

PLATO AND LEVINAS ON VIOLENCE AND THE OTHER

Deborah Achtenberg (University of Nevada, Reno)

In this essay, I shall describe both Plato and Levinas as philosophers of the other, and delineate their similarities and differences on violence. In doing so, I will open up for broader reflection two importantly contrasting ways in which the self is essentially responsive to—as well as vulnerable to violence from—the other. I will also suggest a new way of situating Levinas in the history of philosophy, not, as he himself suggests, as one of the few in the history of philosophy who has a philosophy of the other but, instead, as one of a number of 20th century philosophers who turn to pre-modern thinkers for aid in critiquing early modern thought on a variety of topics, including whether the self is essentially closed or, instead, vulnerable, open and responsive to what is outside it.

In one direction, relationships point to violence. For, what does the presence of an other hold out for me? Will the other harm me, destroy me, subsume me, overwhelm me? Or will the other help me flourish, help me develop or grow, let me be, let me be me? Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, and Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, are concerned with this issue.¹ But their treatment of it strikingly differs. For Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, reason makes possible a contrast between love and assaultive *hybris*. For Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, we must go beyond reason to avoid violence. Why are their views on violence so different? Answers revolve around their different treatments of being, desire and cognition. For Plato, being is transcendent and immanent, thus shareable, and desire is cognitively intentional, as such the source of our ability to share with one another the shareable aspects of being. Since

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 2, (ed.) J. Burnet, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1993, 1961) tr. by A. Lingis as *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2000, 1969). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TI. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the English, then to the French text.

desire, for him, is for sharable being, my relation to an other need not be a violent, zero-sum game. For Levinas, being is transcendent, not immanent—it includes a multiplicity of separate and singular entities that cannot be cognised or comprehended—and desire is non-cognitive openness which makes pacific relations to singular others possible. Since desire, for him, is a non-cognitive relation to an utterly transcendent other—to an other who, as transcendent, can neither be subsumed by me nor a threat to me—my relations to him or her need not be violent.

The similarities in Plato and Levinas' views on violence are equally striking. Each thinker is concerned about ordinary, concrete violence, such as rape for Plato and war for Levinas. Each focusses on essential human vulnerability—described by Plato as being wounded, knocked out and falling on your back and by Levinas as being hollowed out and wounded or tenderised—and thinks such vulnerability is key to overcoming concrete violence. Each, in other words, adduces a figurative type of violence as the solution to the problem of ordinary or concrete violence.² In fact, for each of them, delineating this figurative violence and distinguishing it from violence in a more ordinary sense is a major task or goal. For Plato, this figurative violence is described metaphorically as being wounded, knocked out and falling on your back, in descriptions that suggest both being overcome and letting something in. Levinas uses similar terms, such as *wounded*, *hollowed out* or *tenderised*, and, in addition, calls the figurative violence *essential violence* since, in allowing yourself to be vulnerable to it, your going on being *what you are* is interrupted or violated. Each thinker counsels such openness, vulnerability or wound, even though it is frighteningly similar to our vulnerability to rape or to the violence of war, in part because such openness promises great human goods to those who can overcome their

²That this vulnerability, figuratively understood as violence, is not violence in an ordinary, concrete sense, is clarified by an interchange between Levinas and an audience member at the University of Leyden in 1975: “AUDIENCE. If I am vulnerable, as you emphasize in your books, how can I be responsible? If one suffers, one can no longer do anything. E.L. By vulnerability, I am attempting to describe the subject as passivity.” Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998, 1982), 133, tr. by B. Bergo as *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 83.

fear of it.³ If we allow ourselves to be vulnerable or wounded in this figurative sense, they suggest, we will experience not violence but beauty for Plato, not violence but a new dimension or a teaching for Levinas. Each thinker, then, rejects the ideal of utter human self-sufficiency and instead favours responsiveness, in part since each believes that, through opening ourselves to what is external to us, we achieve great human goods. Finally and centrally, each, in addition, sees responsiveness as leading to or being constitutive of service—Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, speaks of being affected by and also having a fecund relation to the other and Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, of being moved by and also serving or being a slave to the other.

³The view that Levinas thinks openness brings something good to the one who is open is counter to the more common assumption that, for Levinas, my responsible relation to the other fundamentally does violence to me. It is my view, counter to this, that for Levinas, though my relation to the other is all about the other, it nonetheless also brings a good for me. This view of his is more evident in *Totality and Infinity*, where he uses terms such as *marvel*, *new dimension* and *teaching*, but is also found in *Otherwise Than Being*, specifically in the concept of *glory*, despite the later work's greater emphasis on responsibility and its backgrounding of desire, a term central to *Totality and Infinity*. The concept of glory, in a Hebraic register, denotes a type of immanent good. Why Levinas emphasises responsibility and backgrounds glory is one of the main topics of the last chapter, entitled "The Glory of the Infinite," of my book-in-progress on Plato and Levinas. The chapter also discusses a parallel foregrounding and backgrounding found in Levinas' essay "Loving the Torah more than God" where acceptance of the withdrawn God is in the foreground but gives one the standing to ask for a little of God's presence. A similar pattern, I maintain, is found in one interpretive strain in Jewish thought, a strain in which the holy is emphasised and glory mentioned but in hushed tones in order to de-emphasise it. Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement q'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) tr. by A. Lingis as *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1981). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OB. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the English, then to the French text. Emmanuel Levinas, "Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu," in *Difficile Liberté*, 189–93 (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995, 1963) tr. by Sean Hand as "Loving the Torah more than God," in *Difficult Liberty: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 142–145.

