


2022

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### Recommended Citation

Laubscher, L. (2022). When “there is” a Black: Levinas and Fanon on ethics, politics, and responsibility. *Middle Voices*, 2 (1). Retrieved from [https://dsc.duq.edu/middle\\_voices/vol2/iss1/7](https://dsc.duq.edu/middle_voices/vol2/iss1/7)

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This paper examines some of the ways in which the Black other, by Frantz Fanon's articulation, complicates and challenges Emmanuel Levinas's philosophies of ethics and justice. Additionally, it brings Levinas's notion of the *il y a*, or "there is," and Fanon's "zone of nonbeing" into critical conversation with respect to the body and being of the Black other.

*Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others.*

(Levinas, 2004, p. 146)

*No one has clean hands; there are no innocents and no onlookers.*

(Fanon, 1968, p. 199)

# When "there is" a Black: Levinas and Fanon on Ethics, Politics, and Responsibility

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One can safely assert that Emmanuel Levinas is widely regarded as the foremost contemporary "philosopher of the other and of ethics." Much less "widely regarded," though in our opinion no less "foremost," we would claim like eminence for Frantz Fanon, "philosopher of the (Black) other and of ethics." A core tension is already prefigured in the rhetorical manner of our presentation above, by the modification of a phrase with the addition of "Black" in brackets. Indeed, some may register an early objection: Levinas, such an objector might say, is articulating an infinite, transcendent and metaphysical ethical responsibility of and towards the human, while Fanon is concerned with a totality,

and the ontological betrayal (an "after") of such (a "prior") responsibility in a material present and presence. As such, they are really concerned with "separate" or "different" philosophical moments. This is a position and argument we will interrogate and contest.

By the unfortunate constraints of space, we will forego a thorough biographical and intellectual overview of Levinas and Fanon's lives and thought, requisite as it nonetheless is to a fuller understanding of our argument, and theirs.<sup>1</sup> Even so, a few "topographical" comments may be in order as an initial and orienting bird's eye view of sorts to converging and diverging lines of life and thought. For

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<sup>1</sup> Anchoring texts for Levinas's thought would be *Totality and Infinity* (2013) and *Otherwise than Being* (2004), while for Fanon, the reader would be well advised to read *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968). As for biographies, Solomon Malka (2006) and Francois Poirie's extensive interview (In Levinas, 2001b) provide good overviews of Levinas's life, while Macey (2012) and Cherki (2006) do the same for Fanon.

a small overlapping period between Fanon's regrettably short, and Levinas's fortunate long lives, there was a time when they shared physical residency in France, and their scholarly activities overlapped. Yet, they never met, and it is unclear whether either read the other's work [a copy of Levinas's *Existence and Existents* (2001a) was found in Fanon's library, after his death, but it is uncertain whether he read it – there are no references to Levinas in any of his published works]. The difference in professional careers – a philosopher and a psychiatrist – notwithstanding, both Levinas and Fanon shared a scholarly lineage and interest, most notably in their engagement and transforming dialogue with phenomenology and existential phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> One could also chalk up similarity in the assertions that both were concerned with the other, and with subjectivity in the movement between a totality, “here below”, and the elsewhere of an infinity – a movement which, for both, also included the absolutely fundamental (even radical) consideration of the body. Even their respective writing styles were similarly employed less to explain or provide a philosophical system than to perform the conceptual; to present an unsayable “experience,” and well in a profoundly affective, and often poetic and enigmatic, manner. Laubscher et al. (2021, p. 5) describe Fanon's writing as “... an eminently rigorous and exemplary scholarship which nonetheless speaks in lyrical

prose and transcendent poetry, able to reach an affective heart and an animating soul even as it does a thinking ego”. Much the same can be said of Levinas.

Yet, it is also true that there is always an excess, always more, and that any statement of similarity immediately buckles and gives way to difference and deferral. Both Levinas and Fanon were French subjects, for example, fought and sacrificed under the banner of the *tricolore* during World War II<sup>3</sup>, and whereas one could even say that they both suffered as “others” to France, “... Levinas as a Jew and Fanon as a black subject under French colonialism” (Prabhu, 2012, p. 127), the raced and colonized experience of that subjection for Fanon was of a sort that banalized all pretensions to simple similarity and the comparative equality of men<sup>4</sup>. One could say that both Fanon and Levinas are ultimately concerned with an ethics of responsibility, so emblematically captured by the respective epigrammatic quotes to this article. However, if the marching orders sound similar, the soldiering step and the battle for life will betray rather different stakes.

