity becomes guilt. In encountering the Other’s alterity, I realise that my ‘being in the world’ has always been a violation of the Other’s alterity—that being a ‘consumer’ has never been a conscious decision on my part.\(^{28}\) To be in the world is to consume it. To live is to consume the living,\(^{29}\) but more importantly, to be (hu)man is to consume alterity. According to Levinas, I now “fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence” (EFP:82). Alterity reaches back past my self-conscious intent—my *bonne conscience*—to a guilt that I could not have anticipated. Levinas describes this guilt as my “*mauvaise conscience*”, or:

> Bad conscience: without intentions, without aims, without the protective mask of the character contemplating himself. Without name, position, or titles. A presence that fears presence, stripped bare of all attribute. A nakedness that is not that of unveiling or the exposure of the truth (NC:129).

*Mauvaise conscience* is bad, not in terms of being “evil”, but because it gives my *bonne conscience* a bad name by devaluing what self-consciousness treats with the utmost respect: presence, being, knowledge and freedom. It “calls into question the exercise of the same” (TI:43). Levinas names this calling into question “ethics”.\(^{30}\)

A crucial change in mode has taken effect to initiate ethics in my life. The desire for alterity (very much exterior to me) has now changed into guilt about an alterity that finds a space *inside my own life*. I now sense that my existence in the world has had more effect on the Other than I could ever know. Levinas describes both the Other’s alterity and my *mauvaise conscience* as naked, not because I can now ‘see’ what I am guilty of, but because I am now exposed to what I will never see (whole parts of my life I will never ‘know’, and the repercussions of this on the Other). Levinas describes the Other’s infinite unknowableness as finding a way into the darkest folds of my subjectivity:

> The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me...Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies—the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain (TI:27).

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\(^{28}\) With almost uncharacteristic clarity, Levinas (OF:3-4) demonstrates how many unintentional things I do: “Reaching out my hand to pull a chair toward me, I have folded the arm of my jacket, scratched the floor, and dropped my cigarette ash. In doing what I willed to do, I did a thousand and one things I hadn’t willed to do. The act was not pure; I left traces. Wiping away these traces, I left others. ...It is impossible for the attention directing the act to avoid inadvertent action. We get caught up in things; things turn against us. That is to say that our consciousness, and our mastery of reality through consciousness, do not exhaust our relationship with reality, in which we are present with all the density of our being”.

\(^{29}\) “We have to eat and we have to eat something living. That is the law of the flesh” (Caputo 1993:198).

\(^{30}\) “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (TI:43).
My subjectivity paradoxically becomes a space where the uncontainable finds containment. This is what begins to fill the void created in my self by desire. I contain the Other’s alterity, that is only present in its absence, as a series of past negations of alterity that I will never know.

So, I am now exposed. My mauvaise conscience makes it impossible to defend myself against what the face will now charge me with. I realise the consequences of my containment of alterity when I look again into the face of the Other. And I see in him something else about this (hu)man that I have never seen before: He is hungry. More, he is starving. The Other is starving: This does not just mean that he cannot find food to satiate his hunger; It also means that he must feed on his own body to stay alive. He is a wraith at the whim of the world unconcerned with his nourishment.

I can also now see why the world is unconcerned with this wraith—it is busy being-a-world that is slave to my stomach. Excluded from secure happiness by my being-in-the-world, the Other is continually faced with the anxiety and horror of this world ruled by my intentions. And in this instance, it is not even the world ruled by the elemental, for the elemental has no intentions. The other (hu)man is not able to make a home for himself; this world is my home. Effectively, my rule exposes the Other to the elemental. With the world’s otherness suspended so that I may consume it, there are remnants left over from this possession already returning to the elemental. There is no dwelling for the Other, so he starves. My intentional act is to eat the world: the unintentional consequence of this act is that I am eating the Other. As Levinas says, “I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if [it] is not already the usurpation of somebody else’s place” (EFP:85). Despite my ignorance to the fact, my nourishment from the world has been at the material expense of the Other. Levinas refers repeatedly to Pascal to demonstrate this:

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, ‘my being at home’, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).

In coming face to face with my guilt for the Other, I suddenly see where he is standing: By standing in his place, I have driven him out. From where he stands, the Other

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31 “To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger” (TI:75).
32 “...the dark spectre of flesh consumed by disease or starvation, of being reduced to a point where the body is driven to feed upon itself” (Caputo 1993:199). He is not suffering in the countless other ways that a (hu)man can suffer. He is not suffering from being overly consumptive. He is not a figure of obesity, the cause of the second largest number of preventible deaths in the western world. Litsa Chatzivasileiou (2000) investigates the sensationalist, popular appeal of the starving other, rather than the over-eating other.
is a victim of my consumption; I may as well be eating him. By securing my own happiness, his happiness is taken away from him. My dwelling in the world equates to his destitution.

Not only is he destitute but he is “destitute of expression”. This means that there is nothing overlying this face that I can use to translate alterity:

Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression (EFP:83).

Its ‘face-ness’ is the face’s only expression. Being “destitute of expression” is an extreme exposure occurring for the face—“extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself” (EFP:83).

In turning to face me, the other signals me; his face, his expression, his word is not only indicative, informative but also vocative and imperative. He faces me with his eyes, unmasked, exposed, and turns the primary nakedness of the eyes to me; he faces me with a gesture of his hand, taking nothing, empty-handed; he faces me with a word, which is not an instrument, an arm, which is the way to come disarmed and disarming (Lingis 1986:227).

He stands here before me, with none of the weapons that I have to suspend the world’s otherness. He is defenceless. His face is exposed beyond closure—it is as if it has been blown open by a “shot ‘at point blank range’” (EFP:83); And I see the death of his face at point blank range. This rules out the murderer being everyone but me. I have ‘shot’ him. I am his murderer.

I sympathise with him; his fear is now my fear as well—to become food for another, to become food for the world.33

What is suffering if not this very vulnerability of the flesh, this unremitting unbecoming, this liability to suffer every breakdown, reversal, and consumption? (Caputo 1993:203)

This is why I dwell, and this is why the Other suffers. But now that I face his suffering and acknowledge my guilt, I am not so concerned with my own fear (of being ‘eaten’). Now I have a more pressing fear. I fear for the implications of what I have consumed. I fear for the fate of this Other. I do not (any longer) fear for my fate.

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33 On a literal exploration of this theme, see Plumwood’s (1995) paper “Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey” which recalls her experience of being attacked, repeatedly, by a crocodile. “Before the encounter, it was as if I saw the whole universe as framed by my own narrative, as though the two were joined perfectly and seamlessly together. As my own narrative and the larger story were ripped apart, I glimpsed a shockingly indifferent world in which I had no more significance than any other edible being. The thought, ‘This can’t be happening to me, I’m a human being, I am more than just food!’ was one component of my terminal incredulity. It was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat” (Plumwood 2002).
What of fear for the other? Obviously that fear could be interpreted as fear for self, on the pretext that in fearing for the other I may be afraid of being in the same situation as the other. But that is not what fear for the other really is. The mother who fears for the child, or even, each of us who fear for a friend, is afraid for the other (PJL:117).

My mauvaise conscience fears not the consequences of my guilt for my future happiness. It fears not future retribution by the Other; it fears for the Other’s survival. Levinas imagines this fear as building a backward utopia, or a utopia built on the fear of no-place: “It is the fear of occupying someone else’s place...it is the inability to occupy a place, a profound utopia” (EFP:82). Now it is “as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the Other’s death even before being” (EFP:83). I feel guilty for eating the world—‘killing’ the Other.34

But what am I going to do about my guilt for the starving Other? What good or what use is my guilt? This guilt may mark the beginning of the ethical encounter, but it is certainly not the end. In chapter six, I examine how Levinas turns my guilt into a response.

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34 But importantly, I do not feel guilty for eating the world, ‘killing’ the world’s otherness. Never, in all my negotiations with the world thus far have I recognised such a thing. I may have known that animals die in order that I may eat, but I have never thought that they have suffered, as humans have suffered, in the process. In Levinas’s words: “Neither the destruction of things, nor the hunt, nor the extermination of living beings aims at the face, which is not of the world. They still belong to labour, have a finality, answer to a need” (TI:198). If the thinking mind, or Spirit, as Caputo (1993:200-1) says, “feasts on the flesh of others while remaining itself inedible”, then, according to the logic of reversibility that both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty use, this would explain why “what is not spirit—flesh—[is] what can always be eaten, what is always haunted by the possibility, the figure of being consumed. Hence flesh is unable to attain the freedom of spirit, to mount the high ground of absolute inedibility”.
Giving bread from my mouth and then feeding the world

...the ‘hemorrhage’ of the for-the-other, is the tearing away of the mouthful of bread from the mouth that tastes in full enjoyment. ...It is the gift painfully torn up, and in the tearing up, immediately spoiling this very enjoyment. It is not a gift of the heart, but of the bread from one’s mouth, of one’s own mouthful of bread. It is the openness, not only of one’s pocketbook, but of the doors of one’s home, a ‘sharing of your bread with the famished’, a ‘welcoming of the wretched into your house’ (Isaiah 58) (OB:74).

What do I do? How do I respond to the Other’s suffering? I return to the scene I found myself in at the beginning of part three to judge what is needed of me here: I am enjoying myself alone in my dwelling. Just as I swallow a spoonful of soup and a crust of bread, there is a knock on the door. If I open it, everything that I have secure inside will be exposed: the smells of my soup, the stores in my pantry, the warmth of my shelter.

But when I open the door, at first, the threat of exposure retracts—I am flooded with the light of this presence of alterity. I cannot think it; I cannot see it: My senses or sensibilities are all working, but not achieving their usual aims: I cannot grasp this presence (in hand or mind). With the confounding of my senses comes a most overwhelming desire to uncover what I know is not uncoverable, to continue to reach out toward what I cannot touch. I forget my bowl of soup; I forget my hungry stomach. There is another opening inside me, a space I do not want to ‘close’ or fill up through satiation. I want to open to this alterity in a way that I have never wanted anything before.

At this moment, I ‘see’ that I am standing face to face with another (hu)man. Not only that, but now, hungry myself, empty, exposed, I can see that this Other is starving. Then, my sight, smell and taste return, suddenly, reminding me of where I stand. I am in
the bounty of possessions. From where the Other stands, my dwelling looks like devastation: it harbours all the security of future meals exclusively for myself. He has caught me with my hands dirty from possession and my mouth full of food, and I have never felt so guilty in my life.

What am I to do? I cannot deny the Other; I am accused and guilty. Whatever I do now is a response to my guilt: The world has been given over to my needs and I have been enjoying it. And yet my every mouthful has deprived the Other of his. I may as well have been eating the Other, for now he must feed off his own body because I feed off the world in his place. What sort of response must I make?

**Feeding the other (hu)man**

Up until meeting this face, I was hungry, or I believed I was hungry. I now see that hunger before this face to face encounter was of a different nature to the hungry desire that I now have; I see how very different my hunger is from the hunger that the other (hu)man endures. My hunger is almost enjoyable because I know it will soon be satiated. In fact, the satiation of my hunger was only mouthfuls away before the Other knocked. Now, I stand face to face with the Other, my soup is getting cold and my bread hard. To know what sort of response I make to the Other I must recollect two facts: the Other is starving; I am in awe of (in thrall of) his alterity. Levinas demonstrates the intertwining thus:

The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognise the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as ‘You’ in a dimension of height (TI:75).