These similarities in Plato and Levinas' views are even more striking for us because Levinas himself does not see them. He sees Plato not as a philosopher of the other, but as a philosopher of freedom: "This primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching," Levinas says: "to receive nothing of the Other but what was in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside—to receive nothing, or to be free." (TI, 43/13–14) Levinas here mistakenly supposes that Socrates teaches us that thinking and knowing are a return to the self rather than vulnerability to what is outside us. The image of being knocked out and falling on your back suggests otherwise, as we will see in what follows.

In this essay, I shall describe both Plato and Levinas as philosophers of the other, and delineate their similarities and differences on violence. In doing so, I will open up for broader reflection two importantly contrasting ways in which the self is essentially responsive to—as well as vulnerable to violence from—the other. I will also suggest a new way of situating Levinas in the history of philosophy, not, as he himself suggests, as one of the few in the history of philosophy who has a philosophy of the other but, instead, as one of a number of 20th century philosophers who turn to pre-modern thinkers for aid in critiquing early modern thought on a variety of topics, including whether the self is essentially closed or, instead, vulnerable, open and responsive to what is outside it. As Heidegger—as well as some next generation thinkers such as Arendt and Strauss—turns to the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle, so Levinas turns to Hebrew thought. This way of situating Levinas leaves us with the task of sorting out the 20th century philosophic legacies of two similar and also very different pre-modern philosophies of the other, a task that in one rather traditional frame could be seen as part of deciding on, or synthesising, the 20th century legacies of Athens and Jerusalem. This essay carries out part of that task.⁴

⁴This essay is a version of chapter 1 of my book-in-progress, tentatively titled *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Levinas on Relations to the Other*. As readers familiar with Levinas' two major works will notice, the essay refers to Levinas' treatment of ideas in *Totality and Infinity*, the earlier of the two works. The first part of my book specifically deals with *Totality and Infinity* since it is in that work more than the later, *Otherwise Than Being*, that Levinas most concretely compares his work with Plato's and develops his own ideas in part out of that comparison. The first part has four chapters, each one containing an

1.

The *Phaedrus* includes a reference to rape near the beginning—when Phaedrus points out to Socrates their proximity to the site of Boreas’ mythical rape of Oreithyia, daughter of the king of Athens (229b4–5)—and ends with Phaedrus repeating the Greek proverb “the things of friends are in common.” (279c6–7) In this way, the dialogue is framed by two directions in which relationships point: in one direction toward the possibility of violence or a zero-sum game; in the other direction toward mutuality. The setting reflects these possibilities. Socrates and Phaedrus walk alone together, outside the city, by the river Ilissus, in the warmth of the noonday sun. They talk as they walk. At a certain point, Socrates lies down and they continue talking. What will happen between them? Who will get what from whom? Will one take advantage of the other?

Violence plays a role in other dramatic aspects of the dialogue as well. When Socrates tells Phaedrus that he does not think Lysias’ speech is good, Phaedrus playfully threatens to force Socrates to speak: “We two are alone in solitude, I am stronger and younger, and from all these things, ‘understand what I say to you’ and do not wish to speak as a consequence of violence rather than willingly.” (236c8–d3) Socrates gives his first speech and is ready to leave by crossing the river when Phaedrus encourages him to speak further. Socrates then charges Phaedrus with being the cause of a speech being made and Phaedrus responds by saying “You do not exactly announce a war!” (242b6) Phaedrus moves from pointing out the site of a mythical rape, to playfully threatening force against Socrates, to recognising that war and speech are opposites, to, at the end, declaring that loving relationships

extended interpretation of parts of one or more Platonic dialogues: Violence (*Phaedrus*), Freedom (*Meno, Republic*), Creation (*Symposium, Hippias Major*), Knowledge (*Theaetetus, Meno, Phaedrus, Gorgias*). The book’s second part treats *Otherwise Than Being*, showing how that work takes up similar Platonic themes but does so metaphysically rather than intertextually. Thanks to the University of Nevada, Reno, and to my department there, the Department of Philosophy, for providing me with a 2004–05 sabbatical leave during which I did the initial work contained in this essay, and to the University of California, Los Angeles, where, sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies, I was a Visiting Scholar during that same year.