### The Ethical and Ethics, Politics and the Political

Saying that Levinas was far less interested in questions of politics than of ethics seems an

easy, even uncontroversial, characterization. He appears, Drabinski (2011, p. 1) writes, “utterly unaware of and unconcerned with the accusing face of the political,” while Caygill (2000, p. 6) finds Levinas's “critical neglect of the political dimension ... surprising,” especially given his closeness to the “convulsions of twentieth-century political history” and as the philosopher “most directly touched” by such history (p. 6). We would be sorely mistaken, though, if we are led to believe that Levinas has nothing, or little, to say, imply, or offer politics and/or the political. He, for example, studiously and deliberately avoided any direct mention or philosophical examination of the Holocaust/Shoah, but the “presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror” suffuses his oeuvre as it “dominated” his life (Levinas, 1997, p. 291). Politics and the political also permeate and percolate in the recurring references to justice, war, tyranny, morality<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, though, Levinas did comment on international and political events in several interviews. Some of those comments were rather unfortunate, unsavory and/or downright horrible<sup>6</sup>. Finally, some authors have argued, rather convincingly, that Levinas's so called Jewish/Talmudic and/or “confessional writings” (which he took great pains to keep separate from his philosophical work, even to the point of using a separate publisher) contain a rich source for an analysis and understanding of the political, and that it – as such – should really be read alongside the philosophical (see Alpert, 2015; Anderson, 2017; Eisenstadt, 2003). It thus seems

that, between saying Levinas does not say much of anything about the political because his focus is on transcendence and the ethical, on the one hand, or that everything he says about responsibility to the other bears upon the social relationship and the political (even if, or inclusive of, politics as problem), on the other, there is a much more complicated and nuanced space for exploration.

By way of a brief recapitulatory step, for Levinas, the ethical precedes the encounter with an other, as an infinite and transcendent “condition” of possibility for the finite and materialized “actual” encounter of the singular self with a singular other. This ethical responsibility for the other is anarchic, diachronic, imposed, asymmetrical, and an irrefusable obligation; as such it is not a function of any historical attribute, psychological quality, or sociopolitical context. It is there before, or more precisely, outside (an-archic) history and time, and before the appearance of the other as such; before culture, and before one notices the color of her eyes, or the hue of his skin. In fact, if one does notice the eyes, or the shape of the nose, one has entered into the spatial and the ontological, into comparison and adequation, engaged as one is in an appropriation into categories, schemas, and a totalizing same. Which is not to say that one can exhaust the other's alterity – s/he remains infinitely foreign. The face both “calls forth” and “tears itself away” from presence: One sees a face that can be described in material, categorical, and featured presence

2 Of course, in the manner of small degrees of separation, Levinas and Fanon were also “connected” through the relationships each respectively had with others – both Levinas and Fanon had individual and personal relationships with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, for example, and one cannot but wonder whether the other's name came up in such social and/or private conversations.

3 Levinas served in the Tenth Army, forced to surrender early in the war, upon which he was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp near Fallingbommel, in Germany. While his camp was a segregated one, containing only Jews, he was nonetheless shielded from extermination by the Nazis' strange observance of the protocols of the Geneva convention of 1929 regarding prisoners of war. Frantz Fanon served in the Free French Army, actively participated in the battles of Alsace, was wounded and received the *Croix de guerre* for heroism in combat.

4 Clearly “human being” could be used here, but I've retained the gendered pronoun to align it with the specific reference to Fanon and Levinas. Elsewhere in the paper, unless the quote is specifically so rendered, I use more inclusive gendered referents.

5 The powerful first lines of *Totality and Infinity* may serve as evidentiary reference par excellence: “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality. Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?” (Levinas, 2013, p. 21).

6 There is always a tricky tension between the writer and the work, the pronouncements and life of the writer and the message and mission of the writing, within which our search for conflict and/or correspondence needs a delicate and insightful scholarly hand. Too few scholars, in our view, have theorized this tension, and fewer still have done so well. A few noteworthy exceptions are Bernasconi (2005), Drabinski (2011), Maldonado-Torres (2012), Eisenstadt (2012).

– one with brown eyes, flattened lips, and a bulbous nose – but such features assume meaning not in terms of itself, as much as it does in relation to other eyes and noses and lips. Which is to say to categories in a system of spatial and temporal relations [“vision moves into grasp” (Levinas, 2013, p. 191)]. The fact remains that the singular face cannot be exhausted by “seeing,” and “knowledge” of vision as the signifying expression of the face “...is uncontainable ... leads you beyond ... makes it escape from being, as a correlate of knowing” (Levinas, 1982a, p. 87). Politics and the political would be such a comparison and adequation in which the singularity of the individual call and command is lost to the general and the law. By extension, to see a Black face or a woman in racism and sexism would be to betray the responsibility of the ethical call in totalizing, systematic violence; “the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity” (p. 86). Levinas reminds us, such that the “malignancy of evil” is a possible response to a face “...dominated by perception,” even if it “... cannot be reduced to that” (p. 86).

The ethical is, quite simply put, “first philosophy” from which all else (including politics and “political philosophy”) flows. Politics and the political comes “after”; it is already a “falling away” from the transcendent and infinite ethical demand into the totalizing and economic rule of law and accounting (economy), a movement from singularity to homogeneity, mutuality, and reciprocity. For it to apply “equally,” or “fairly,” the political law has to be blind to the particular individual, which, by the assumption of reciprocity, “... no longer involves generosity” (Levinas, 1999, p. 101) as much as it does calculation and exchange.