*To recognise the Other is to recognise a hunger.* However, I can only recognise this hunger because alterity has exposed my guilt. Until now, I saw the world as given over to me: I saw raw meat as a potential stew, not the suffering of the animal that was killed for it. I saw a piece of furniture for sale as a fine table not as a tree cut down in its benign imperturbability. Until now, I have not noticed that the Other is suffering—and that this is the price of my enjoyment. There has been nothing about the otherness of the animal or tree to expose me in the way that (hu)man alterity exposes me.

*To recognise the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as ‘You’ in a dimension of height.* This master is the Other’s alterity. I am responding to the Other’s need for sustenance, but I am giving to this master. Therefore, certainly, giving sympathy is not enough; the Other cannot eat sympathy. I must give what the Other needs for sustenance. But still, it is not enough to give what I have in excess. I must give in a way that is adequate for, and equates with, the dimension of alterity that I am exposed to. I must give in a way that nourishes the emptiness of the opening of
my desire for the Other. I must give with the desire not just to satiate the hunger of the Other but to feel ‘as hungry as’ the Other. I must desire to hunger as the Other hungered. Therefore, to respond to the Other is not to give what I have in excess, but to give what I need.¹

It is not a gift of the heart, but of the bread from one’s mouth, of one’s own mouthful of bread. It is the openness, not only of one’s pocketbook, but of the doors of one’s home, a ‘sharing of your bread with the famished’, a ‘welcoming of the wretched into your house’ (Isaiah 58) (OB:74).²

Take my food, compromise my space, take my money—take what I enjoy myself. I give these gifts—I must sacrifice “for-the-other of one’s own materiality” (OB:74). This is a sacrifice of blood. Remember:

...the ‘hemorrhage’ of the for-the-other, is the tearing away of the mouthful of bread from the mouth that tastes in full enjoyment. ...It is the gift painfully torn up, and in the tearing up, immediately spoiling this very enjoyment (OB:74).

By sacrificing that material which would nourish me, I begin to respond in a way that gives to alterity as much as to the Other’s hunger. Giving bread from my mouth is my attempt to understand what it means not to enjoy because another enjoys, not to eat because another eats, to have my place taken by another. My sacrifice must reflect that which I had that was never ‘mine’ to start with. I am substituting myself—I have taken the Other’s place—and now I must give it back by taking the Other’s no place. I am substituting myself for the Other in every moment that I stand face to face with the Other. The Other’s face accuses me of murder. All that I can do is to respond—“here I am” (OB:114,145-6; NC:131). Here I am in your place.³

And just as my inability to know the Other’s alterity does not stop me desiring to know it, so too, my inability to know the Other’s suffering does not stop me from trying to know it. I will never know the Other’s alterity; and I will never know what it feels like to be

¹ Lingis (1986:229) concurs: “The other’s wants are first of all material; they make claims on my own sustenance and on my own substance, made wholly of the substance of the sensuous element. It is not only some surplus of my possessions that is contested by his imperative need by my appropriative life, by which I appropriate myself. Responsibility is serious when it is not only my surplus that is affected but all that sustains my life and my very occupancy of this post”.

² With an interesting synchrony, Dr Gordon Latto, cited in Patterson’s The Eternal Treblinka (2002:118), describes his observation of a group of slaughtermen giving food to a lamb: “In a lunch session in a slaughterhouse, a lamb jumped out of its pen and came unnoticed up to some slaughtermen who were sitting in a circle eating their sandwiches; the lamb approached and nibbled a small piece of lettuce that a man was holding in his hand. The men gave the lamb some more lettuce and when the lunch period was over they were so affected by the action of the lamb that not one of them was prepared to kill this creature, and it had to be sent away elsewhere”.

³ Grosz: “The subject is chosen by the other, thus constituting its ‘identity’, its momentary place and time” (1987:34).
as hungry as the Other.\textsuperscript{4} This does not mean that I will give up (I can’t) for I cannot leave from this space of responsibility. Levinas uses the analogy of the (hu)man as hostage to illustrate the infinitude of my obligation to the Other:

A responsibility for my neighbour, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me… It is the responsibility of the hostage that can be carried to the point of being substituted for the other person and demands an infinite subjection of subjectivity (EFP:84).

Being a hostage to the Other involves a never-ending subjection of ‘my place in the sun’ to my responsibilities to him. To be hostage to the Other is to become responsible for the Other’s actions, to the extent that I am responsible for the Other’s responsibility to me (Grosz 1987:34). To be hostage to the Other,

…is to answer to the other’s needs, to become responsible for the other’s actions—even if they are inflicted on the subject….Held captive, hostages are nevertheless accountable, not for what they do, but for what is done to them... (Grosz 1987:34-5).

When Grosz says that I, ‘the hostage’, am accountable for what is done to me, it counters what I understand a hostage to be. To be a hostage is to be held to ransom; to be held to ransom implies a third party provision of ransom; provision of ransom implies ‘freedom’. For Levinas, I am a hostage to the Other for a reason (not a ransom), even though it is a reason beyond my intentionality.\textsuperscript{5} I, the hostage, am implicated (reason), yet incapable of acting (ransoming myself). To be freed, I need the ransom to be provided by a third party. In Levinas’s analogy, the hostage is passive, yet there is no third party. There is not anyone to free me. Nor is there anywhere for anyone to see what is going on between us. There is no outside to our relation. It is a “relation without relation” (Benso 2000:19). If there were such a place, “the [subject] and the other would be reunited under one gaze, and the absolute distance that separates them filled in” (TI:36).\textsuperscript{6} It may be possible for someone to see me standing in front of the Other, but this does not mean that someone who ‘sees’ this situation ‘sees’ the face to face encounter. A third person may see two (hu)mans, but

\textsuperscript{4} This is because he is always what I am not. “He is what I am not: He is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is the poor one, ‘the widow and the orphan’” (EE:98). “The other is the richest and the poorest of beings: the richest, at an ethical level, in that it always comes before me; the poorest, at an ontological or political level, in that without me it can do nothing—it is utterly vulnerable and exposed” (DEL:27-8).

\textsuperscript{5} There are no ‘innocent-targets’.

\textsuperscript{6} And again, if there were a context or an outside from which the other facing me could be apprehended by a third person, then our ‘relating’ to one another could be seen as a whole, and “it would suppress…the very multiplicity bound with this bond. The individuals would appear as participants in the totality…” (TI:121).
only I can see the other (hu)man’s alterity. The face to face encounter is the only access to the alterity of the Other.\footnote{In order that multiplicity be maintained, the relation proceeding from me to the Other—the attitude of one person with regard to another—must be stronger than the formal signification of conjunction, to which every relation risks being degraded. This greater force is concretely affirmed in the fact that the relation proceeding from me to the other cannot be included within a network of relations visible to a third party” (TI:120-1).}

Levinas’s ‘hostage’ can never be freed. Rather, I must strive to redeem my existence in the world, an existence that is courted by the violence that it does not intend. In spite of my conscious and intentional innocence, I must strive to redeem myself as long as I dwell in the world. My responsibility for the Other’s death “subsists in duration itself” (Hand 1989:75). With every new present I enter into as an eating subject, I cause new violence to those who are not eating. Therefore, my guilt and my responsibility are renewed.

Since the fact of others’ existence makes me infinitely responsible, I am a hostage even before I may know it. I must continue to plead guilty because I will never finish performing my endless obligation (Peperzak 1993:26).

“I am responsible for the Other even when he bothers me, even when he persecutes me” (PJL:106). I am hostage until there is no more to do (Ajzenstat 2001:25). “It is the fact that I cannot let the Other die alone, it is like a calling out to me” (PJL:104). This infinite responsibility takes a third party out of the ‘picture’, at least at this point: because there is no ransom, no reason for a third party.

**Putting my responsibility into context**

Thus I begin to respond adequately to the face to face encounter. And at this beginning, I see in sharp focus the severity of acts of self-deprivation, such as anorexia, that have long been considered in medical rather than ethical terms. According to Boulos Walker (2002:317), analyses of anorexia are almost exclusively devoted to an understanding of the state as an intentional attempt at mastery, by the subject, to control and boost the subject’s own sense of self. She refers to the influential work of Hilde Bruch, who writes in *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within*:

Anorexies struggle against feeling enslaved, exploited...the main theme is a struggle for control, for a sense of identity, competence, and effectiveness (Bruch 1973:250-1)\footnote{There are many other examples of how anorexia has been read as a deliberate act of self-control (see Fallon, Katzman, and Wooley 1994). Take Grosz’s suggestion (1989:135) for an alternative view on anorexia, inspired by a reworking of the Freudian concept of “hysteria” as “defiance through excess, through overcompliance” or as “a parody of the expected”: “This may, incidentally, provide an alternative to the more typical explanations of that modern expression of hysteria, anorexia nervosa. Anorexia is not the result of a diet that has gone out of control. That is, it is not the woman’s overzealous attempt to comply with the cultural ideals of femininity. Rather, it is a defiant...}
Boulous Walker is not arguing that there are no legitimate reasons for thinking of anorexia in these terms; rather, what she does attempt is to open up the possibility that some experiences of anorexia might belong to the realm of response brought about through *mauvaise conscience*, that is, as an unintentional gesture or

...a pre-rational reaction to one’s ontological responsibility to the other—to all others. This is not, of course, to suggest that all medical conditions are intentional by nature, but rather that in the case of anorexia medical diagnoses and interpretations tend toward a reductive reading that repeatedly depicts the anorexic subject as wilfully engaged. Seen from an ethical perspective the actions of certain anorexic subjects might be reinterpreted as unintentional reactions issuing from the (largely unconscious) ontological dilemma posed by taking both the place and food of the other (Boulous Walker 2002:316).

Importantly, Boulous Walker’s ethical account of anorexia emerges from what she describes as a “chiasmatic” meeting of Levinas’s conception of ethics with Weil’s descriptions of gravity and grace, which I refer to in an earlier footnote (fn.17 in this chapter). Weil’s death through refusing to eat does arguably highlight what might seem like a Levinasian response to the suffering of others. Weil’s prayer lucidly illustrates the potential of responding to another’s suffering by giving bread from one’s mouth:

May this love be an absolutely devouring flame of love of God for God. May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ’s substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment...rend this body and soul away from me to make them into things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, for ever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness (Weil in Murray 1981:55).

Having said this, I would still want to make a distinction between an anorexic response and a Levinasian response: If anorexia is analysed from a purely Levinasian standpoint, it is inadequate as a response in one important way: Anorexics die.9 Boulous Walker hints at this when she says that perhaps anorexia is a demonstration of “excess[ive]” Levinasian responsibility (2002:318). My response to the Other is infinite; my *responsibility* to the Other is infinite; if I die “giving bread from my mouth”, the Other must take my place in starving myself out of a place in the world; or, if I die “giving bread from my mouth”, I am no longer in a position to respond. As Levinas says, the Other is always *more destitute*. So, I must continue to dwell, I must continue to eat, so that I might be for the Other.