involve a common third. What is suggested is that violence is a zero-sum game in which one benefits to the detriment of another and that its opposite is a situation in which two share in a common third, with the paradigmatic case being two people, such as Socrates and Phaedrus, sharing in a speech.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Phaedrus comes to Socrates with a speech in praise of non-lovers which he is intrigued by and wants to recite. Socrates' central criticism of the speech, written by Lysias, is that its main presuppositions about love (*eros*) and about the springs of human action are false. The speech, Socrates maintains, presupposes that love is the irrational desire for bodily pleasures and that there are only two sources of human action (237d6–7)—an innate desire for pleasures and acquired opinion that aims at what is best. Sometimes desire and opinion have the same goal, but sometimes they do not. (237d9–e1) For desire and rational opinion have no intimate connection. Desire is not shaped by reason but is irrational and has its own natural goal, while opinion has no intimate connection with desire and, when rational, comprehends what is good or just. When desire and opinion do not have the same object, one can control or master the other, and then the one in control is the source of our action. Moderation (*sōphrosynē*), a virtue, is one type of mastery or control, specifically, control by rational opinion which guides us toward what is best. *Hybris*, a vice, is the other kind, rule by irrational desire which drags us toward pleasures.⁵ There are a number of types of *hybris* or mastery of desire over reason (*logos*) including one that has to do with the pleasures of food, called *gluttony*; one that has to do with the pleasures of drink; and *eros* or love which has to do with the pleasures of bodily beauty, that is, with sex. In love, the desire for sex masters opinion that has an impulse toward what is right. (238b7–c4) With these presuppositions in mind, Socrates says, Lysias concludes that because love is a type of *hybris*, it is better to have a relationship with a non-lover than a lover since the non-lover will control his own desires and aim at what is good.

Socrates does not accept Lysias' account for he does not accept the idea of human self-sufficiency or control on which it rests. In his

⁵*Hybris* has a variety of meanings all suggesting a disposition to overstep limits: wantonness, wanton violence, arrogance, insolence, insult, violation, assault. The verbal form, *hybrizein*, can mean to rape someone.

own speech on love, the palinode, Socrates strikingly associates love with lack of control and being outside yourself. He associates love with being *moved*, with being *enthused* (that is, with having a god within), with being *enslaved*, with *awe* (254b8), *humility* (254e7) and, generally, *madness (mania)*. But he declares that “the greatest good things come to us by way of madness when, that is, it is given by the divine” (244a6–8) and that love is one example of such divine madness. The helmsman or governor of the soul, who is identified with reason (specifically, with *nous*), falls on his back at the sight of the beloved and then loves him and serves him. He is knocked out and no longer in the things of himself (250a6–7).

Given that Socrates is a rationalist, we might have thought that the picture of sober relationships drawn by Lysias would appeal to him. For, since European modernity, many philosophers have associated rationalism with control or mastery. Descartes, for example, associates his rationalism with mastery and possession of nature rather than with responsiveness to it. His method is a method of *conducting* reason, not of being conducted by it or by something else to it, and, for him, the ideas we know best are in the mind rather than mind being fundamentally in relation to something outside itself. Cartesian reason is autonomous and the Cartesian self is closed, not transcendent. Cartesian philosophy announces the self-sufficiency of the self and of reason.

Socrates’ view of love reflects a different view of reason and the self. For him, a certain type of madness or being out of your mind is preferable to sober moderation. Eros, according to Socrates, is not simply the desire for the pleasures associated with beautiful bodies but a type of divine madness; it pulls you out of your self (ecstasy) and draws you up (transcendence). Moreover, though eros is madness, it is not irrational. Instead, in eros, two lovers together cognise beauty. They cognise what really is. The ecstatic madness of eros leads lovers to the most important kind of rationality, a responsive rationality that is a simple beholding of what is.

To illustrate this, Socrates compares our soul to a chariot with a team of winged horses, which represent spirited and erotic passions, and a winged charioteer, which represents reason (*nous*).⁶ The beautiful and

⁶At 246b1–2, Socrates refers to the charioteer as the ruler of the soul: “the ruler holds the reins of the pair (*ho archōn synōridos hēniochei*).” At 247c7–8, he

good horse is a lover of honour who has moderation and shame; is a comrade of genuine reputation⁷; and is driven by commands and speech alone. The bad horse, snub-nosed like Socrates, is a comrade of *hybris* and boasting, deaf and barely yielding to whip and goads. When we see beauty in the world, we discern its likeness to the eternal beauty we saw before we were born. We are drawn up to something outside ourselves. We want to fly upward and see that beauty, the very form of beauty. When the lover sees a beautiful youth, the hybristic and boastful erotic horse jumps on the youth and, carried along by violence, pulls them all forward to mention the pleasures of sexual gratification. At the same time, the honour-loving spirited horse, since he loves moderation and shame and cares about true reputation, due to shame refrains from going forward and pulls them all back. They struggle again and again, until the snub-nosed erotic horse wins out and leads them to the boyfriend whose face flashes like lightning. The charioteer, seeing the bright boy, remembers beauty itself and, in fear and awe, falls on his back. (254b7–8) He is knocked out and no longer in the things of himself.⁸ (250a6–7) His fall compels him to pull back on the reins and restrain the horses. He restrains the unruly horses again and again, until the charioteer wins out and the erotic horse is humbled and follows the charioteer's forethought (*pronoia*). Then the soul of the lover follows the beloved with shame and fear and serves the beloved's needs. He even serves like a slave to him. The youth, seeing the service, is knocked out, and experiences love in return. The two share in the vision of the beautiful that flows between them. In the best love, their wings grow and they both ascend to the beautiful itself through the activity of philosophising together. (253c7–257b6)

calls *nous* the soul's governor or helmsman: "really existing being, visible alone to reason, governor of the soul (*psychēs kybernētēi monō theatēi nōi*)."

