

Levinas and Finite Freedom

I

It has become natural to suppose that moral responsibility presupposes freedom. But Emmanuel Levinas has claimed the reverse: that genuine human freedom presupposes moral responsibility. This counter-intuitive claim forms an important part of Levinas's overall ethical project, which advances a bracing conception of responsibility for the other that is fundamental and infinite. Here is Levinas:

In opposition to the vision of thinkers...who require, among the conditions of the world, a freedom without responsibility, a freedom of play, we discern...a responsibility whose entry into being could be effected only without any choice...Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom. (Levinas 1998: 161)

This is not to say that Levinas downplays the importance of freedom for ethics, as some critics have complained. To the contrary: in one place Levinas avers that freedom constitutes "the very humanity of man" (Levinas 1990: 71); and in another he insists that his prioritization of responsibility before freedom "must not...signify some limit within the substance of the free being" (Levinas 1969: 223). Rather, in his ethics, Levinas seeks to promote a novel account of human freedom that is compatible with his conception of infinite responsibility for the other. He calls it "finite freedom" (Levinas 1969: 115ff.), and it is the task of this chapter to spell out what finite freedom means and why it matters.

There are a couple of preliminaries in order before we begin. The first concerns Levinas's famously idiosyncratic philosophical style. Our view is that the strange form that Levinas's seemingly desultory and sometimes esoteric remarks on human freedom take can in fact be read, instructively, as presenting a kind of "journey to selfhood"—one that evokes the classical genre of *Bildungsroman*. Mark C. Taylor has noted that it is characteristic of this genre that:

the author follows the circuitous path of the hero's *Bildung*—development, education, cultivation, self-formation. The journey usually leads through various educative experiences in the course of which the protagonist progresses from the naiveté and illusion of youth to the sobriety of mature selfhood. The experiences recounted are of interest less for their individual uniqueness than for their representative character. (Taylor 2000: 77)

Levinas's remarks on freedom can be seen to fit readily into this mould. And yet they remain highly conceptual: they chart the journey not of a "representative character," but rather of the *freedom* in an individual, as it passes dialectically through what we might call—paraphrasing Hegel—various conceptual "shapes," starting with an immature conception of infinite freedom and moving step-wise to a mature conception of finite freedom. Incidentally, this is why the register of Levinas's philosophical remarks on freedom feels strangely allegorical—almost mythopoeic.¹

The second preliminary we would like to advance concerns the notions of "immature" and "mature" freedom just mentioned. It is worth emphasizing right away that it is plausible to suppose that the conditions and circumstances in virtue of which an

individual is free can typically come in degrees. For instance, one can be more or less well-informed, have a greater or lesser range of viable alternative courses of action, and so on. However, philosophical discussions of freedom have typically focused on defining only the minimum "threshold" requirements necessary for freedom to obtain. These debates are certainly of philosophical importance, because questions concerning when an agent can be held responsible, and when paternalistic intervention is legitimate, hang on whether this threshold conception of freedom is met. Yet, it is also surely philosophically important to understand what is involved in those putative higher degrees of freedom towards which we just signalled—that is, to understand what it takes to be more free, and more maturely free, in ways that go above and beyond whatever is required for one to count as responsible for oneself. We believe that Levinas's conceptualization of the journey from immature to mature freedom is responsive to this latter project. Specifically, we shall suggest that despite its comparability with the well-known Hegelian rendition of this journey, Levinas's account is distinct in that it holds that the account of mature, or "finite," freedom does not negate and replace more basic conceptions, but rather presupposes them, whilst further enriching the I's freedom by adding further layers.

Accordingly, in this chapter, we will show that on Levinas's view for an individual to enjoy mature freedom it is not enough for the individual to feel free from arbitrary external or heteronomous constraint or determination, as a Kantian might have it; such a view is important but immature. Beyond this, Levinas argues, for an individual to enjoy mature freedom, they must stand in certain social relations to others. But it is not sufficient for the individual to stand only in harmonious relations of love, friendship and mutual care with others, as some relational autonomists have implied (see, e.g., Mackenzie and Soljar 2000:

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6); nor, however, is it sufficient for the individual to stand in ethical relations of mutual recognition with others, à la Hegel. Rather, what is finally required is that the individual stand in a specific kind of *fraternal but "non-Utopian"* (Levinas 2000: 10) relation with the other. This is a relation in which the individual, or the "I," is confronted with the unbridgeable independence of the other's will from the I's world, where the other's interests are felt to be radically removed from one's own. The confrontational encounter of the autonomous I with the full extent of the freedom of the other forms the core of Levinas's concept of finite freedom. In addition to Levinas's distinctive take on the *Bildungsgeschichte* [roughly: developmental story] of freedom, then, we will show that his ultimate conception of finite freedom can be marked apart from other comparable views in the post-Kantian tradition in that it holds that the social relations that are constitutive of mature freedom can be non-utopian or antagonistic.