I argue, then, that my responsibility to the other (hu)man, while extreme, while infinite, involves not the realisation that my dwelling is *no longer* my own, but rather the
taking-to-extremes of these ideals. The anorexic seems to be saying: ‘Alright, you want me to be slim, I’ll be slim. I’ll be so slim that you’ll no longer find me attractive. This is what you want; but what you’ll get is much more than you bargained for.’ In other words, it is a not always successful attempt at self-determination” (1989:136).

9 For a grave depiction of this fact, see Naomi Wolf’s “Hunger” (1994).
realisation that my dwelling is not just my own. I must continue to dwell in order to be for the Other. Our substitution becomes a substituting of positions of authority in relation to my dwelling, rather than a reversal of our spatial positions in relation to my dwelling. If we both need my dwelling in order to survive, then perhaps, with every mouthful of bread that I give to the Other I would take one for myself. In the end, this may actually mean that I have eaten less—not starved myself, but restrained myself.

But does this mean that my responsibility is to infinitely share meals with the Other? Would sharing my meals with him infinitely respond adequately to my desire to know his hunger? In one sense, perhaps it does: By responding to the Other’s hunger by sharing my meals with him infinitely, I am levelling off, equalising, both of our hungers. And this would mean that I have succeeded in knowing the Other’s hunger; that is, that I have accomplished what Levinas says can never be accomplished: We are equally hungry and equally satiated.

What do I do now, to continue to be ethical on Levinas’s terms? To answer this I return to the question of authority. I have substantiated my authority for the Other: I am in my dwelling, sharing my meal with him, but, importantly, I am doing this as a response to his alterity. Although the Other may now be within my dwelling, his alterity far exceeds the boundaries of my space. Again, this is what saves my face to face encounter with him from being comprehended from the outside: If it were limited to my sharing meals infinitely with this (hu)man, then we could possibly be seen doing this by someone from somewhere outside of our relation. But the Other’s alterity ruptures this possibility (it cannot be seen). With every mouthful of bread that I share, I am returning to my desire, I am reaching out past the Other to the never-touch of his alterity—the alterity that ‘blinds’ me to everything I know (knew).

I do not see the world; I see only the Other’s face. I am not distracted by the world and the other faces it contains; I am sightless in this space of responsibility. The only sight is his face. Benso (2000:20) calls this the “space opened up by the relation itself”; Levinas describes it as the “curvature of space” (TI:291). There is no context to our meal; the Other is “not a character within a context” (EI:86). His alterity ruptures the site of my dwelling and takes me to the no-context of the face to face encounter. I ‘look’ into his eyes

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10 “The face...is a request and it is an authority” (PM: 169).
11 Nickie Charles’s and Marion Kerr’s (1986) study can be seen as demonstrating a ‘warped’ form of this responsibility: They found that women generally provide larger portions of food for their male family members, regardless of appetite or body size requirements.
12 Benso cites an article on the “curvature of space” (see Marquez 1987), but I did not find it very useful.
and I see the world. Perhaps we would go on like this forever, staring into each other’s eyes, eating together—me eating less, him eating more?

But my desire to know the Other’s hunger does not have an end. My responsibility to him is infinite. My authority is no longer mine (what was mine is his). I must realise, Levinas explains, that if I am responsible to this Other before me, and he holds the authority, that I must see the world as he shows it to me. According to Levinas, through the eyes of the Other (autrui), I see the Other’s others (autres) (PJL:106). And what a terrifying site (sight): In seeing this endless presentation of others—(hu)man and perhaps also nonhumans—I realise that my responsibility extends out infinitely to all of them as well. 

It is an ethical dilemma par excellence. I am in an impossible position. If I am to deal with my responsibilities to all these others, then how am I to survive? And if I do not survive, then who will be responsible to them? One way of thinking about this is thus: Perhaps it is in the very existence of all of these others that makes it possible to move this ethical dilemma forwards. When I was simply facing one other and sharing my meal, my obligations although infinite seemed reasonable. But now, seeing these ‘others’: extending as they do infinitely, my already infinite obligations are infinitely extended. If I am responsible to all of humanity then I must generalise:

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13 Is Levinas committed to seeing the whole world in the eyes of the other, or just the whole (hu)man world? Ajzenstat’s (2001:35) interpretation is generous: “Indeed...the whole world and thus an infinite number of infinitely different things”. It seems to me that this view in the eyes of the other is like looking into Jorge Borges’s “Aleph” (1945 (1970)). An Aleph is “one of the points in space that contains all other points”. It is “the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending” (17). I am not sure if Levinas, himself, is always so inclusive. In Totality and Infinity, he refers to the other’s others as “humanity”, three times on just one page: “the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity” and “the presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us)” and again, “the epiphany of the face...attests [to] the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me” (TI:213).

14 Perhaps it is necessary for me to see the world through the Other’s eyes—because his hunger has an immediate relationship with the world that I do not have. His life is at the whim of the elemental; my life is secured against it. I have only the Other to thank for my place: he has the world to ‘thank’ for his. Perhaps this means that the Other is more exposed to his mauvaise conscience—his guilt for existing at the expense of the whole world (I am guilty for existing at just his expense.) Or perhaps, he is more guilty, because he has the intention of violence to the world: “the famished stomach that has no ears, capable of killing for a crust of bread” (TI:118). He may have killed to feed himself, but only because I was feeding myself in his place. So even his violent intention, his guilt, is my responsibility now.
If he [the other (hu)man] were my only interlocutor, I would have had nothing but obligations! But I don’t live in a world in which there is but one single “first comer”; there is always a third party [the whole of humanity and perhaps the rest of the world] (PJL:104).15

Thus returns the third party of my hostage situation—a protagonist, who, up to this point was redundant, for there was no intention of my being freed.16 But now I see that this third party (humanity and the rest of the world) can free me from dinner for two for infinity.17 By ‘inviting’ them, the Other provides a third party who can negotiate my ransom and release: Because dinner for infinite others for infinity is an unreasonable and impossible proposition; we cannot but negotiate.

Asymmetry must give way to symmetry, difference to inequality, and infinite service to the Other to calculation of how best, in necessarily finite ways, to serve the needs of the many (Ajzenstat 2001:26).

I cannot feed all the Other’s others with ‘bread from my mouth’. What can I do? I cannot but generalise. Levinas calls this generalisation “totality”, “the birth of the theoretical,” “justice”, or “politics” (PJL:104).18 Politics is the ransom.

‘Politics’ provides a context. With my sight renewed (through the eyes of the Other), I see through the Other to the third party that is humanity and perhaps the rest of the world. And what I see is not a world threatening my security with the element, but a world already suspended in the mind of the Other: I am secure, and separate again. To see the world in the eyes of the Other, to be responsible to the world, is to return to my bonne conscience.

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15 Interesting that Levinas says he or she here. He never does this.
16 In Otherwise than Being, Levinas describes this third party: “The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow. ...The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor.... The third relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at” (OB:157-8).
17 ‘Dinner for two for infinity’ can come to resemble what Levinas (IT:19) describes as “an intimate society”, which is one that I choose, and, perhaps eventually, one that will forgive me: “The conditions of a legitimate forgiveness are realized only in a society of beings totally present to one another, in an intimate society; a society of beings who have chosen one other, but in such a way as to control every facet of that society; an intimate society in truth, quite similar in its autarchy to the false totality of the I. In fact, such a society consists of two people, I and thou. We are among ourselves. Third parties excluded”. As Ajzenstat (2001:59) explains, Levinas has a “profound uneasiness about the hegemonic, irresponsible and violent tendencies of societies, states” and what are normally termed ‘communities’. In particular, Levinas see these as voluntary communities—neighbourhoods, churches and states are given allegiance or attended through one’s own will. These communities are exclusive: therefore acts of charity arising out of such communities come from a sense of fortification and authority that goes unquestioned, rather than proximity to a neighbour that has not been chosen (Jowett in Ajzenstat 2001:60).
18 Ajzenstat calls these intentions endemic totalities, because, if all my responsibilities to the Other are to be met, then these totalities are unavoidable. On the other hand, avoidable totalities are attempts to make the other the same as me. They do not arise from an ethical encounter. They are “the kind of categorization that claims completeness and forgets its origin in rupture” (Ajzenstat 2001:12).
And so I must; I must be separate enough from the third party to see them, to think them, to restrain my guilty response to develop a generalised response.

I am separate from the third party, but still in the face to face encounter. Already I am seeing the world as separate; already, the Other is seeing the world for me. My bonne conscience does not resume completely and reinstate my authority. I am still facing the Other; he is still affecting my mauvaise conscience. I am never to rest at home, to ‘dwell’ again, freed from responsibilities. This relation between my mauvaise conscience and my bonne conscience is a tug-of-war: my infinite responsibility to meet the infinite needs of the Other versus my generalised responsibility to meet the infinite needs of the third party. On one end of the rope, where generalisations develop, my bonne conscience concedes its authority to play by the ‘rules’ of my mauvaise conscience. But these rules are no rules at all: “This ethics has no fixed rules but involves the rupture of all fixities or [generalities]...” (Ajzenstat 2001:21). My mauvaise conscience always ‘wins’; my bonne conscience always concedes to my mauvaise conscience. It concedes, and then my mauvaise conscience begins to tug again.

With this vision of politics through the Other’s eyes, Levinas presents the opportunity for me to respond to the non(hu)man world. My response is now mediated in two ways: First, my encounter with the Other is the condition for me to (sight restored), ‘see’ the rest of the world and its needs; second, my encounter with the Other will always rupture the generalised ways I respond to these needs. If I need the world (possessions, food) to satiate the Other’s needs, then Levinas will always consider this demand before the demands of the rest of the world. Take Levinas’s comments on the ‘face’ of an animal:

One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal.... Yet the priority here is not found in the animal, but in the human face. ...The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal (PM:169).

Clark (1997:179) in “On Being the Last Kantian in Germany: Dwelling with Animals after Levinas,” exposes the double negative in Levinas’s statement—one cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal:

Levinas’s somewhat evasive syntax qualifies any openness to the animal other by casting that muted act of affirmation in the form of a (double) negative: that one cannot entirely say ‘no’ to the animal face means saying ‘yes’ is the exceptional rather than the categorically imperative act, supplemental in nature, rather than constitutive.

19 “Politics, left to itself, has its own determinism. [Ethics] must always watch over justice” (PJL:108).
Why can I not say ‘no’ entirely to the animal face? Because it is among all the Other’s others. Why can I not say ‘yes’ categorically to the animal face? Because there is no face to the animal’s face; there is no alterity to the animal’s face. I may not say ‘no’ entirely, when I see an animal’s suffering—but this is still an animal that I ‘see’ rather than ‘encounter’. I do not respond with guilt; I do not give it ‘bread from my mouth’.