⁷Since I see Socrates making one to one comparisons—moderation and shame to *hybris*, genuine reputation to boasting, driven by commands and speech alone to deaf and barely yielding to whip and goads—I translate *alēthinēs doxēs* as "of true reputation." Love of honor (*philotimia*) is left out of the comparison due to the fact that Socrates is describing the *virtue* of the good and bad horses so that the sense is: though he is a lover of honor, nonetheless he has moderation and shame.

⁸Though this comes from a slightly earlier part of his speech, in it, Socrates is talking about a lover. (249e4)

Socrates' palinode requires interpretation. The ascent to the hyperouranian place is recollection where recollection is spelled out by Socrates in the dialogue as understanding what is said according to form, moving from multiple perceptions to what is gathered into one by reasoning (*logismoi*). (249b6–c4) Recollection, in other words, is, roughly, movement from perception to the conception or idea implicit in it. When the lover sees the lovely youth, his reaction is not just to the boy's body, but also to the boy's beauty, beauty that shines through him or, more mundanely, beauty of which the beautiful youth is a visible example or instance. As recollection is movement from perception to the conception or idea implicit in it so, Socrates indicates, love is not an entirely bodily experience, but also is cognitively intentional. I love and desire the beauty that is in and beyond the boy and his body. Love and desire are not simply brute response, in other words, but are cognitively intentional. They are response to the beauty I perceive in the boy.

In intimate relations, then, violence is one possibility, non-violence another. Violence results from uncontrolled desire, specifically from uncontrolled desire for the pleasures associated with bodily beauty. Such desire overcomes any rational opinion about what is good and results in using the other for one's own self-satisfaction at the other's expense. The dialogue's frame suggests rape as a paradigm case of such violence. One type of non-violence results from Lysian virtue understood as the tense control of reason, which aims at what is good, over desire, which has a different object. Such control, though, is unstable, given the lack of connection between desire and reason. Socrates describes another, more stable and complete type of non-violence, one that comes through an astonishing mutuality in love, contrary to the normative pattern between lovers and youths in Athens. Socrates says the boy feels love in return but calls it friendship, since he does not comprehend it. Both feel intense love because of the form of beauty that flows between them.⁹ (255c4ff.) For Socrates, then, the two come together over a common third, the form of beauty, which they both behold. In love, two come together over something beautiful and good that can be shared. Since a form is both in and beyond one who knows it, it can be shared by another who knows it as well. This is one of

⁹Regarding the boy, Socrates refers to "the flow of beauty going back into the beautiful one through the eyes." (255c4)

Socrates' great discoveries, and the core of his solution to the problem of violence in relationships. Since being is fundamentally shareable, non-violence is possible. The soul need not be a closed and masterful Cartesian self but, in knowledge and in love, can be and is open and vulnerable. Vulnerable to the boy's beauty, the soul opens to the very idea of that beauty and shares it, non-violently, with the boy.

Socrates' account of love points to his notion of being. Being, for him, is fundamentally ecstatic or transcendent. Things are and are not what they are since their real being is the form in which they participate but with which they do not fully coincide. The very being of things transcends them. The transcendence is not utter transcendence, though, since things do share in the forms. But it is transcendence nonetheless, since things get their being from the forms. Human beings are ecstatic and transcendent, too, in two ways. First, like all beings, their being, their form, transcends them. Second, since knowledge is of the forms, human knowing is ecstatic and transcendent. It is of something outside human beings. Knowing is, fundamentally for Socrates, being together with something outside yourself—not something only outside yourself, though, since knowing is recalling something, or bringing out the conception that is implicit in a perception you already have. Eros, too, since it is fundamentally a rational or cognitive process, is transcendent. But, like knowing, it also is of something within, something you possess, a god within, a directedness you already have. Being, then, is ambiguous. As Socrates says in the *Republic*, the things around us tumble about between being and non-being.¹⁰ (479d3-5) Things are and are not what they are. Knowledge and eros are and are not for something outside. And it is this structure that makes non-violent intimate relationships possible between human beings. For to be outside yourself is not to lose yourself but to enrich yourself, and mutual enrichment or growth through mutual beholding of what is—through mutual participation in the forms—is possible.

Socrates resolves the issue of violence in relationships, then, through understanding desire as fundamentally cognitive or intentional and as both transcendent and immanent, since what is in you is also outside you and can be shared by another. When I am in love with

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, *Platonis Opera*, vol. 4, (ed.) J. Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

another, something is in me, but also outside me, and in and outside the other as well. Being is fundamentally shareable.

2.