Whereas there are some subtle differences and shifts of emphases in Levinas’s conception of justice (and the political) between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, it is, for the most part, the presence of the third party “other than the neighbour but also another neighbour and also a neighbour of the other” which modifies and “widens” my responsibility in “the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?” (Levinas, 2004, p. 157)

The response, as serious and committed as it is, or needs to be, is nonetheless in the orbit of an ontology, and within a temporal and contextual presence; one in which the third, the neighbor of my neighbor, is of a distance that does not quite have the power to eviscerate me in the responsibility of the ethical infinite (Eisenstadt, 2012) incumbent on the face-to-face of the two. “To the extravagant generosity of the for-the-other is superimposed a reasonable order ... of justice through knowledge” (Levinas, 1996, p. 169). As such, for it to nonetheless gesture towards the ethical good, for it to retain some measure of the infinite saying in the political said, politics must be premised on the “firstness” of the ethical, and on “diachronic” justice that “passes by justice” and is “more ancient” than justice (Levinas, 2004, p. 158), a law that passes beyond laws (Levinas, 2013)<sup>7</sup>. Ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct; it is “dis-interestedness,” which is not indifference, but a form of vigilant passivity to the call of the other which precedes our interest in being.

Some rather well known scholars and philosophers have taken such Levinasian views on justice and the political to criti-

cal task<sup>8</sup>, but it is to Drabinski (2011), and Bernasconi (2005) that we turn briefly, both because they set the scene for Fanon well, and because they espouse a respectful wish not altogether dissimilar from ours: to pose Levinas’s very questions back to Levinas in the service of a “thought different from what can be found in his writings” (Bernasconi, 2005, p. 6), perhaps even to “radicalize Levinas” by uprooting some of the “... habits of Levinas’s own thought” (Drabinski, 2012, p. XIX)<sup>9</sup>. As such, Bernasconi questions the approach of the other outside of culture, arguing that to do so is to repeat and perpetuate a violent and abstract humanism that “reduces the other to nothing more than a man” (2005, p.17). To argue a face without characteristics, and a non-particular, “abstract,” trans-individual universal “humanity” – even by the radical proposition of this face as ethically prior to the I - is effectively to argue a white, male, European face. The Black who attempts to live thus, “simply as a human being ... soon discovers that to do so calls for living simply as a white” (Gordon, 2005, p. 4). It is possible, now, to levy the argument that, “despite every appearance to the contrary, Levinas’ philosophy is politics in the purest sense” (Froese, 2019, p. 7). For Fanon, the conquering and colonial European promise, to “become like me to be a man,” is not only a false and impossible one

for the Black, inherently and foundationally inassimilable to white Europe, but is also the way in which Europe absolves itself precisely from responsibility, from itself. Moreover, Drabinski (2011) argues that Levinas allows for two kinds of others – those who are near, to whom I am kin, and responsible, and those who “appear as radical and alien,” and who could be an enemy (we revisit this suspicion, later in the paper). As such, there opens up an “epistemological distance” between a center and a periphery, the latter of which waits for a responsibility which does not arrive (Froese, 2019). By this reading, the refrain of Bernasconi’s question, who is my neighbour?, may well render the philosophical answer of (European) kin, kith, and the familiar and proximate same.

Yet, there is also no denying that Levinas’s account of justice is a thoughtful and challenging one. We tend to think of justice as the pursuit of rights, as a question of fair and equitable distribution of privileges, and as a mirror to the state or institution’s moral character. But by linking justice to ethics and responsibility, and providing it with a rich and depthful philosophical grounding, Levinas actually does more for the term than we pay it common due: He shows how justice is incumbent on each of us, and pulls the rug out from under us when we shirk or otherwise

7 A simpler, albeit perhaps polemical, way of restating this sentiment may be to say that Levinas wishes the (western/european philosophical) knowledge of Athens be informed and even relativized by the (western/european biblical) wisdom of Jerusalem.

8 These include Eagleton (for whom the Levinasian focus is “self defeating and ineffectual” as it turns politics into “... the problem, not the solution” (2009, p. 233), Žižek (for whom the Levinasian distinction needs to be upended, in a choice “against the face, for the third” (2005, p. 183, emphasis in original), or Reinhard (who also argues for a reversal, such that the political, in fact, “... is the condition of the ethical ... the two can only be created by passing through the three” (2005, p.49, emphasis in original).

9 Levinas himself, in the often contradictory or opaque style he is known for, provides ample ground for re-reading and re-interpretation. For example, there is a nuanced shift from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*, in the emphasis on substitution and proximity in the latter. As such, Bloechl is able to argue, with Levinas’s own words, that “The face is both the neighbor and the face of all faces” (Levinas, 2004, p. 160), or “The third looks to me in the eyes of the Other ... It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice” (Levinas, 2013, p. 213). As such, “... in the human face, I am commanded by all the Others at once” (Bloechl, 2000, p. 143), and “my obligation to my neighbor, no longer the abstract other, but a real person near me” (Alford, 2004, p.164) is compelled by the third who was “there” “all along”.

give to others – the police, the legislature, the other who will vote – the responsibility which is each of ours, singularly. Inasmuch as I live an asymmetrical and infinite responsibility without content, and inasmuch as I am elected and assigned to such responsibility in a way that nobody else can answer for me, responsibility in justice particularizes me, accuses me, at every instant: “It is not the last judgment that is decisive, but the judgment of all the instants in time, when the living are judged” (Levinas, 2013, p. 23). In this sense, his is a radical and activist position, one in which “I am called to act as a prophet in order to call the State to greater justice, to respond to the other beyond the call of law” (Wolff, 2011, p. 26).