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20 Levinas does not say this straightforwardly: “The phenomenon of the face is not in its purest form in the dog” (PM:169); and again: “I don’t know if a snake has a face” (PM:172). According to Clark (1997:179-80), this statement about the face, that it is not in its purest form in the animal, goes against a basic premise in Levinas’s argument: “The notion that the animal face is not in its ‘purest form’ implies that there is a continuum joining the faceless to the faced, when everything else about Levinas’s rhetoric points assertively towards an abyss of essence dividing the two phenomena”.
So far in this thesis, I have walked beside Levinas down the path towards the space of the ethical encounter with the Other. In choosing to walk this path with him, designated by him as a path that leads toward ethics, I have done so with a desire for its destination. But to describe the ethical scene of Levinas’s philosophy is for many to describe a catastrophe of cataclysmic proportions. Levinas conceives of a scenario where the physical presence of another (hu)man, a (hu)man that stands so close to me that we could embrace, asks me to account for my enjoyment of life. This is ethics, Levinas says. Ethics is to come face to face with someone I do not know, and to acknowledge that I am responsible for his suffering. Ethics is to respond to this Other’s call for help by saying “here I am” (OB:114,145-6; NC:131). Ethics is to sacrifice the very food that I eat to give the “bread from my mouth,” to this other. Levinas describes a scene that many would say was impossible, or, at the very least, just a dream.

Most other ethical accounts are less demanding. Levinas’s face to face encounter requires me to respond directly to the Other face to face with me. Most other ethical accounts do not personally implicate me. They give me a list of ‘dos and do nots’ that set boundaries around my behaviour. I am limited so that I will never harm another, or will only harm them if there is no other possibility. Levinas’s ethics requires me continually to reconfigure my behaviour by responding to the accusations of others. I may formulate my own list of ‘dos and do nots’, but I can never be sure that this list will limit or secure me from the accusations of others whom I am yet to come face to face with.
Why am I drawn down this path with Levinas that leads to such cataclysm? Do I want to live in anxiety, terrified of the repercussions of my every movement, my every mouthful? This aspect of Levinas's ethics makes it seem more dystopic than utopic. Why am I drawn to the dystopia? Because I have encountered Levinasian ethics before? I am sure that I am not the only person to face their Levinasian responsibilities? I have come face to face with an Other before and have measured the power of our relation. It felt like a face to face encounter: I have had so few like it before, or since. This is the story of my ethical encounter:

**Encountering Manny**

Walking home late one night, I see a slight, dark figure with a bike leaning against the fence outside my house. I say “hi” as I approach and push open the gate to walk up the stairs to my front door. After I turn away, she calls out to me. I cannot make out her face, and I can barely hear her. I walk down the stairs to hear her better. Closer now, I can see that this woman is black, and young. Even with her face in shadow I can see she’s been beaten. Her nose is bleeding. Not looking at me she says, “Can I have a light?”

I run upstairs, find matches. I run back to the fence, matches in hand, and I pass them over to her. She does not take them. Instead, balancing, one hand gripping the bike, she pushes a bent cigarette into her mouth and leans her face towards me, keeping her eyes fixed on the street. The bike that holds her up crashes onto the footpath. I wait for her to steady herself before I strike a match and light her up.

She takes a couple of drags and she starts talking. “...drinking down the park...beaten by some fella there...can I come in”. I ask her where she lives, what’s her name. “...my name is Manny...can I stay the night”. I think of my housemates asleep inside. Stay the night? Panicking, should I wake them up? Should I ask if Manny can stay? I do not even know her. Should she stay? What should I say? I rack my brains for ‘the right thing’ to say. But I can’t think. I hear myself say ‘yes’.

I help her undress and shower, washing off the blood from her face and the alcohol. I give her dry clothes and put her to sleep in my bed. I shut the door and set myself up to sit out the night awake. By relinquishing my sleep to keep watch, I hope to make up for the fact that I did not ask my housemates about Manny. I worry that the night watch will not make up for my decision.

I wake Manny up and get her out of the house at daybreak. When my housemates awake, I tell them. They are critical of me; I cannot explain my actions. I try to say that I was concerned about disturbing them, but this is not the reason I let them sleep. I was
terrified that they would say, “call the police”, “call a taxi”, “call an ambulance”. At the moment of Manny’s request, I felt that there was no ‘choice’, no ‘desire’ even, to say anything but yes. “Here I am.”

This encounter revealed to me that my efforts to ‘reconcile’ what I see as my ethical-behaviour-from-a-distance contains its own violences. I have always thought that if I behave in a certain way, generally, with an attitude of respect towards indigenous people, that this is enough. I have done my duty and I can sleep well at night knowing that I am not racist. When Manny ruptured my ‘political’ night I realised that I ‘owed’ her so much more than an ‘attitude of respect’.

Years after this encounter, I realise the impossibility of reconciling my desire to do the right thing and my desire to maintain my love of life without guilt. This is the aspect of Levinas’s ethics that I am drawn to: He refuses to resolve the contradiction between my enjoyment of the world and my responsibility to Others that I have not (even) intentionally harmed. He says “enjoy yourself, savour the flavours, love your life.” I can relate to this. I have no intention of living life always anxious. Levinas’s ethics does not deny me my love of life, but at the same time, it is my satiety and security that causes the suffering of the Other. In Levinas’s ethics, I must accept this contradiction, not as a life based on a series of hypocritical actions that must be rectified, but as a paradox that will never resolve itself. Happiness is accompanied by angst.

The problem that I do see with this paradoxical element of Levinas’s ethics is his selectivity about what particular anxiety he is willing to face. While accepting guilt for those whom I harm unintentionally, I am able to deny any guilt for those whom I harm intentionally. There is no room for me to face the nonhuman world, which I can feel free to exploit so that I have a full stomach when next I face another (hu)man. He qualifies this—with the possibility of addressing the nonhuman through the eyes of the other (hu)man who faces me. By extending my responsibilities to the ‘Other’s others’ in this way, I attend to my responsibility to the nonhuman (and for (wo)man, though less explicitly)—but always indirectly, always mediated by the (hu)man I encounter, always generalised. I can have intentions of behaving in a responsible way toward them, and this seems to be enough for Levinas. As I have suggested in chapter six, this means that I need never encounter any space where I would be forced to accept that I have done the non(hu)man harm that I did not intend.

So I walk with Levinas along his ethical path, with a little reticence. I want to reach his destination, yet I can’t help hoping for a fuller, more devastating, more all-encompassing anxiety to meet me at the end. The path that I now see is his path. It is a
secure journey for me, so that I will have the strength (and responsibility) to face the other (hu)man at the end. But in the process, I see his perspective on the world: a dense thicket of nothingness, a world made useful, beautiful even, only by the existence of paths cut through it, such as his—(hu)man paths. I listen to his choices, his theories, his ethics, his perspective on the thicket through which he cuts his path. I now wish to point out that this world around him can and should also be faced. He can stop at any point along the way and step off the path—and be faced by myriad unforeseen Others. Perhaps he could even meet the faces of his food and his foodmakers.
Four
Avoiding Levinas’s concept of ethics and dealing with the consequences

driven out into a third world

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).
It has taken me half a thesis before I could write about the ethical encounter—the moment that I recognise the consequences of my life lived as one long insatiable digestive tract. I have taken so long to reach this moment in Levinas’s description of the emerging (hu)man, to clarify to myself as much as to you the character of these consequences. For it is now clear that the consequences of my eating that concern Levinas differ in character from those that concern me. Levinas does not think that my eating of the world is in itself violent. The real violence, for him, lies in my eating of the world at the expense of the Other: that “my being-in-the-world” is “the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have...oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world”.

I do not suggest that Levinas’s ethical concerns are not also my own. I am concerned about the consequences my consumption has on the Other. But at the same time, I am also interested in the effects on the rest of the nonhuman others. I now realise that, in the process of describing the ethical encounter, Levinas unintentionally reasks many of the questions that first drove me to seek answers in his ethics: Levinas supports the idea that (hu)mans are separated from, and elevated above, the world. He describes the world’s otherness as both treacherous and vacuous. I am not only justified in securing myself against it, but in undertaking any actions necessary to do so. As a result, the unspeakable violence of mechanised production and destruction of animals is arguably supported in Levinas’s characterisation of the emerging ethical (hu)man. Levinas facilitates my separation from it and from other violent relations to the nonhuman world, using his characterisation of woman as ‘walls’ mediating between the (hu)man and the nonhuman...

1 In an interesting parallel, Wyschogrod (1990:154) demonstrates how Bataille’s ‘excessive expenditure’ can find an affinity in Levinas’s description of guilt and responsibility to the other (hu)man: “expenditure in the interest of the Other”.
worlds. The ultimate ethical encounter with the other (hu)man, the moment that ‘realises’ my consumption, *legitimises* the destruction up until now.

In the concluding of part three, I described the path that Levinas and I have taken—using the metaphor of cutting through a thicket. In this thicket are all those ‘beings-in-the-world’ that Levinas’s work allows me to ignore, or use, on my way to reaching the destination of the ethical encounter. We cut this path together, Levinas and I, until finally, we encounter the other (hu)man. Here, at the ultimate ethical moment, the event occurs (as it occurred between me and Manny). Each of us, both Levinas and I, encounter a *face*, our guilt and our responsibility. At this moment, reflected back to us in the eyes of the ethical Other, we see the thicket we have cut through behind us. And we recognise the suffering of all those other beings-in-the-world that have been pushed aside by the ruthless and self-regarding construction of our path through it. And so we begin to make indirect responses to them. Now, forever changed by this experience, we recommence our journey, carrying our new companion (Manny) with us through the thicket. Not for long, though, for our path is now forever and infinitely open to the *faces* of other (hu)mans and non(hu)mans.

Now that the first ethical encounter is over, I realise one more thing: Despite all the sacrifice that it has required from the nonhuman world, despite the impossibility of my ignoring the *face* of another (hu)man, I can barely recall encountering the *face* at all in the sense that Levinas describes. Yes, I recall Manny, but where are all the Other’s others? Once I have encountered one (hu)man, should not my path open up to all the others? Perhaps, my path has always been open to all the other faces? Perhaps, in the thicket there exists not just the nonhuman world yet to be possessed, not just the women used as walls against the thicket, but thousands (and an infinity) of other (hu)mans who we have pushed aside as we stride together towards our first ethical encounter. I have encountered Manny yet how many destitute others have I avoided? I am conscious that there have been many. I am aware that I have avoided my obligations to them.² Would I want my encounter with Manny to have come earlier, before I had had ‘my share’ of the world? And, perhaps, now that I have had this encounter with Manny, I will try to stay on the path, to avoid the faces of all those needy others in the thicket. How I undertake to stay on the path is the focus of this next and final part.

² Writing that I am ‘aware’ and ‘conscious’ seems to run counter to the underhand way that Levinas says my encounter with the other human is thrust upon my subjectivity. But the facts are, I *am* aware of Levinas’s descriptions of ethical encounters, and I *have* pinpointed some of their characteristics by finding one such encounter exemplified in my relation to Manny. Even if this is a fallacious construction—even if it is possible for the Other’s suffering and alterity to enter into my life without awareness, that does not necessarily mean that I have not some ‘conscious’ mechanisms at dealing with the other human.
Spatial avoidance in my city

Of course, within the human neighbourhood the sixth commandment [thou shall not kill] can hardly be said to have been scrupulously obeyed; it is, as Levinas says, an ‘authority…without force’ (PM:169). The face is a ‘demand’ that remains as the possibility of ethics whether we accept or deny that ‘demand’ (Clark 1997:183).