But according to Levinas, on the first page of *Totality and Infinity*, “being reveals itself as war—even more, war is “the very patency, or the truth of the real.” (TI, 21/9) Being is war because of *conatus*, the fundamental and self-interested drive of beings to persist in their being above all else, a drive that leaves human beings fundamentally threatened by or allergic to others. Nonetheless, peace is possible. For peace, Levinas states in the book’s last chapter, is “the unity of plurality” (TI, 306/283), and plurality ruptures being. Like the *Phaedrus*, then, *Totality and Infinity* is framed by two directions in which relations to others point: in one direction, toward violence, in another, toward the peace of plurality, difference or alterity. Moreover, as with Plato in the *Phaedrus*, so Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* focusses on figurative violence—on an interruptive vulnerability that nonetheless is peaceful—as the resolution of the problem of violence in the more ordinary sense. There is a rupture in being, he says (TI, 35/5, 278/5, 255), an “ontological scission” (TI, 305/282).¹¹ The rupture produces plurality without harm to the constituents of the plurality: “The fundamental fact of the ontological scission into same and other is a non-allergic relation of the same with the other.” (TI, 305/282)¹² There is a resistance in being (TI, 44/14, 197/171), a contestation (TI, 171/145), a mastery (TI, 171/146), a breaking of the ceiling or a breaking open of a closed circle (TI, 171/146), an opposition (TI, 197/171). But it is a peaceful one: “pacific opposition” (TI, 197/171), non-violent resistance (TI, 197/171), non-hostile opposition (TI, 171/146), mastery that does not conquer but teaches (TI, 171/146), a breaking open that opens a new dimension (TI, 197/171). The other is something or someone new (TI, 219/194), absolute upsurge (TI, 89/62), absolute commencement (TI, 272/250). The other is a peaceful master who breaks totality open expansively not oppositionally.

¹¹In chapter A.2, Lingis translates *rupture* as *breach* (TI, 35/5), while in the second reference given here, he translates it as *rupture* (TI, 278/255).

¹²See also *Totality and Infinity*, 197/171.

Since the other is new and ruptures being, my peaceful relation to him or her is not need but desire. For, need aims at fulfillment of what already is rather than aiming at or intending something other or new. (TI, 34/4) Desire is the non-allergic relation with the other. Apperception of desire, as a result, is the aim of *Totality and Infinity*: “The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire....” (TI, 47/18) Desire is connected to love, or eros, and fecundity, where love, for Levinas, is for what absolutely is not yet (TI, 264/242) and fecundity is a relation to an other that is not a power over possibles (TI, 267/245). Put differently, desire, eros and fecundity are, according to Levinas, for the transcendent—the absolutely transcendent, not found even in potential in anything whatsoever that already exists.¹³ (TI, 35/5)

Like Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, then, Levinas attacks the problem of violence by reconceiving desire. For him, though, the important distinction is not between desires that are and are not cognitively intentional but between need, which is ontological, and desire, which is metaphysical. What distinguishes desire and need is transcendence. Need is for completion, satisfaction or fulfillment and thus essentially refers back to the self. Desire is for what is absolutely other, for what is something else entirely, where *absolutely* and *entirely* indicate that the other is not found at all in the one who desires, not even in potential. Desire is not completed but deepened by what it desires: metaphysical desire “desires beyond everything that can simply complete it.”¹⁴ (TI, 34/4) In desire, the remoteness of the other is not overcome but preserved. (TI, 34/4)

Since desire is for something not relatively, but absolutely, other, desire is not knowledge. Knowledge is a relation to an other through the mediation of a third term already given. As a result, knowledge cannot comprehend the absolutely other. Knowledge is associated with ontology, or theory as comprehension of beings, and is contrasted with metaphysics, or theory as respect for exteriority. Ontology promotes freedom since the reduction of what is other to the same through a

¹³As noted before, Levinasian absolute transcendence is distinct from Plato’s transcendence of a whole over its parts.

¹⁴The French “*le creuse*” could have a stronger meaning than “deepens it” such as “hollows it out” or “excavates it.”

neutral third term prevents alienation by the other and preserves my self-sufficient and thus spontaneous activity.¹⁵ Metaphysics is concerned not with freedom but with critique since the presence of an unassimilable other, not reducible to my thoughts or to anything whatsoever that I already have, calls my spontaneity into question. Knowledge, the reduction of the other to the same, finds only what is already in itself, rests on the self-sufficiency of the same and is thus an egology, a return to the self. (TI, 42–44/12–14) Levinas, like Socrates, then, solves the problem of violence through resort to transcendence but, unlike Socrates, resorts to an utter transcendence, with no trace of immanence, found in a fundamentally non-cognitive relation to an other. For Levinas, peace in relationships comes from our openness to or respect for an other with whom we are in relation but whom we can never contain or comprehend. Socrates resolves the issue of violence in relationships by reconceiving desire as cognitively intentional and being as fundamentally shareable. Desire, for him, can comprehend and desire what is good or beautiful, and what is good or beautiful in the most important sense, since it is transcendent and immanent, can be shared. The best relationships are those in which desire for the other is consummated through sharing the shareable aspects of being. Levinas' approach is to conceive desire as non-cognitively intentional. One main goal of *Totality and Infinity* is to describe a type of intentionality that is not knowledge. That type of intentionality, according to Levinas, enables us to reach beyond being, which is war, toward the absolutely other and, by doing so, to establish the peace of plurality. It is an intentionality of a wholly different type (TI, 23/xii), an intentionality of transcendence (TI, 49/20), a signification without a context, a vision without an image (TI, 23/xii). It is not representation (TI, 27/xvi), knowledge (TI, 64/31), categorisation (TI, 69/41), disclosure (TI, 64, 74/36, 47), thought of an object (TI, 49/20) or consciousness in the ordinary sense (TI, 274/252). As Heidegger argues that our relation to unknowable death is central to our being in the world, so Levinas makes our directedness to the unknowable other the central movement of spirit, central as a result to desire and eros.