Even so, Levinas’s justice requires the visibility of faces, and the very fact of seeing, notwithstanding his charge to see without seeing. As a question of justice, what justice is to me, it is a face that poses the question to me. I am born to justice by someone who “... has already presented himself ... as a face” (Levinas, 2013, p. 177). Hence, even conceding the question’s anarchic and diachronic (non)address, outside of history and place, as the question of the human (my humanity authorized), the addressee is in history and the material present (my humanity authored). The ethical call may precede the self’s encounter with the other, but it is only in the encounter with the other that the self can be ethical. One is reminded of Derrida’s quip with respect to Heidegger’s *Dasein*: that *Dasein* is not human being, but neither is it anything but. In a similar vein, the face of the other is not the face that appears, but neither is it anything but. Could we not argue, now, that the Levinasian ethical command is (also) political; that “... to welcome the widow, orphan, or stranger ... is already implicated in a political world” (Drabinski, 2011, p. 189). In fact, by Levinas’s own formulation of the neighbor, there is no single aspect of existence without the plurality of others, such that the

obligation to justice may be no less of a first question than ethics, and “... all responsibility has to be borne politically” (Wolff, 2011, p. 25).

Perhaps no philosopher or scholar makes this point as powerfully as Frantz Fanon. It is fine and well for Levinas to say that if one sees the shape of the face, the droop of the eyes – and presumably the color of the skin or the thickness of the lips – that one is not seeing the face as transcendent command. Racism would be a violence against the other, and a betrayal of ethical responsibility, if not humanity. Surely a laudable position, with nothing to find fault with, except the assumption, Fanon reminds us, that the Black appear as a man, as a human.

For there to be an ethical relation, there has to be an (human) other, with a (human) face. The fact of the matter is that the Black does not appear as a human; he is “... the very prototype of the animal ... no more than a ‘body-thing’ ... neither the substrate nor the affirmation of any mind or spirit” (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 26-27). A “phobogenic object”, the Black has no subjectivity, only materialized objecthood and a canvas for the projections of the white (Fanon, 1967). The Black enters, not as a man, “... but a new type of man, a new genus. Why, a Negro!” (Fanon, 1967, p. 116). As one of an indistinguishable number, within a swarm of nameless, faceless, Blacks, his alienation is never his to bear, alone [Homi Bhabha recounts an illustrative utterance to an “innocent” Black man by the police, after being manhandled: “well, you may not be the criminal, but you look like him” (Bhabha, 2021)].

As an object, and without a face, the Black is a being which issues no ethical command, cannot order or ordain. His appearance does not even solicit the ontological resistance of murder, in the Levinasian pronouncement of the face that cannot be killed inasmuch as killing is to totalize and grasp

completely what cannot be grasped. “The Black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (Fanon, 1967, p. 110) such that the explanations and philosophies of Europe must concede “... an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation” (1967, p. 110) of the Black and colonized man. “The European knows and does not know” (Fanon, 1967).

Let us recall a pithy and concise definition of Levinas’s for the face: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name the face” (2013, p. 7). The Black’s appearance cannot be of this ex-cendent sort, from the beginning. What appears, in the Fanonian moment, is not the exorbitant Levinasian human of the instant, outside of time or place. Fanon’s Black is already there, having appeared before he does, woven as he is from myth, story, and history. His is not the human of the instant, but the Black too late on the scene. He does not make meaning for himself, it is already there, before him: “I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me ...The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim” (Fanon, 1967, p. 140). The appearance of the Black to the white is pre-reflective and pre-linguistic [“... children know that innocence is not black” (Sexton, 2015, p. 161)]. As such it is not a simple matter of phenomenological meaning making in the face of the face, and for the Black, politics is not a response to the presence of the moment, but an always belated striving for a freedom the “existentialists” presume as an existential given, “prior” to the existent, and Levinas for a hypostatic existent, made “human” by the ethical command of the other. The Levinasian two, when it involves the black and the white, “... is just an occasion for the reproduction of a relational mode whose forms are already fixed, under conditions that traditional ontology is incapable

of accounting for” (Macherey, 2012, p. 17). The Black is unintelligible within the field of ontology (Warren, 2018), the lived experience of which proves an ontological dehiscence which cannot, consequently, be a simple falling away from infinity as a political and ontological betrayal.

Between the colonizing white and the colonized black there is a divide – they “reside in different zones of existence” (Anderson, 2017, p. 155). Fanon’s subject cannot attain to the transcendence of the infinite other, and the ethical imperative attendant upon such a command, as he is only “recuperated into ... knowable selfhood through objectification” (Prabhu, 2012, p. 130). The movement of the Black is not between totality and infinity, but between nothingness and infinity. Escape, for the Black, is not from Being, as Levinas’s (white) subject would have it, but from the zone of nonbeing (and/or, as I will argue later, from the *il y a*).