(Hu)man alterity is a force. If the other (hu)man gets close enough to me, I cannot avoid confronting his alterity. When he knocks on my door and I open it, it opens me up—to my desire and to my guilt. His alterity exposes me to a violence that I, without my conscious knowledge or intent, inflicted on the Other. I do not question whether he is right or wrong when he accuses me. I may not know the violence, but I know he is right. There is no need to question whether he is right or wrong in his accusations because Levinas’s conception of (hu)man alterity has the authority to wrench open my subjectivity in this way.

Possessing authority is unique to (hu)man alterity. The nonhuman world is full with other sorts of otherness—everything in the nonhuman world has its otherness—but none of their ‘alterity’ has the force to confront me with my guilt. But it does not necessarily follow that the Other who confronts me with my guilt will receive an adequate response: The Other may have authority over my subjectivity, but it does not follow that he possesses power over my actions. Even if the Other opens me up to my guilt, I can still deny the Other’s help. (Hu)man alterity holds no physical control over me. It does not arrest my ability to satiate myself, to enjoy the world, nor to deny the request of the other (hu)man. But this is the power that the ‘alterity’ of the nonhuman world could hold over me. If I step outside the walls of my dwelling, I may be subsumed by the elemental. Decisions normally mine to make—how and when to eat, when and why to deny the Other—can be removed from my grasp by a world gone ‘wild’ with imperturbable being.
The ‘alterity’ of the ‘wild’ world could rupture the security of my future happiness. It does this by taking away my ability to possess and control. But (hu)man alterity, too, can rupture the security of my future happiness, or, at least, my future happiness untainted by guilt: If I deny the other (hu)man knocking on my door, if I am free to decide not to sacrifice my autonomy for his well being, I will still be heavily burdened and infinitely inhibited by my infinite guilt. Encountering guilt I cannot avoid. A friend describes her experience of living in Berlin in the winter with her newborn baby: To get to her home she has to walk past the bodies of people sheltering from the cold shivering in the entranceway to her apartment block. She can rationalise walking on without a direct response to their suffering partly because she has responsibilities to her child—But these responsibilities do not secure her against guilt for their suffering. Guilt follows her as she walks up the stairs, a shadowy mauvaise conscience, and it cannot be shaken off by justification. She may be able to avoid the suffering homeless people in her entranceway, but her guilt inhabits the apartment with her.

But perhaps there are ways that I can avoid my guilt? So far I have described several ways to, and things to, avoid on my path to the ethical encounter. But until now, what I have avoided is the ‘alterity’ of the nonhuman world. Perhaps, these ways to avoid the ‘alterity’ of the nonhuman world can also be applied to avoid (hu)man alterity, and consequently, to avoid my guilt? In this chapter, I explore strategies of avoidance. To both frame and personalise this discussion, I again use my experiences of avoidance and guilt in the city in which I live.¹

Avoiding guilt in city space

I experienced with Manny what seemed to me to be a face to face ethical encounter. Even though this experience helps me to believe that such encounters are possible, and do occur, it has never occurred again. After my encounter with Manny, my life and lifestyle have continued in a way not dissimilar to the time before our encounter—with one notable difference: my wrenching desire to write a thesis to explore the implications of avoidance in my city.²

¹ I am writing about a particular city, not cities in general. It is not the task of this thesis to determine whether or not the strategies I write about in relation to my particular city are directly applicable to other cities. Although, I do think that even in cities where there are denser populations and the potential for more immediate confrontations with human suffering, it is still possible to avoid coming face to face with my guilt for this suffering. However, this proposition is best left for future work.

² Is my writing an avoidance too?
My first explanation for why I am not (consciously) confronted more often is because I do not often enough come into (physical) contact with those who seem to be suffering in the way that Levinas says the ethical other suffers. I am a white, middle class Australian living in an inner city suburb of a capital city. My privileged socio-economic and geographic location affords me an in-built ‘strategy’ for avoiding ethical confrontation. This is not a conscious ‘strategy’ as such—the mechanisms of my isolation from need have largely been set in place for me; I have inherited them. Being who I am and living where I do, I am physically removed from obvious sites of suffering. All I need do to maintain this isolation is stay here: off site, out of sight.

This mode of avoidance works on the path in a similar way as it works in the dwelling to avoid my confronting the production of my food. From the beginning of this thesis, attaining and maintaining my distance from the world is my strategy to attain and maintain security in it. Technological methods of food production displace the work of my hands: I do not have to touch the world in order to possess it. I can withdraw further and further distance until it is not possible to see the processes of production and destruction. And, if I cannot see them, I do not have to think about them.³

Along with the millions of animals that are slaughtered for (hu)man consumption, are the millions of (hu)man faces that I avoid—because they are not proximate. David Harvey reflects on the effectiveness of this strategy:

...we can in practice consume our meal without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad social relations embedded in the system the puts it on our table...we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them... (Harvey 1990:422-3).⁴

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³ Henri Lefebvre (1974 (1991):27) describes this strategy of avoidance as the “illusion of transparency”. The illusion of transparency assures me that what I can see is all there is to know. The mind can see everything because everything is transparent. Under this illusion, complete comprehension of a scenario seems absolutely possible. Comprehension meets no “insurmountable obstacles” that would refuse to be brought to the light. Lefebvre’s space appears as “innocent” and “free from traps or secret places” (27): no shadowy corners exist, in fact, no distance exists that would allow unknowable elements a darkened hiding place. For Levinas, when it comes to the non(hu)man world, this illuminated, comprehensible space is no illusion. That I can know the world is a truth irrespective of the distance that I view the world from. However, when it comes to (hu)man alterity, any illusion that I may have that the Other is ‘knowable’ (or transparent) is revealed as just that: an illusion. My distance from the other manages to conceal the one thing that could reveal this as illusory. With distance from the other (hu)man, the illusion of transparency can convince me that the other’s alterity does not exist—because I must be proximate to the Other (that is face to face) to encounter alterity.

James Donald (1997:182) argues that this desire for transparency has been promulgated by urban reformers for the past 150 years. To render the city transparent, the space of the city must be utterly comprehensible—viewed as a territory to be “bounded, mapped, occupied, and exploited, a population of the city to be managed and perfected”.

⁴ Sut Jhally (1990:49) argues this point as well: “[Commodities] draw a veil across their own origins: products appear and disappear before consumer’s eyes as if by spontaneous generation, and it is an
‘Faces’ working in sweatshops or on cash crops to produce goods that I buy, faces on temporary protection visas working in the abattoirs doing large-scale killing that I do not want to see or think about when I eat meat, are distanced from my inner-city sanctum. Because these faces are so distanced, there is no exposure to their alterity. Because I am not exposed to their alterity, there is no exposure to my guilt. If I cannot see them, if I am not exposed to my guilt for their infinitely less secure dwellings-in-the-world, then I do not even have to think about them. I continue to not-grasp the fact that these people are the procurers and securers of my nourishment.

Yet, I am aware of the existence of these faces and their suffering from a distance. Nonetheless, the way I recognise this is quite distinct from the way that I would recognise it if I were face to face with one of these people. Perhaps I have become aware of their suffering in a magazine or television exposé. Because the physical presence of their bodies is so distant as to be absent, I have a radically diminished access to their alterity. And if I have no face to face encounter with their alterity, I have no wrenching desire, no absolute exposure, to change their suffering into my guilt. I may recognise their suffering with my attentive, thoughtful consciousness: I may respond in a generalised way: I may boycott sweatshop products; I may vote for a government that gives asylum seekers permanent refugee status. But will I feel the guilt of personal responsibility for the suffering of these faces? Probably not. If I am not exposed to the guilt of my mauvaise conscience that wrenches open my subjectivity whenever I am proximate to them, then perhaps I will also not be exposed to my mauvaise conscience’s most cataclysmic accusation: I can never do enough.

When this realisation—I can never do enough—comes to me through the face of the Other, my response is infinite: I can never do enough, and yet I am infinitely obliged to try. But when the face of the Other is absent, or so distant as to be absent, the reverse occurs. Without my mauvaise conscience continually tugging at my guilt, my never being able to do enough retires into futility. Without my mauvaise conscience, I resign from trying. I will, in my inactivity, with an air of resignation say “I can never do ‘enough”.

Without my mauvaise conscience tugging at the end of the rope, my bonne conscience decides whether or not to see suffering. With my bonne conscience again in control, I retire asking will I bother listening to this expose? Do I really want to expose
myself? Do I really want to change my behaviour? Does changing my behaviour really make any ‘difference’? Why do I need to be guilty? It’s not my problem.

Thus the fact I am isolated from most needy faces in my city does not ultimately isolate me from their needs. In fact, the limitations of my strategies (conscious or unconscious) for distancing myself from their suffering are paralleled by the limitations of my (conscious or unconscious) strategies for distancing myself from food production: I can avoid the violences of the production and destruction of animals for food by keeping a concrete distance between my dwelling and the abattoirs. But the strategy no longer works when it comes time for me to eat—again I am confronted with their elemental side in a slab of dead meat. I must devise strategies to maintain my distance from this meat that I am about to eat. And same again for my avoidance of guilt towards the Other’s others. There will always be faces who suffer and live in my city (Manny). As in the case of my eating meat, I must find a way to maintain my distance from them.

In the inner city suburb in which I live there is suffering around me. The old man who lives next door in my set of flats gets food from The Salvos. At night and all through the day, I hear the quiet knocks and requests from heroine addicts at another neighbour’s door. An endangered and dwindling form of habitation, there are still several boarding houses on my street, filled with middle-aged men. People beg for spare change on the main street, just off mine.

And yet so rarely does this suffering end in the ethical encounter. I may be aware of the ‘situation’ of faces ‘less fortunate’ than me, but I am rarely confronted in a conscious and very personal way with their real suffering and need. I rarely know the name of the Other that suffers in my own street. I have rarely met them face to face and looked into—let alone through—their eyes. There are meetings that resemble ‘encounters’ but are not encounters. I am stopped for spare change in the street and I give it: I help a sun-stroke man find his way back to the house he had forgotten. A gentle young man asked me for a hug and refused to let go when I hugged him.

But then there was the time I gave my bed to Manny after she had been beaten up and could not get home. This single encounter with Manny was so overwhelming that now even meetings in the street (the non-encounters) threaten my security.

Some weeks after I first gave my bed to Manny for the night, she turns up at my house again. This time, I am not home. She tells my housemates she was sleeping at her cousin’s place up the road, but he had made ‘a move’ on her, been violent, so she wasn’t going back. Could she stay the night? When I get home, my friends and I discuss it, and
decide that yes, just this once more, she can stay. We set her up a bed. She sleeps. She leaves in the morning.