¹⁵This calls to mind the other who threatens my integrity in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and in the lordship and bondage section of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Neither knowledge nor power, eros is sociality or multiplicity. Knowledge reduces sociality: “Consciousness appears as the very type of existing in which the multiple *is* and yet, in *synthesis*, *is no more*, in which, consequently, transcendence, a simple relation, is less than being. The object is converted into an event of the subject.” (TI, 274/252) Eros, for Levinas, is not fusion but plurality: “Sexuality is in us neither knowledge nor power, but the very plurality of our existing.” (TI, 277/254) In eros, the “I springs forth without returning.” (TI, 271/249) Eros takes place beyond war with an other and his or her freedom for “the amorous subjectivity is transubstantiation itself.” (TI, 271/249) In eros, being is produced as multiple or, even more, as infinite. For the child is new—a rupture in being, a commencement. (TI, 278/255) The child produced through eros and fecundity is also erotic and fecund and thus productive of another, and another, and so on. Fecundity engenders fecundity.¹⁶ (TI, 269/247) Moreover, the child produced is free. The relation to the child in fecundity is creation *ex nihilo* and “Creation *ex nihilo* breaks with system, posits a being outside of every system, that is, there where its freedom is possible.” (TI, 104-5/78) As a result, “Being is here produced not as the definitiveness of a totality but as an incessant recommencement, and consequently as infinite.” (TI, 270/248)

Finally, though eros and fecundity are transcendent, they are not ecstatic.¹⁷ (TI, 269/247) Love produces plurality, not unity. When I love, I am not outside myself nor do I lose myself. Even more, the I is effectuated by its relation to an other. Fraternity constitutes ipseity. (TI, 280/257) It is for this reason that Levinas calls peace the *unity* of plurality. (TI, 306/283) The ipseity or unicity of each is preserved. Given the non-heroic nature of eros, including the fact that in eros I lose my subject position, it may seem strange that, according to Levinas, I do not lose but gain my self in love. But this is one of Levinas’ fundamental

¹⁶*Fecundity* can be read as Levinas’ response to Heidegger’s being-toward-death and can instructively be read together with *natality* in Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* as another such response.

¹⁷For ecstasy, see also *Totality and Infinity*, 48/18 where Levinas states that metaphysics “excludes the implantation of the knowing being in the known being, the entering into the Beyond by ecstasy.” In a similar vein, Levinas rejects apostasy of the self: “But faced with this alterity the I is the same, merges with itself, is incapable of apostasy with regard to this surprising ‘self’.” (*Ibid.*, 36/6)

ideas. Through losing my position as a subject, I become my self. The self is not static. It does not remain the same. Instead, the self is the being whose existence consists in recovering or identifying itself through all that happens to it. (TI, 36/6) I sojourn in the world but remain at home with myself (TI, 37/7); beings “remain at their post but communicate among themselves” (TI, 48/19); each of us has a “universal identity in which the heterogeneous can be embraced” (TI, 36/6).¹⁸ In desire and love, for Levinas, I go toward the other while retaining my self. The other as such, then, is not threatening, for Levinas—though, of course, specific others may in fact be threatening—since my relations to others are in part constitutive of my self.

Levinas writes at a deep metaphysical level. What does he mean more freely? In desire, for Levinas, I intend the other while putting my own interests, needs, concerns and cares out of play. In that sense, I am hollowed out or excavated by the other rather than completed by him or her. (TI, 34/4) In addition, I intend the other apart from any preconceptions I have of him or her, apart from any evaluations, any standpoints, any categories. Levinas calls this type of response to the other a response to the other simply as other, as absolutely other or absolute alterity, as singular. When I desire in this way, rather than being diminished, I am increased. I receive a teaching, Levinas says (TI, 197/171); the other opens a new dimension (TI, 197/172); the other speaks to me (TI, 198/172). In addition, when I desire in this way, though I put my own cares and interests out of play, I do not lose my self. I remain at a distance (TI, 34/4, 179/4), but this remaining at a distance from the other is the very process in which my self is developed. The self comes into existence in a process of responding to an other. The self comes about through a process of recovering my self through all my

¹⁸The contrast is with Hegel’s universal identity that negates the heterogeneous. Levinas quotes Hegel: “but this which is distinguished, which is set up as unlike me, is immediately on its being distinguished no distinction for me.” (*Totality and Infinity*, 36-37/6-7) In “Love and Filiation,” Levinas says that, in contrast to “knowledge which is suppression of alterity and which, in the ‘absolute knowledge’ of Hegel, celebrates ‘the identity of the identical and the non-identical’, alterity and duality do not disappear in the loving relationship.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Love and Filiation,” in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas*, (ed.) Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 66.

intentions of or responses to the other. As a result, I can both retain my self and relate to the other as more than an extension of me.