“I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep”. (Fanon, 1967, p. 140)

## The body (politic)

It is a particular hallmark of both Fanon and Levinas’s thought that they pay crucial and fundamental attention to the body. For Levinas, the body is both enchainment and possibility. The existent is “riveted” to its materiality – it does not exist as “spirit, or as a smile or a breath of air” (Levinas, 1987, p. 55), but is encumbered and occupied by the

solitude of a body which prevents the self fleeing from itself, even as it “... accompanies – necessarily – the upsurge of the subject in its existent freedom” (Levinas, 1987, p. 56). The body is the advent of consciousness – a concrete setting and localization. Consciousness (“the freedom of the Ego”) and materiality “go together” (Levinas, 1987, p. 57); the body is “the condition necessary for any inwardness. It does not express an event; it is itself this event” (Levinas, 2001a, p. 70). More familiar to us than any object in the world, we “...affirm ourselves in the unique warmth of our bodies long before any blossoming of the Self that claims to be separate from the body” (Levinas, 1990, p. 68). It is never the case that we relate to ourselves or the world without a body, so that “to be truly oneself,” is to become aware of, “and above all accepting” this “ineluctable original chain” of the body to consciousness (1990, p. 69). Levinas’s body is a human body, and has no other attributes (with the minor exception, perhaps, of *Totality and Infinity*, at least in the sense of a starving or vulnerable body). In fact, the one instance where Levinas addresses a raced body (in the German use of an “Aryan race”), is from the early (1934) paper, *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* (Levinas, 1990), where he argues that the German attempt to yoke a race to the body (politic) is precisely to deny human freedom, and the possibility of transcendence. It is to awaken a “secret nostalgia” and an “elemental evil,” a phrase we revisit later.

For Fanon, however, what Europe (and Levinas) forgets, is that “the Negro suffers

in his body quite differently from the white man” (Fanon, 1967, p. 138)<sup>10</sup>. For the Black, his “body might not be what it should be, the body of a man” (Khalifa, 2021, p. 48). In the struggle for life, in the enchained upsurge of its egoism, the Black does not discover a soul, or experience the existential egoism of a freedom to be. Sitting down next to a fire<sup>11</sup>, “I ... discover my livery for the first time ... It is indeed ugly” (Fanon, 1967, p. 114)<sup>12</sup>. Mere livery, skin and flesh haunted and infected by a “corporeal malediction” which devastates a body “proper to the human,” a general, human(istic) “corporeal schema” which assumes a human position in the world, in space, and in relation to the self in the world, cannot be for the Black. Theirs is also to bear the crushing burden of a “historico-racial schema” [the elements of which “had been provided for me ... by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (Fanon, 1967, p. 111)], and a “racial epidermal schema” [by which “In the train, it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. I was given not one but two, three places” (Fanon, 1967, p. 112)].

There are a series of well-known experiments and “tests” in developmental psychology by which researchers mark whether the child has a sense of itself and its body as belonging, as its own. Known as “rouge tests,” such a study might involve children playing in a room with one or more mirrors, while a researcher at some point unobtrusively places a red dot (a splotch of coloring, a sticker) on

the child’s forehead (e.g. Amsterdam, 1972). Upon encountering her reflection hereafter, the child that has a sense of self (concept/recognition/awareness) will stop, perhaps with a perplexed frown, reach up to the dot, maybe even try to rub it off. They are aware that the dot does not belong, is not (part of) them, is other and alien. The Black’s whole body and flesh is such a dot, ineradicable by the spit and spittle of an ego, or a soul swiping left. Sealed “into that crushing objecthood” by the white, Fanon is “abraded into nonbeing” (p.109). The very corporeality of the human that Merleau-Ponty (whom Fanon responds to, particularly) – and, we argue Levinas as well – assumes is “nullified and rendered naïve by the Black experience” (Weate, 2021, p. 168).

In the return of the Black body, amputated, splayed, fragmented, and disfigured, he is always “there,” never “here,” never at home, never able to appear as “himself,” as “herself.” The Black drives as black, enters the corporate boardroom as black, “enjoys” empty seats beside him or her on a crowded bus, smiles wryly as car doors are locked when he crosses the pedestrian walkway, and gasps breathlessly under the knee on his neck. “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened” (Fanon, 1967, p. 112).

## The Il y a and the Zone of Nonbeing

The bulk of Levinasian scholarship focuses on his so called mature works, *Totality and Infinity*, and *Otherwise than Being*, bookends of sorts for his innovative and radical thought of ethics as first philosophy. Much less attention (in general, but particularly so in psychology) is

paid to the early work, notably *Existence and Existents* (2001) and *Time and the Other* (1987). This should not be taken to mean that these works were “surpassed,” or that Levinas came to distance himself from it. In fact, quite the opposite – he assumed the truth of that early work as continuing backdrop to his unfolding thought without having to revisit it necessarily. It is to those early texts that we turn for an articulation of the il y a, or “there is”, and with which to bring Fanon and the zone of nonbeing into dialogue.