A week later, Manny calls me on the phone. A man in the hostel she was living in beat her. She needs to leave, can she and a friend have a lift to her friend’s home in an outlying suburb? I say yes. I drive to the hostel. She has been brutally beaten. Her face was so swollen I can hardly see one of her eyes. She moves slowly and stiffly, as if her legs might break. Her arm is in a sling. We get in the car and I ask for directions. Instead, I get more requests—can I drop by her friend’s boyfriend’s house to see if he is there? Can I drop her friend to the park and stop for a drink? I do these things. Then her friend doesn’t want to go to the suburbs anymore. Manny says that maybe her aunty will let her stay at her place. I drive her there. She is home. Aunty Christine is exasperated with Manny. She says Manny gets into fights all the time—gets drunk, and starts fights. This is not what Manny told me. Christine says she can stay one night, but that Manny has to find a hostel to stay in after that. She has no room. And Manny’s family won’t take her back. I leave saying that I will find her a hostel to stay in.

When I get home, I phone every hostel in the inner city. None will take her. They either know or know of Manny and her fighting. The only place is across town, and expensive—and they want four weeks’ rent in advance. I will pay for it, but think that Manny will not want to stay there, so far from the park where she hangs out and drinks. I call Aunty Christine the next morning and tell her I am having problems. She has softened up, and says it is okay for Manny to stay with her but that she needs a bigger place to rent. I say I will help her. When she finds some places, I will drive her to see them, and then help her move. She should give me a ring as soon as she has looked into it.

Then I will wipe my hands of Manny. I feel manipulated. She has relied on me, and lied to me about her injuries. Luckily for me, she does not ring and her aunty does not ring. I do not feel ‘responsible’, but nor do I want to feel guilty for not responding. If distance is the key to avoiding (hu)man need, what do I do now to reinstate some distance between myself and the (hu)man who needed or still needs me?

What I think emerges at times like this is an emotion that Levinas usually associates with my engagement with the nonhuman world—that is, anxiety. Anxiety is the feeling that I have when I find my (imagined) control of the future being taken away from me, or foiled, by the unpredictable ‘alterity’ of the nonhuman world. In the situation I now find myself in, anxiety is evoked. I am anxious because if I go out on the street, I think there is a good chance that someone like Manny, perhaps even Manny herself, will ask something of me.
The strategy that one can adapt to avoid the Other in this case is the straightforward strategy of maintaining distance: Stay at home. Levinas condones using the dwelling to lock out the elemental; but I can also use dwelling to lock out (hu)man alterity and need. In my flat, I am in a static mode of dwelling. I can close the door. I can stay out of view of the window. I can remain securely inside. If someone knocks, I can pretend that I am not home. My fear of what I might confront if I open the door gives me reason not to open the door. For the difference between fearing for my future happiness in the ‘face’ of the il y a, and fearing for my future happiness face to face with the Other is really no difference at all.

In chapter five, I used the case of the Other ‘knocking on my door’ as a literal example of my encounter with the Other. However, in my everyday negotiations around ethics, I am more likely to encounter a metaphorical ‘knocking’. On the street, when there are no women in the walls that I can hide behind, I am most vulnerable to being ‘encountered’. But fortunately for me, I need not isolate myself at home if I do not want to be approached.

Why? Remember that the dwelling is not necessarily just a static spatial relationship that I have with the world. It is also a space I can inhabit around me, when I am outside. I take an attitude of confidence out with me into the streets. “The ‘at home’ [Le ‘chez soi’] is not a container but a site where I can...” (TI:37). I can walk into the street with security. The world is the site (“lieu”) of my dwelling. “Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is comprehended” (TI:111,37-8). When I leave my home, my dwelling in the world takes on the characteristics of a “sojourn” (TI:37): Regardless of whether or not I am in fact able to lock out the world’s otherness, I believe that I can, and behave as though I can.

Still, this does not explain how I can avoid my guilt if someone ‘knocks’ into me on my sojourn down the street. There is no use in my relying upon an attitude of security to lock out anxiety because I am already anxious about being faced by the Other. Instead, that sojourn takes on the qualities of my static dwelling. My well-worn tracks hold the mark of my static dwelling best. As Levinas says, “well-trampled places do not resist me but support me” (TI:137). I rely on familiar trajectories, I do not have to look further than the edges of space already appropriated by me; ‘follow a map’ in my head rather than negotiate my physical environment.

The less I feel capable of meeting my obligations to the Other, the more I rely on familiar trajectories—paths that ensure a distance is maintained between me and the Other.
(hu)man, and which will secure my escape.\textsuperscript{5} Memories of confronting places can preempt the direction of my gaze; I look away before that ‘face’ ahead of me asks me for money. Or, if I see Manny in the distance and I know that she has not seen me, I can cross the road as if diverting my path was my \textit{always-intension}. I use the command I have over my future, my \textit{I can}, to maintain a secure separation. I \textit{anticipate} an encounter and I use my ‘line of sight’ to subvert exposure to alterity and guilt.

The attribute of anticipation (that vision offers through my distant negotiations with the world) is removed from my \textit{face to face} confrontations with alterity. In my strategy of avoidance through distance, avoiding alterity is easy—I am nowhere close to the other (hu)man. But in my strategy of avoidance through anticipation, the other (hu)man is just up ahead of me. From this short distance, I can see that the other takes the form of a (hu)man. I may also see that they need help of some kind. So why does his alterity not confront me?

If I keep a physical distance between the Other and myself, even if I can \textit{see} him, I am doing so in anticipation: as if absorbed in a context that holds all the potential threats of a space \textit{not yet appropriated by my dwelling}. In chapter three, I described the way that the suspended otherness of the city begins to return to the elemental almost from the moment of its suspension. It is only my well-trampled paths that support me holding the mark of dwelling. \textit{Out there}, the Other is immersed in the elemental. A useful confusion can occur—between the anxiety that I feel about being faced with my guilt and the anxiety that I feel in the ‘streets’ of the elemental. Levinas uses the example of the way a city looks after an exhausting trip:

\begin{quote}
...the unreal, inverted city [where] things and beings strike us as though they no longer composed a world, and were swimming in the chaos of their existence (EE:54).
\end{quote}

And at this moment of anxiety: I have no intention of distinguishing between a (hu)man in need and a world inverted.\textsuperscript{6} At this moment, both threaten my future. In fact, if my anxiety becomes too great, then I can exploit the confusion between the elemental and the Other: I can imagine that the Other is a predator. If I feel preyed upon, then I am

\textsuperscript{5} For discussions on the ‘domestication’ of streets and other city spaces, see Sharon Zukin’s \textit{The Cultures of Cities} (1995:29-32); and P. Jackson’s “Domesticating the Street: The contested spaces of the high street and the mall” (1998:80).

\textsuperscript{6} Critchley (1997:78) points out that Levinas, himself, plays with a confusion between alterity and the \textit{il y a}: “It would appear that Levinas wants to emphasise the sheer radicality of the alterity revealed in the ethical relation by stressing the possible confusion that the subject might have in distinguishing between the alterity of the \textit{il y a} and that of illeity, a confusion emphasized by the homophony and linked etymology of the two terms”.

justified in acting preemptively to defend myself: I run, hide, dissemble, lie to avoid the *face to face* encounter.\textsuperscript{7}

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\textsuperscript{7} Zukin (1995:27-32) concurs that the stranger/predator figures strongly in the aesthetics of fear which dominates urban planning in major world cities such as New York, resulting in various manifestations such as lights, surveillance cameras, guards in shopping malls, and high-security measures in inner-city apartment blocks. See also M. Featherstone’s *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991:25), for a discussion on this phenomena in shopping malls. Gated communities also work through this perception. They are designed in a manner that secures their inhabitants against ‘predators’, feeding the occupants’ paranoia that it is actually those humans inside the locked security fences who are vulnerable to violence. See J. Hillier and P. McManus’s “Pull Up the Drawbridge: Fortress mentality in the suburbs” (1994:99), for a discussion on gated suburbs.
8

Eating the Other to make life exciting again

Ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream culture (hooks 1992:29).

Now I encounter another dilemma: I want the excitement of exposure to alterity without responsibility; I want a world that I can dwell in securely without anxiety; and I want a world that I can revel in replete with challenges and confrontations. As bell hooks says, “one desires contact with the Other even as one wishes boundaries to remain intact” (1992:29). I want encounters with the other (hu)man because of the scintillating light that it brings, but I also want the sanitized safety of a life without ethical encounter. In order to

1 Torgovnick (1990) describes the dilemma in describing the ‘western’ compulsion to “clearly demarcate subject and object even while flirting with other ways of experiencing the universe” (in hooks 1992:222). Here is Fischler’s omnivore’s paradox. Following Rozin, Fischler (1980:945) says that the omnivore’s paradox also “accounts for the fact that preferences tend to increase with the degree of familiarity of the food: Rozin says that ‘familiarity breeds content’. But conversely, it also accounts for the fact that we do not appreciate excessive repetition and monotony. Rozin says that, in that sense, ‘familiarity breeds contempt’.”

Cook and Crang (1996:135) put this dilemma in terms of a double commodity fetish: “In the first fetishization, consumed commodities and their valuations are divorced for and by consumers from the social relations of their production and provision through the construction of ignorances about the biographies and geographies of what we consume. ...The second fetish [is] a fetish of locality related to what Lash and Urry have termed the ‘touristic quality’ of much contemporary consumption. They stress the ways in which consumers in various retail spaces are increasingly being ‘encouraged to gaze upon and collect the signs and images of many cultures’”.

2 Leonie Sandercock (2000:23), citing Ulrich Beck, puts our ambivalence thus: “Strangers bring the outside in... In the face of this unsettling, the desire for the logic of order and identity is reasserted. ‘We’ must secure our centrality and ‘they’, those who disrupt our homely space, must be pushed out from the centre. Difference is an attribute of ‘them’. They are not ‘like us’ and therefore they are threatening. Yet, the very strangeness of strangers is not only frightening but also enticing. Our ambivalence towards strangers expresses fear and desire fused into one, and is thus doubly unsettling”. hooks (1992:26) concurs: “Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger”.

keep my dwelling both exciting and secure, I am compelled to find new ways of engaging with otherness in the city. In this final chapter, I argue that one way to do this is to engage with an alterity that offers me ‘wildness’, yet one that is paradoxically packaged safely and neatly presented to me. As an example, I describe here the consequences of my penchant for eating ‘ethnic’ food.

**Caging the wild Other**

I moved to this inner city suburb for ‘authentic ethnic’ eating experiences—a ‘tourist’ who ‘dared’ to leave the well-beaten track. A Vietnamese grocery quickly became my favourite haunt. Outside on the street, pe-tsai, pak choi, choi sum, kang kong, galangal and lemongrass in aluminium trays are refreshed by a trickling hose. If greens are all I need, it’s easy. But inside I find the challenges and confrontations of the otherness I seek.

Today, I traverse the aisles for salted radish, but the possibilities of so much otherness distracts me from my task. In plastic packets, all sorts of obscure animals—dried, shrunken desiccated, prawns, squid, jellyfish. Spiky fruits, muddy roots, and eskies clog the aisles with their moving, biting, salty smells. In this moment, I ‘open up a crack’, almost overwhelmed with the despair of seeing crabs, still alive, tied so they cannot bite their way out. But I quickly ‘close the door’ and cheer myself up with a little ‘ethnic’ treat that I’ve been tipped off about. I finally locate the basket. Little parcels, wrapped in banana leaf, tied with coloured string, three colours. Oh, I forget which ones have the glutinous rice and mung bean, which ones have the banana, and which ones have the pork. I just pluck out any two, pay $2.40 for them and $1.40 for the salted radish. In this moment, I am satiated, and a little bit sticky.