To intend the other while putting my interests and preconceptions out of play is not to do something but is to be affected by someone. (TI, 197/171) When I lose my mastery, Levinas says, I am moved or, better, tenderised. (TI, 270/248) Love arises in the passivity of a wound. (TI, 277/254) Love is an open responsiveness which, though responsive rather than active, is productive. Through it, the other comes to be. Levinas calls the productive or generative quality of desire and love *fecundity*. (TI, 267ff./244ff.) I stand back and give the other space to be, moreover, to be whatever and whoever he or she will be. The concrete case of fecundity is desire that leads to the birth of a child—a new individual, a singular being, of no genus. Fecundity extends beyond this and is the quality of my desire and love for any other person. Through open response to an other, I enable the other to be and facilitate his or her future projects. My relation to my self also can be fecund. Through not conceptualising, but simply responding to, my self, I give my self space to be, to be me, to be some me I am going to be.

Though the goal is peace, not war, the figurative language in which it is discussed is the language of violence—of excavation, rupture, wound, resistance, breaking a circle open, tenderisation. The violent language plays a role in the account of peace. For the breaking open opens a new dimension rather than being destructive. This type of rupture is not ordinary but “essential violence”: “What, in action, breaks forth as essential violence (*essentielle violence*) is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity.”¹⁹ (TI, 27/xv) I cannot contain the other in thought—but the inability points to surplus, not to destruction or diminution. Essential violence, unlike ordinary violence, is a marvel. It disrupts my essence—my going on being *what I am*—by supplementing it rather than harming or annihilating it. Essential violence is a breaking open that does not destroy or diminish but opens a new dimension. The other peacefully opens me up.

We have seen this type of violent figure of speech before, in Plato. The helmsman of the soul feels fear and becomes a slave. The youth, in response, is knocked out. Feeling fear, becoming a slave, being

¹⁹In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas refers to a “good violence.” (43/56)

knocked out—all suggest vulnerability to the other. It is Socrates' job to describe a beneficial rather than harmful vulnerability, a vulnerability that is not a violation of limits, a vulnerability that enables one to develop, grow or flourish. Phaedrus fears the other. Socrates teaches him that there are others to whom one may be vulnerable without fear. What the helmsman feels is not fear in the ordinary sense. Hence, when Plato says the helmsman feels fear and awe, he means *fear, that is, awe*. Similarly, the lover's service to the beloved may feel like slavery to one unaccustomed to vulnerability, but it is not. For it is a mutually beneficial service, rather than the harmful service to a master that is slavery in the ordinary sense. We are witness to Socrates' ontological expansion of vocabulary.

Similarly, Levinas uses the language of violence—of *essential violence*—to describe a vulnerability that is not a violation, but a type of increase. Commerce with “the alterity of infinity does not offend (*blesse*) like an opinion,” he says; “it does not limit a mind in a way inadmissible to a philosopher.” (TI, 171/146) Why not? Because “Limitation is produced only within a totality, whereas the relation with the Other breaks the ceiling of the totality. It is fundamentally pacific.” (TI, 171/146) The contrast to our relation to the absolutely other is our relation with others as conceived by those who see us as arbitrary, spontaneous, pure freedoms who are as a result necessarily in conflict one with another. “The other is not opposed to me as a freedom other than, but similar to my own, and consequently hostile to my own. The Other is not another freedom as arbitrary as my own, in which case it would traverse the infinity that separates me from him and enter under the same concept.” (TI, 171/146) The other breaks me open—peacefully. I am not just an arbitrary freedom for whom the encounter with any other freedom, any other person, is essentially threatening.²⁰ The other is not essentially a threat but is, instead, an addition. Levinas goes on to say about the other, “His alterity is manifested in a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus

²⁰As Sartre would maintain who, according to Levinas in his interview with Richard Kearney, interprets the other fundamentally as a threat. See Richard Kearney, “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of the Infinite,” in *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (ed.) Richard Kearney (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 182.

called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality.” (TI, 171/146) The other teaches me, where teaching is giving me more than I already contain. Commerce with the other, then, does not hurt you, harm you, destroy you.

Essential violence is clearly distinct from violence in the ordinary sense, as awe is different from fear. I learn from the other’s teaching without shock: “The idea of infinity, the overflowing of finite thought by its content, effectuates the relation of thought with what exceeds its capacity, with what at each moment it learns without suffering shock.” (TI, 197/171) The relation with the other as absolutely other “is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The ‘resistance’ of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively.” (TI, 197/171) The other resists me. I cannot grasp the other. There is “total resistance to the grasp.” (TI, 197/172) But the resistance occurs “only by the opening of a new dimension.” (TI, 197/172)