The ontological difference, between being and Being (or in Levinas’s rephrasing, the difference between existent and existence), frame his project, particularly by the reversal of the Heideggerian emphasis on anxiety and Dasein, to Levinas’s focus on Being in general, and the emergence of the existent in hypostasis, “where it is not a question of anxiety,”<sup>13</sup> but of a horror before and in existence. When the world disappears, “there is” a bare existence that is not nothing. “This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term ‘there is’” (Levinas, 2001a, p. 52). Were one able to speak of the il y a as an “experience,” it would be like night, which “invades like a presence” but is not something, nor is it no-thing; like night, “it” is an absent presence which permeates, submerges, and “invades” one, “full of the nothingness of everything” (2001a, p. 53). Furthermore, like the dark silence that accompanies the child left alone in his or her bedroom after the adults have shut the door for the night, there is something menacing about this indeterminate presence

10 In the text, this quote is directly addressed to Jean Paul Sartre, but I have taken the liberty to read a metonymic Europe into it.

11 The suggestive reference here is likely to Descartes, whose body and soul emerges alongside his meditative and reflective fire. And, lest we forget, it is Descartes to whom Levinas turns for the inspirational “double origin” of the *cogito* in the I and in God (or the Infinite). From this “simple” allusive reference, Fanon challenges the very basis of both Descartes and Levinas’s insights.

12 In the Markmann translation, “uniform” is used instead of “livery”.

13 The first, French, edition of *Existence and Existents* was sold with a red band over the cover, on which this phrase was emblazoned, presumably a marketing alert to the prospective buyer of a contrary emphasis to the prevailing Heideggerian: in a simplistic nutshell, if Heidegger’s interest is in the movement from beings (existents) to Being (existence), Levinas would reverse this, for the way of truth from existence to existents (*De l’existence a l’existant*), “where it is not a question of anxiety” (the English translation does not quite pick up the French title’s suggestion of direction).



(Baumgartner, 2005), and of what may lurk unseen in its fold, the “things that go bump in the night.”<sup>14</sup> “The rustling of there is ... is horror” (Levinas, 2001a), the “... name of a dark and chaotic indeterminacy that precedes all creativity and goodness” (Peperzak, 1997, p. 3).

Now, “to be conscious is to be torn away from the there is, since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, a subject of existence that is, to some extent, a master of being, already a name in the anonymity of the night” (Levinas, 2001a, p. 55). Consciousness is the emergence of the I from the anonymity of the “there is” to stake a place, a position, a “here”; that is, to ex-ist, which is to come forth and “take a stand” (ex- + sistere). Levinas calls this positioning hypostasis, which, while still before every act of understanding, as a certain wakefulness, is nonetheless also the advent of consciousness, whereby existence is accomplished. The existent masters existence in consciousness, but carries the weight of existence by the same act and movement. Put another way, whereas one “escapes” the indeterminate horror of existence in consciousness, one never does; consciousness is not the vanquishing hero whose victory is realized in the instant of the decisive battle, but rather the price of victory which inaugurates the burden and labor of rule. The price of consciousness is the solitude of existence, from which there is no escape.

But it is precisely that the existent desires an escape from the menace and insecurity of

its exposure to the indeterminacy of existence. S/he wishes to escape the brute weight of existence, to reach elsewhere, to a salvific transcendence beyond solitude. We do not have the space to review the ways in which the existent attempts an escape from existence (for example, by the grasp of labor, knowledge, possession, enjoyment, the dwelling, fraternity, and fecundity)<sup>15</sup>, but to say that – with the exception, precisely, of fraternity and fecundity – the Black can stand in as examples of appropriative use in each case and attempt. We return to this point shortly.

There is a certain similarity, a rather striking likeness, between the il y a and the zone of nonbeing for the Black. By a contemporary reference, if not analogy or even representation, the “sunken place” depicted in the movie “Get Out” by Jordan Peele (2017), vividly presents the experience of the Black – not quite dead, nor living, thoroughly encased within the body, put to utilitarian service for the white’s fuller enjoyment of life by the Black’s “living” entombment in the sunken place. We would be startled indeed to read, alongside Peele’s depiction of the sunken place, Levinas’s description of the there is, as “... the place where everything has sunk away, as a density of atmosphere” (Levinas, 1987, pp. 25-26).

If, now, the fact of Blackness, or the lived experience of the Black<sup>16</sup>, is of a sort appropriate to the elemental il y a, a zone of nonbeing, two questions impose themselves. Firstly,

does the Black appear as zombie, as a kind of living dead non-human human, from the il y a? Or is it that the Black is banished to the il y a from the living present? Again, does the Black, as the quintessence of horror and evil, arrive as such from the il y a, a phobogenic object as such, or is the Black banished to the elemental, a creature of Dr. Frankenstein’s creation, “so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust ... my form ... a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance” (Shelley, 2021, p. 80)<sup>17</sup>. We may perhaps fruitfully think of those two questions, if not moments, in terms of the philosophical and the psychological.