What I hunger for in ethnic food is more than ‘good food’, or that off-the-beaten-track otherness. *Eating ethnic food reconnects me with the ‘wildness’ that I have avoided by dwelling-in-the-world*. I hunger to contact the wildness of the world through the alterity of the ethnic Other.³

Levinas says that the only way to contact the Other’s alterity is through a *face to face* encounter. But what I am trying to contact here is not an alterity that opens up my subjectivity and exposes my guilt but an alterity that opens up my subjectivity and exposes me to ‘wildness’. This ‘wild alterity’ does not link me to suffering or guilt. This wildness hooks me into the elemental. This sticky rice ball re-exposes me to wildness. In this sticky

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³ According to hooks (1992:22), “the seductive promise of this encounter is that it will counter the terrorizing force of the status quo that makes identity fixed, static, a condition of containment and death.”
little rice ball, I do not see a product of industrial agriculture. It is not ‘raw’ in the sense that Levinas speaks about the products of an industrialised agricultural system. It is ‘good soup’.

In chapter four, I described how ‘good soup’ leaves its makers invisible to me. Rather than exposing the (hu)man or (wo)man, Levinas’s ‘good soup’ is made by the gentle efflorescence of the ‘feminine’. But regardless of who or what has made it, the reason it is ‘good soup’ remains the same: It has been mediated between the ‘wildness’ of the world and the familiarity of my dwelling. That this sticky rice ball is the product of mediation would seem to defeat my reasons for eating it. Did I not want this food to connect me with the wildness absent in my dwelling? When I last had ‘good soup’, it was made specifically for me. This, I believe, is the key: This rice ball was not meant for me. What I hunger for is the otherness of the Other ‘who made the food’ rather than the food. I desire not to eat the food, as much as I desire to “eat the other” (hooks 1992:39). I want to see its invisible maker; I want to see the face of the Vietnamese migrant; I want to experience the ‘ethnic’ other’s ‘authentic ethnic’ world. The ‘authentic ethnic’ world of the Vietnamese other who made this rice ball would bring me closer to wildness than any ‘good soup’ in my white, colonial world could. Eating this rice ball exposes me to the elemental.

And there is another desire that I hope to satiate from eating this ball that further diminishes any sense of emptiness that the absence of alterity may have left in my life. In eating this rice ball, I (consciously or unconsciously) hope to demonstrate how culturally tolerant and inclusive I am. Perhaps I hope that in eating ‘ethnic’ food I am mitigating my colonial past. Eating this rice ball, I hope to eat with ethnicity. Buying and eating the rice ball takes on a redemptive quality: curating my cultural tolerance, and ‘feeding’ my fantasy of an authentic, untainted past, placing me within it—a form of “imperialist nostalgia...where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed,” (Rosaldo 1989:25). This fantasy lets me believe that my dwelling-in-the-world is not a

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4 In relation to African American culture, hooks (1992:26) says: “this cultural narrative relies on stereotypes of the ‘primitive,’ even as it eschews the term, to evoke a world where black people were in harmony with nature and with one another”. R. Diamond (1993:3), describes the way restaurant critics continually reinforce the notion of a untainted past, describing “fictitious lands that are static, immune to political strife, poverty, and any oppression due in part to intervention from the so-called first-world”.

5 In her study on the place of ‘Indonesian’, ‘Italian’ and ‘Greek’ restaurants in Holland, Anneka Van Otterloo (1987:127) questions just this assumption: “if nationals and foreigners sit down at each other’s tables, do the two groups become closer?” She finds that in specific instances, this may be the case, without really questioning what ‘closeness’ means. It is the nature of ‘closeness’ that I question in this chapter.

6 Jean Duruz (1999:300) comments on this practice in direct relation to eating: “the danger lies in consuming the ‘exotic’ as a nostalgic figure—the danger that shoppers and diners seek to purchase a romanticized working-class/ethnic/peasant way of life, together with that food that middle-class ‘Anglo’ communities (mainly) feel they have lost”.

“usurpation of the whole earth” (EFP:82). I am not usurping anyone at the moment. Look! I am eating the Other’s food, what I think to be the Other’s food: I am redeeming my past. I eat this ethnicity and I am wilder and more a part of my place—where I live and who I am are integrated. I eat, and literally incorporate my suburb into a diverse, tolerant community, with me as one of its active participants.

I say one of its active participants. This is important: for if the ‘encounter’ is to redeem me, I must not treat the ethnic faces who are feeding (my face) as objects, as I have done in the past in my dehumanising dwelling-in-the-world. In eating ethnic food, I must integrate and incorporate myself and my suburb into the ‘ideal’ ‘culinary nurturing home’ that is then, multicultural Australia:

a place where many ‘sons and daughters of the nation’ feel at home ‘eating ethnic’ and where many ethnic ‘mothers’ enjoy feeding and being appreciated. In it, everyone feels a bit of a subject. All of this happens under the watchful eye of a well-fed paternal government whose presence communicates the imperative of the multicultural Law which regulates the availability of the eaten and the access of the eater (Hage 1997:117).7

In this ideal home, my eating need not usurp another’s place. I eat in the context of an Australia where I hope both I and the Other can build dwellings and be ‘at home’. Sticky rice balls are ‘good soup’ for me, but I hope that I am not taking bread from the Other’s mouth; I hope that the Other who made these rice balls is sharing their meal willingly; we are not both eating (I am being fed by the Other), but I want the Other to enjoy feeding me.8 I want my ethnic food to be an invitation into the Other’s dwelling. What I really want is for them to invite me for dinner at their place.

And, perhaps, my hopes are their hopes? To explain: “migrant-home-building” describes the way migrants enact a pining for far off homelands; home-building is one way that they have to feel more ‘at home’ in their new homeland (Hage 1997:108).9 This concept

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7 According to Symons, for advocates of multiculturalism and non-European migration the expansion in quality and diversity of food due to immigration is a powerful argument for expanding immigration. In 1993, the Office of Multicultural Affairs released a commissioned volume charged with exploring the social and culinary benefits of multiculturalism (1993).

8 Duruz (1999:309-10) points out importantly, that as well as my eating of sticky rice balls being a romanticisation of working-class and ‘ethnic’ lifestyles, it is also a romanticisation of women’s work.

9 “The aim is not to go back. It is to foster these homely intimations so as to provide a better base for confronting life in Australia; to build a shelter from ‘social and cultural crisis’, but also to have a base from which to perceive and grasp Australian opportunities. It is in this sense that nostalgic feelings are used in the process of home-building in Australia” (Hage 1997:108).
aligns closely with Levinas’s concept of dwelling: Both involve the building of spaces where a (hu)man can be satiated and secure (Hage 1997:102).10

Food is important in migrants’ feeling appreciated by the wider community. If non-immigrant Australia is willing to buy and eat ethnic food, this secures their dwelling-in-Australia.11 There are not many experiences that I can have of immigrant-Australian cultures that are not eating experiences. (There are Greek bridal shops and Chinese video stores in my suburb, but these are for a cultural group that is not-mine.) Food is one of the only ways immigrants find their cultures ‘appreciated’ by non-immigrant Australia.12

‘Ethnic’ food is an important dwelling activity for the ‘ethnic’ feeder, then, as well as for the ethnic eater. Or so I am ‘pleased’ to believe. But the fact is that my desire for wildness does not always match well with immigrants’ desires to dwell. Many forms of ‘ethnic’ I look at disparagingly: I see the cheap Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant over there and this one here—plastic tablecloths and fluorescent lights, wall-mounted televisions and MSG: I disparage their lack of authenticity.13 I want to eat a ‘regional flavour’ such as ‘North

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10 For example, Greek migrants planted food gardens on first arriving in Australia in the 1950s. These gardens provided food with which they were familiar, but also food that did not cost them anything, making them less dependent on store-bought goods (Hirschon 1993:73).

11 I think that hooks (1992:26) would paint this willingness to sell ‘ethnic’ food with a different hue: “Marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation”. Shun Lu and Gary Fine (1995:535) concur, saying that: “many transactions by which ethnicity is made ‘real’ are economically grounded: festivals, restaurants, art galleries, clothing outlets, and music venues. Ethnicity often becomes a marketing tool, part of an entrepreneurial market”.

12 See the work Sneja Gunew (2000) has done in demonstrating this point. On the other hand, Vietnamese-Australians, for example, find plenty of negative media portrayal, often being linked to drug smuggling, crime and violence.

It seems that when it comes to food, ‘ethnic’ Australians are embraced as part of the wonderful mix that is multicultural Australia, but released from it and reviled by negative media portrayals. Ghassan Hage (1996:463-4) describes the importance of this strategy, to White Australians: “In Australia, most public discourses on Lebanese, Bosnian, or African mass killings actively exoticises the behaviour and subconsciously distances the dominant (largely Anglo-Celtic) culture from the possibility of engaging in such barbarous acts. ...Indeed, even relatively mild demonstrations of ethnic animosity between Australians of Serbian and Croatian origin, for example, are often described as ‘un-Australian’. In the case of Australia, putting ‘ethnic cleansing’ beyond the ‘Australian character’ actively distances Anglo-Celtic Australians from the atrocities their communal ancestors committed against the Aboriginal population in the process of Australian nation building”.

13 Authenticity is typically defined as being that which is believed or accepted to be genuine, real or true to itself (Lu & Fine 1995:538). Theorists such as Lu and Fine, as well as Cook and Crang (1996:159), challenge notions of authenticity, using the example of traditional cuisines to do so: “Many of the most basic, and ‘traditional’, ingredients in European culinary cultures such as tomatoes, potatoes, vanilla and chillies were ‘discovered’ overseas in the early stages of imperialist ‘adventure’, brought back ‘home’, and ‘domesticated’”. On this point, see also J. Goody’s Cooking, Cuisine and Class (1982); Sidney Mintz’s Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past (1996:97-8); and A. Appadurai’s “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in contemporary India” (1988).
Vietnamese’ or ‘Southern Indian’. In turn, I believe myself to be discerning, and willing to discern, the difference between the two.

However, there are those theorists who argue that immigrants’ attempts at making their ‘ethnic’ food acceptable by tempering their tastes to white Australian palates can be read as an active attempt to engage or enter into dialogue with their new home:

Sweet and sour cooking might be a culinary aberration, but there are other ways to see it than as the product of the subjection of Chinese culture to western influence. It also embodies, for example, the Chinese people’s usage of their cultural creations to embody forms of dialogue, negotiation and interaction with other cultures (Hage 1997:143).

But these acts of negotiation and interaction are not heard by my ‘palate without ears’: I do not want the Other’s wildness to be tamed for me. I want eating to bring me closer to the wildness of the Other. If I eat this ‘tame’ ethnic food, and if by eating it, I am making the ‘ethnic’ feeder feel more ‘at home’, then where do I stand? As the one who eats this mediated food, I am ‘possessed’ by the feeder’s dwelling; I become integrated with the Other’s security. In this scene, the ‘ethnic’ Other’s ‘I can’ substitutes me, subject for object. But I, as one who eats, do not want to be an object whose enjoyment in eating is possessed by the Other for his dwelling.