Finally, as with Socrates, so also with Levinas, not only his conception of desire, but also his conception of being is key to his solution to the problem of violence. Being, in *Totality and Infinity*, is plural.²¹ Outside any conceptual scheme, any totality, lies the other. The other is singular where singularity is different than particularity. For a particular is always a particular of a certain genus. A singular has no genus: “The unicity of the I does not merely consist in being found in one sample only, but in existing without having a genus, without being the individuation of a concept. The ipseity of the I consists in remaining outside the distinction between the individual and the general.” (TI, 117–18/90) What makes the other is not a set of properties that distinguish it, but is its refusal of properties: “the refusal of the concept is not only one of the aspects of its being, but its whole content....” (TI, 118/90)

For Levinas, too, then, the issue of violence in relationships is resolved by reconceiving desire and being. Desire, for him, is non-cognitive intentionality, non-cognitive vulnerability to an other who is beyond any conceptual scheme or totality, in which we are resisted but not violated, mastered but not conquered, broken open expansively and not oppositionally. Desire, in addition, is fecund or generative rather

²¹In *Otherwise Than Being*, being is adverbial.

than threatening. Through open responsiveness, desire makes others, and their future projects, possible. Finally, desire is transcendent but not, in Levinas' sense, ecstatic. When I desire, I move toward an other without losing myself. As a result, desire's transcendence is non-violent. Desire points to plurality or multiplicity, to the peaceful coexistence of a multiplicity of singular beings.

3.

Though Plato argues that reason is the source of non-violence and Levinas argues that we must go beyond reason to overcome violence, we can see now that the two thinkers' views on violence and the other are not completely different but share a common core: each, in his treatment of violence, stresses vulnerability and responsiveness, and rejects the idea of fundamental human self-sufficiency. As we have seen, a personified reason, according to Socrates, falls on its back when it sees the beautiful youth. The image is a dramatic, lovely and philosophically important one. The helmsman of the soul, *nous*, sees the boy, remembers the form of beauty and, in fear and awe, falls on his back. He is knocked out and no longer in the things of himself (250a6–7). Reason, then, is not turned in on itself and in control but is affected by the other outside itself. Being affected in this way causes reason, and eventually the whole reason-infused soul, to follow the beloved in awe and to serve the beloved's needs. Even eros, in the end, is affected by the youth and, once affected, along with the rest of the soul, follows and serves him.

The language used to describe eros is violent but is used to convey something that is not, literally, violent. Love need not be assault, Socrates teaches the beautiful and justifiably nervous Phaedrus. Socrates' lesson is not just for Phaedrus, but for any Athenians still influenced by a decayed heroic ideal. Love always disrupts you, Socrates suggests. It knocks you out. It takes you outside yourself. But the disruption is welcome. It stimulates you to grow and puts you in touch with something good. As Socrates puts it, it causes your wings to grow and draws you up to the form of beauty.

Levinas' term for the disruption we experience in love, and in all direct relations to others, is *essential violence* which, as we have seen, is not violence in an ordinary sense but rupture that gives me something I do not already have. When Levinas speaks of a breaking open that opens

a new dimension, or of a mastery that does not conquer but teaches, he, like Plato, is referring to an initially shocking but ultimately welcome or desirable vulnerability. I learn from the other “without suffering shock,” Levinas says. What I gain from the rupture called *essential violence* is a surplus, a marvel: “What, in action, breaks forth as essential violence [*essentielle violence*] is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity.” (TI, 27/xv)

Moreover, for Levinas, the self is not harmed, but effectuated, by its vulnerability to an other. Fraternity constitutes ipseity, as we have seen (TI, 279–80/257). I become my self by being affected by the other; the existence of the self *consists* in recovering itself—or, better, in identifying itself—through all that happens to it (TI, 36/6). I sojourn in the world but remain at home with myself (TI, 37/7); each of us has a “universal identity in which the heterogeneous can be embraced.” (TI, 36/6) Each of these statements is a formulation of Levinas’ central metaphysical idea, of a self that is essentially in relation while, at the same time, absolving itself from relation. (TI, 110/82)

In conclusion, with Plato and Levinas, we have not a philosopher of freedom and a philosopher of the other, but two philosophers of the other. Each considers human beings to be essentially, shockingly and marvelously open, vulnerable and responsive rather than closed, self-sufficient and self-involved. Each finds the solution to the problem of violence in that openness. At the same time, the type of responsive relatedness described by each is different: Plato’s is cognitive and takes place through mutual beholding of what is, while Levinas’ is accomplished by bracketing cognition of what is and relating to the other as singular.

We are left, then, with material for reflecting on whether philosophies of the other fall into two fundamental kinds on the model of the two kinds delineated by Plato and Levinas, and with grounds for disagreeing with Levinas’ characterisation of himself as one of very few in the history of philosophy who have a philosophy of the other. Instead, our inquiry suggests we might characterise Levinas as one in a group of 20th century philosophers who find rich resources in pre-modern thought for critiquing early modern ideas of the self as closed rather than open, vulnerable and responsive. Levinas turned to a fundamental resource he describes as Hebrew, and Heidegger and his students turned to a fundamental resource we, following Levinas, could call Greek. As one

who in her work and her thought takes on both of these 20th century philosophical legacies, I have endeavored in this essay to behold each philosopher in the light of the other, as well as to bring the two philosophers—two philosophers of our vulnerability in relation to others—face to face.

achten@unr.edu