### The Philosophical Moment: The Black Emerges from the Il y a

We’ve already argued the appearance of the Black as not quite human, and we’ve referenced several scholars who have taken Levinas to task for his insistence that the existent who appears into existence is a universal human, “... free in his relations with the world and the possibilities that solicit action from him” (Levinas, 1990, p. 64). Extending the mark of the beast, so to speak, to a broader “non-European,” the Latin American philosopher, Enrique Dussel, writes that “Levinas always speaks of the other as ‘the absolute other’ ... he has never thought that the other

could be Indio, African, or Asian ... Not even Levinas has been able to transcend Europe. We are the ones born outside, we have suffered it” (Dussel, 1974)<sup>18</sup>. If, for Levinas, the European tension, such as it is, is between Athens and Jerusalem, between the Greeks and the Bible, he also presents it as humanity’s tension: “I always say – but under my breath – that the Bible and the Greeks present the only serious issues in human life; everything else is dancing ...” (Levinas, 2001b, p. 149). Now, is it not possible that, “in alterity we can find an enemy”? (Caygill, 2002, p. 1).

In an early paper, written shortly after Hitler came to power, Levinas argues that Hitler has awakened an “elemental feeling” within the German populace, based as it was on “primitive powers” (Levinas, 1990). What connects this early essay and statements of “dancing primitives” and “the asiatic peril”<sup>19</sup> in the latter part of his life, is that these peoples are too attached “...to the elements, to the earth, to the body. They cannot get out of being.” (Alpert, 2015, p. 22). Like the pagan, they lack transcendence and are bound to the instinctual and a failure of ethical subjectivity – a failure that presumably also enabled the horror of the Shoah. Hitler’s moment, though, can be thought as a temporary failing, a historical aberration given that ethical subjectivity, wrought by the yoke of Athens

14 Keep in mind that, by the analogy of night and day, the light of day cannot rid itself entirely of the pall of night, as in dark alleys or basements, fleeting shadows in corners of parks, or in the recesses of woods and bushes.

15 See *Existence and Existents, Time and the Other*, but also Section II of *Totality and Infinity*, where the il y a appears in the form of the elemental.

16 “The Fact of Blackness” is how that most famous chapter 5 of *Black Skin White Masks* is titled, but also one which has drawn quite vocal ire from some scholars as an erroneous translation. The more correct rendition, they argue, would be “The lived experience of the Black”. For our purposes here, both versions are actually quite apropos.

17 Often forgotten or lost in translation, Mary Shelley’s full title, tellingly appropriate in so many ways to our argument here, was *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

18 There is a simultaneously inspiring and disappointing connection between Dussel and Levinas, who knew each other from their participation in an intensive seminar at Louvain, in 1972. “As a South American,” Dussel asked Levinas if the “fifteen million Indians slaughtered during the conquest of Latin America, and the thirteen million Africans who were made slaves” were as other to Levinas as the victims of Anti-Semitism (Dussel, 1999, p. 125). To which Levinas responded, “That’s something for you to think about” (pp. 125-126). Which Dussel did, in his “Liberation Philosophy,” which transforms Levinas’s absolute alterity to proximate exteriority, to a philosophizing from the position of the damned. It is abundantly clear that Dussel is as inspired and informed by Fanon as he is by Levinas.

19 Caygill (2002) analyzes and lists a range of such statements from various essays and interviews, for example of “innumerable masses advancing out of Asia”, or the “yellow peril” which is “not racial, it is spiritual” and whom eschews a “radical strangeness” where “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob no longer mean anything” (pp. 182-194).

and Jerusalem, is precisely Europe's gift of humanity, Europe's disjoining of spirit from body, making room as such for transcendence [Levinas argues thus in another early paper, from 1935, *On Escape* (Levinas, 1982b)]. It is not our intention (well, not primarily) to "trot out" these statements to the end of "moralizing gasps" (Drabinski, 2011, p. vi), but (also) to question how these statements are betrayed in the philosophy itself. As such, may we read Levinas to suggest that there are others, other others, whose alterity does not quite evoke an ethical command, their appearance being "radically strange," lacking as they do, a "sacred history," and being too closely beholden to "instinctual passions," rendering them incapable of ethical transcendence and subjectivity. Not quite capable yet of ex-cendence in hypostasis from the elemental, "They cry in another way"<sup>20</sup> (Emmanuel Levinas, 2001b).

We can play with, and develop, this idea even further. If the face contains the trace of the infinite, there needs to be a translation of this Saying into a Said (by the later, most mature version of the ethical moment, in *Otherwise than Being*), one which - by Levinas's own admission - contains a betrayal and treason. Hence, Levinas avers, everything needs to be continually "unsaid". But can't one argue, then, that the ethical action is always already premised on betrayal. If everything needs to be unsaid, in and by a constant unsaying, the only means for which is in ontology, in action, in the social, for Levinas to say that "politics left to itself bears a tyranny in itself" (Levinas, 1984, p. 66) may well be to misplace the treasonous moment: politics as tyranny may well be an extension/expression/disfigurement not of itself, but of the aporetic betrayal at the heart of translation. The very metaphysical command of responsibility

already carries betrayal, already carries the mark of its betrayal; goodness is already sullied. The Saying, for it to have any meaning, is premised on treason, is - from the beginning - "compromised" by an auto-immune "impurity". Rather than a betrayal of the pure infinite in the totalizing here below, the infinite already comes impure, as love does, and as the caress is only that because it can also grasp.