I must carefully balance: I do not want the ethnic feeder to head too far in the other direction either. I do not want to be served food that I would not find palatable. Dog is a traditional Vietnamese meat. If I were served dog at my favourite Northern Vietnamese restaurant, I would be overwhelmed—with despair at eating a ‘pet’. (Eating dog is not-mine culture). I would feel out of place at their table, unconsidered and unwelcome. Careful

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14 Lu and Fine (1995:535) describe these two broad classes of restaurant as “consumption-oriented” and “connoisseur-oriented”.

15 And still, my discernment demonstrates a complete lack of regard for centuries of civilisation and complexities of culture. I think that because I can understand a cuisine by region rather than by country, I am not as crass as the ‘rest of them’ who are eating ethnic and reducing a whole series of distinct histories and social structures to a single item of food.

16 See Lu and Fine (1995:536): “The members of the group recognize that their traditional culture is being altered, but simultaneously they believe that they are educating their clients to understand their culture”; and also Uma Narayan (1997) who also suggests that we should consider ways in which immigrants gain agency by selling invented ethnic cuisines to the dominant group.

17 This situation would resemble that which Levinas describes as insomnia: “I am, one might say, the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought” (EE:63).

18 Lu and Fine (1995:540-1) use the example of non-Chinese-American’s distaste for internal organs to illustrate the limitations non-immigrant Americans set on what they will and won’t stand to be served: “beef tripe [is one of the] favourite dishes in...Taiwan. Other dishes using inner organs or extremities of animals, such as ox’s tail, pig’s tongue, and duck’s feet, are very popular. ...In contrast, Americans define internal organs as dirty, of unpleasant texture, and unhealthy”.

This limiting condition set by mainstream palates on ‘ethnic’ cuisine demonstrates a wider point about the ways that issues around race and migration can surface in eating. Louise Edwards,
balancing of too much and too little ‘wildness’ points to the tension in this scene: To maintain my own security and satiety, the ethnicity that I consume must not be ‘too wild’.\(^{19}\)

What I want is my food served up in a cage.\(^{20}\) I want my ethnicity to be wild, but I do not want it to attack, bite or ‘eat’ me.\(^{21}\) I must be able to possess it, without seeming to possess it; I must be able to cage it, without seeming to cage it. Nor do I want to see this cage—that would expose the illusion under which I am eating. If I am a good judge—if I am the judge—of whether it is ‘authentically Other’ or not, I can have my wild ethnicity and eat it too.\(^{22}\)

This might seem an abrupt end to the final chapter. It is. The journey ended abruptly here for me too.

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Stephan Occhipinti and Simon Ryan (2000:299) say that the three most popular metaphors for expressions of racist sentiment in Australia have been “inundation, contamination and disorder”. However, now it seems that these three tropes are losing their status in acceptable public discourse to the metaphor of “indigestion” as well as panics about food poisoning. On digestion, they cite examples from letters to the editor of newspapers including this one from B.G. Hunt: “Most Australians are already uncomfortable with migration levels, particularly the high non-European migration. ... ‘Dr’ Beazley now proposes to solve this indigestion problem by force-feeding the patient with even more of the same” (Edwards, Occhipinti, and Ryan 304). And on food poisoning, they show how recent panics about food poisoning outbreaks have all been linked, deleteriously and inaccurately, to ‘ethnic’ food companies and eateries, demonstrating that “many Australians are still deeply suspicious of ‘foreign’ foods, and by extension ‘foreigners’ themselves” (Ryan, Edwards, and Occhipinti 1999:316).

\(^{19}\) According to Lu and Fine (1995:536), “novel culinary traditions must be situated so as to seem simultaneously exotic and familiar: distinguishable from mainstream culture (and thus desirable) yet able to be assimilated as edible creation”. On this careful balance, see also Joanne Finkelstein’s Dining Out: A Sociology of Modern Manners (1989).

\(^{20}\) Homi Bhabha (1994:72) describes this invisible cage in terms of a transparent grid: “Although there is always an entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity, there’s always a corresponding containment of it. A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid. This is what I mean by a creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural difference”.

\(^{21}\) Again, Bhabha (1994:70-1) describes this as “the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible”.

\(^{22}\) Foster: “Indeed, in a social order which seems to know no outside (and which must contrive its own transgressions to redefine its limits), difference is often fabricated in the interests of social control” (in hooks 1992:25). Hage describes this as “cosmo-multiculturalism”. For a cosmo-multiculturalist, the ethnicity of a place has “less to do with who inhabits it, who makes a home in it, and the degree of interaction between different cultural subjects within it, and more to do with what multicultural commodities are available on its markets and who has the capacity to appreciate them” (1997:132). For instance, over half the population of an outer suburb of my city is comprised of people born in another country: 52% compared with 42% in my inner city suburb, yet the outlying suburb does not attract substantial attention from cosmo-multiculturalists, even though it contains numerous ethnic eateries and grocers.
Resurfacing (or waiter, there’s alterity in my soup!)

At the end of a long and dystopic journey, I walk home through a city stripped of conspicuous (hu)man and nonhuman suffering, and streamlined to avoid contact with (hu)man alterity. Where ethnicity was wild, the city tamed it. When ethnicity became harder and harder to construct, its illusion more illusive, the city blamed or maligned it. In this so-safe place of secured possessions, suspended enjoyment, and simulated desire and responsibility, a too-tame ethnic encounter, not an ethical encounter, is all that I am now ‘eligible’ for. But I find that I am no longer hungry for either.

I walk alone down my street, and I see the bones of my complicity in every yard. Bush basil marks the entrances of many, its branches once broken off to bless the front door, now leggy and weak. An old lady dressed in black, a lemon tree with its trunk painted white, bitter melon continually resprouting in my back yard, mono grass replacing broad beans. I am ashamed. But this is not the final scene in my story. Waiting for me at home at the end of a long journey is a bowl of cold soup and a stale crust of bread.

It can wait a little longer (it will not get any colder). And anyway, I am not hungry for soup; I am hungry for answers. So I return to the questions that first drove me to write this thesis: How and why does distance make it possible for me to avoid thinking about, and taking responsibility for, the violences of industrial food production? How can I confront the distance between food production and eating? What would my responsibility look like if I were to look at it? And how would this confrontation change my world of eating?
I return to the passage that marked the beginning of my journey with Levinas and his ethics:

My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (EFP:82).

On this journey, I have come to see the ease with which Levinas avoids encountering the world. I have shown what I believe to be his complicity with industrial food production processes. I have shown how easily I can avoid encountering the Other using his strategies to avoid the wild world. But I did not take this journey with him to argue the limitations of his ethics, or to reassert that his logic is self-sabotaging.¹ At the beginning of this thesis, it seemed as if this journey with Levinas would lead me to answers. At the end of the journey, however, the distance between me and my soup is still vast and untraversable. But now I am at least aware of what that distance conceals: the hidden violences and abuses, the faces of others (the faces of the producers and makers of my soup); I am aware of the consequences of not-seeing and not-seeking the origins and consequences of my cold soup. Cold (is it raw again?) and unpalatable, it reveals itself as its constituent parts—as ‘carrot’, as ‘chicken’, as ‘broth’, as ‘woman’.

Other theorists have made this journey and tried to show Levinas that imperturbable non(hu)mans—plants, animals, things, women—have faces too, that they, too, can be encountered.² Even Levinas himself has come close to conceding this.³ But what I have not yet acknowledged, and what Levinas does not acknowledge (not to me in his story of alterity), is that alterity is not limited to faces. It might find particular expression in the (hu)man face, it might even find (arguably) particular expression in a non(hu)man face, but alterity is not grasable. This is not arguable: It is boundlessness. And boundlessness is what gives the (hu)man face its faceness. The boundlessness of alterity absorbs the finite presence of (hu)mans in an absence that can never be grasped.

Here, at home in a city devoid of Others, there are no faces through which alterity can radiate its scintillating light. The Others have been voided; but alterity cannot be voided. Others can be “oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world”; but alterity cannot. It cannot be ‘repulsed’, ‘excluded’, ‘exiled’, ‘stripped’, ‘killed’, because it is not bound in the same moment as body, thoughts, city, things. It is everywhere and nowhere. Knowledge of

¹ Jacques Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” (1978) has been characterised as an example of this argument.
² For examples see Christian Diehm’s “Facing Nature: Levinas beyond the human” (2000), and Benso’s The Face of Things (2000).
³ “One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal...” (PM:169).
alterity’s boundlessness is the unacknowledged gift that Levinas gives through his writing, despite the (hu)man boundaries he then proceeds to set upon it.

The alterity that I see the potential for in this city, is not, or cannot be encountered; Levinas’s “encounter” is always face to face and my responsibility to it always infinite. The alterity I see the potential for in this city is not so overwhelming or wrenching to my subjectivity (not a knock on my front door); it is faceless. It is ‘encountered’ only spoonful by spoonful, and my responsibility to it only finite. Alterity may still be boundless, but my ‘encounter’ with it is ‘bound’ to the finite edges of a 20ml spoon. This way I can concede guilt, and respond to it in my own time. It is manageable. I am not hostage to its overwhelming ‘everything and nothing’, but I do face it (I do not fear it), 20ml by 20ml.

Different from Levinas’s politics, which shows me the world in the Other’s face, the carrot (chicken, broth, woman) in the soup mediates my meeting with the faces behind the world. The carrot is a recollection of origins and consequences. I can begin asking questions. Where do these carrots come from? Slowly, as I spoon out the faces (in all their variety) behind the carrot, I can see manifest the cost of my avoidance: Soil erosion and salinisation, poisoned ground waters, food-borne illnesses, loss of biodiversity, grossly inequitable labour conditions, grossly altered climatic conditions, famine. Every spoonful exposes more spaces and more faces, but not in proximity, so that I can still put the spoon down. I will not be hostage to alterity. In 20ml spoonfuls, I choose the extent of my guilt and responsibility; in 20ml spoonfuls, my avoidance dissipates.4 Perhaps I will never give bread from my mouth to the Other, never be the ethical (hu)man that Levinas would hope for. This still troubles me. But, at least, this ‘spooned’ alterity is one way to begin to address the absence of Others in my city. May it even resuscitate the excitement of eating?

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4 Perhaps what I am saying is similar to what Caputo (1993:18) says: that Levinas’s ethical relation is a prophetic hyperbole. I must act “as if the Other were an Infinity that surpasses the totality”. Or perhaps I can put this ‘onus’ I have to delve into responsibility in the terms Critchley (1997:82) uses: “Levinas’s essential teaching is...his account of a subjectivity disposed toward responsibility, or better, responsibility...”. Or perhaps I could take heed of Benso (2000:44) and her ‘perhaps’: “that beside the other as human there may be (perhaps) an other which is not human, but which, nevertheless, may be constituted (perhaps) as Other and may place (perhaps) infinite demands on human beings in their attempt to philosophise: infinite demands that possess (perhaps) the authority of the transcendent, that ask (perhaps) from human beings that they transcend themselves, that they be good”.

Each of these theorists set up their own possibilities for ‘obligation’ distinct from Levinas’s hostage subjectivity.
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