Levinas's transcendence is a transcendence, to the infinite of the otherwise than being. He clarifies his indebtedness to Jean Wahl for this term, and he uses it in a way always associated with an ascendant reaching to an infinite elsewhere, "above". Fanon also uses the term transcendence, and eerily enough, also acknowledges, in a footnote, his debt to Wahl ["between the white man and me there is irremediably a relationship of transcendence" (Fanon, 1967, p. 138)]. In Fanon's hands, though, to the elsewhere "above," there is an elsewhere "below," a transdescendence of social death and civiliter mortuus [a legal term, meaning a civil death, applied to the convict who, by his transgression, dies to civil rights and "... his estate, if he has any, is administered like that of a dead man" (Weier, 2014, p. 421)]. At the very instance of creation, the Black bears the mark of creation's violence. The Black is black before the will, faceless not by the movement of an ego; a natal alienation. If ontology is, in Levinas's description, an "indispensable ancillary," a servant, to ethics, it may well be less that the servant performs the master's command ineffectually, or betrays it in a less than able manner, than that the master's command is already treasonous.

Would Levinas himself concede a reading as above? Probably not, but then he

also writes, in a prefatory note (in 1990) to the republication of his essay on Hitlerism, which we referenced above, that there is "... the essential possibility of elemental Evil ... inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being" (Levinas, 1990, prefatory note), and against which Western philosophy needs to insure itself by not forgetting its allied, sacred imperative.

### The Psychological Moment: The Black is Returned to the Il y a

Levinas was famously skeptical of, and resistant to, psychology. It even seems that he studiously and deliberately avoided reading Freud, for example, let alone engage with psychoanalysis in his thinking. We argue, though, that if one was to accept Levinas's conception of justice, and of racism as a betrayal of the ethical imperative, the processes of this operation can only be understood more fully by recourse to psychology.

The things of enjoyment come from a background and return to it, Levinas says. The existent appropriates, works over, and satiates itself in existence; s/he crafts a home, with windows and a door as bulwark and edge to the ever present threat of the elemental, which continue to gnaw at the window panes and rattle the doors of the dwelling. The terror of the elemental is kept at bay by knowledge and labor, which is to turn objects into use. The Black fulfills this function splendidly - the relation with the black is not an ethical one, but a functional one. Yet, lest one forgets, to the mastery of the elemental there is also the enjoyment of life. The elemental is to be worked over, to be sure, but also to be enjoyed. The burden of existence demands as much of the ego and reason to fashion an edge onto the elemental as it does a heart and affect with which to master its threat and terror. The whole psychological apparatus thus falls into place in the dynamics of projection, fantasy, death

anxiety, psychoanalysis, and any number such explanations. "Ontologically pliable ... a thing to be scripted in the inverse image of whiteness" (Yancy, 2005, p. 222), the Black is conjured and formed into "a niggerized body," the processes by which this branding occurs having been, and continuing to be, theorized from within psychology already. Fanon himself has certainly done yeoman's work in this regard already - lest we forget, of the black-white relation in the colony, "... only a psychoanalytical interpretation ... can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex" (Fanon, 1967, p. 10), albeit, we hasten to add, a psychoanalysis and psychology rooted in the socius as much as the psyche.

### Finally ...

Clearly the two moments we've highlighted above serve a heuristic purpose. The point is precisely that those two moments are really to be thought together. For example, the emergence from the il y a (or from the elemental unconscious) happens in time, where the black is already ontologically closed (off) from the call of love. That is, even if Levinas's eschatology is not of some teleological future (where racism is eradicated and educational programs will have prepared an egalitarian society where we can live in the judgment of our character), but rather "a disturbance or interruption of the present", the instant cannot but include the faceless, non human Black who has already, in the hypostatic separation from the il y a, attained passage into existence by a structural, philosophical, and psychological betrayal. If the instance of the instant, the verb of the to do, involves translation, as it must, it is already wholly suffused with time and history. And "if the third party was absent from the face to face, in the face of the Other I would be absolved from all my commitments and obligations to everyone else. Because the third party is already located within the face to face, the passage from

20 Levinas refers here to televised images of Black South Africans "dancing" at a funeral.



ethics to politics is immanent.” (Bernasconi, 1999, p. 76). There is, consequently, “... no time before the question of justice” (Wolff, 2011, p. 153), and if the messianism of the saying is of such an aporetic, then the only task is of a working in the present, which is to say a politics.

There is certainly much to learn from Levinas, and great fruitfulness in the exercise that poses Levinas’s questions back to Levinas. But even more, we hope to have illustrated, by putting Fanon’s questions to Levinas, by bringing the colony (which, Fanon teaches us, is a structure, not a geography) and the Black to Levinas’s neighborhood. To Athens and Jerusalem, also the traveler from Great Zimbabwe.

From the despondency which leaves him weeping at the end of Chapter 5, between nothingness and infinity, Fanon ends *Black Skin White Masks* with a liberatory hope, a prayer, to the selfsame enchained and embattled Black body now also the vehicle for escape from the sunken place and the fixity of the white’s Medusan face. We would like to conclude as he does, and well without analysis or commentary.

“My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions” (Fanon, 1967, p. 232).

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