II

We just suggested that it may be instructive to read Levinas's remarks on freedom allegorically, as charting a formative journey through various shapes of freedom, moving from an immature conception of freedom to a mature one. Strictly speaking, though, the first shape of freedom that Levinas discusses in his 1961 masterwork, *Totality and Infinity*, is in fact defined by its *shapelessness*. In a section tellingly entitled "The Mythical Format of the Element," Levinas invites us to imagine an idyllic form of existence, "bathing in the element[s]" (Levinas 1969: 132) that nourish and sustain it. The elements—"wind, earth, sea, sky, air;" the warmth of the sun (Levinas 1969: 132; 112)—are "agreeable" and seem to respond to the I's every need; they are the source of the I's primitive "enjoyment" (Levinas

1969: 140) and primordial "*love of life*" (Levinas 1969: 112). It is no exaggeration to say that the I relates to the elements as a foetus to the womb: it is *immersed* in the element; there is no distance between it and its element. So, for the I, the element that encompasses it naturally "retains a certain indetermination; it has no form that would contain it, and in this sense it is content without form" (Sallis 1998: 157).

Perhaps surprisingly, Levinas suggests that a certain feeling of freedom—a feeling of "sovereignty," as he likes to put it (Levinas 1969: 140)—might nonetheless attach to this primitive state of basking, undivided enjoyment. That is, "freedom as a relation of life with an *other* that lodges it, and by which life is *at home with itself*" (Levinas 1969: 165). This suggestion is surprising because we might wonder whether there could be so much as "an I" who could "feel free" amidst the undifferentiated indeterminacy of the element. Plausibly, this is why Levinas calls the format of the element *mythical*. Stanley Cavell has observed that "myths generally will deal with origins that no one can have been present at" (Cavell 1979: 356). Accordingly, Levinas's discussion of freedom in the element can be seen to release a fantasy of the idyllic, formless pre-history of the I as a free being. Minimally, we can image that this primordial feeling of freedom is just the happy absence of the feeling of external constraint, necessitation and determination; and the absence of any sense of want, privation or desire, too; and it depends entirely on the contingent coincidence of the I's needs with the affordances of the elements.

Of course, there is an obvious sense in which the I's mythic feeling of freedom in the element is perilously superficial. Levinas himself calls it "virtually a null freedom;" one that in fact emerges only as a "by-product of life" (Levinas 1969: 165). For, at this stage, the "sovereignty of the I that vibrates in enjoyment" is actually engulfed by "influences" that

“seep into it like a sweet poison” (Levinas 1969: 164), belying the I’s fledgling feeling of freedom. That is to say, the I’s feeling of freedom *in* the element is in fact pervasively determined *by* the element, on which the I depends entirely. Predictably, in Levinas’s myth the superficiality of the I’s idyllic feeling of freedom in the element is dramatically exposed by the “non-freedom of need” (Levinas 1969: 140), which arises when the fragile agreement of the element with the I’s needs lapses into disharmony. Now, the I is confronted by the fact that “the plenitude of its instant of enjoyment is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys, the fact that joy remains a chance and a stroke of luck;” “the uncertainties of the future that mar happiness remind enjoyment that its independence envelops a dependence...The freedom of enjoyment is thus experienced as limited” (Levinas 1969: 143-4). The I’s primitive feeling of freedom, that is to say, is shattered when it is exposed to privation and uncertainty, and it finds itself powerless before the shockingly brutal indifference of the element.

III

It is this traumatic moment—in which one not only finds oneself to *have* basic needs, determined by the element, but one also finds oneself utterly powerless to fulfil those needs for oneself, without the beneficence of the element—that precipitates the first major development in the freedom of the I: the formation of a *will*.² Levinas characterizes the process of will-formation in terms of a “labour” which works to “ward off” the non-freedom of need by exercising an ability to “dominate,” or “grasp” (Levinas 1996: 18), or otherwise take “possession” of the element (Levinas 1969: 166), thereby “neutralizing” the ominously “unforeseeable future of the element” (Levinas 1969: 158).³ And he writes of this development that for the I with a will, “the ‘at home’ is not contained but a site where *I can*,

where dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free" (Levinas 1969: 37). In short, the fruit of the I's labour is the *freedom* of the will. And this freedom has two main features. Firstly, in its labour of dominating, grasping, possessing the element, the will puts *distance* between the I and the element; and the element thus becomes *something genuinely other*, to which the I is related in some way. As a result, the I can begin to "take up an attitude with regard to its very existence" (Levinas 2001: 10), which is to say, to reflect upon and endorse or otherwise identify with its choices. Secondly, the free will can manifest a capacity to, in a sense, "control" the previously irresistible—because undifferentiated—influence of element. We shall have cause to discuss this second feature in more detail shortly. At this point it is enough to note that Levinas claims that the freedom of the will manifests a capacity "to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other, to ensure the autarchy of an I" (Levinas 1969: 40).

Significantly, in sharp contrast to the shapelessness of freedom in the element mentioned above, the shape that freedom takes at this stage is just that: a shape. That is to say, the freedom of the will as Levinas characterizes it here comes close to a widely held *procedural* conception of freedom, as a capacity for self-government or autonomy. On this conception, the conditions of freedom are identified entirely with certain agential procedures: evaluation, endorsement, intention-formation, action.⁴ Accordingly, freedom is thought to be in no wise conditioned by substantive considerations, such as "the insecurity of the morrow, hunger and thirst [that] scoff at freedom" (Levinas 1969: 241). It is on this basis that we can begin to appreciate what Levinas might mean by "*infinite freedom*" (Levinas 1998: 124). To wit, the I's freedom can be said to be infinite, in a sense, inasmuch as it remains entirely *unconditioned* or *unlimited* by the I's finite, worldly conditions. And a

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fully *procedural* conception of freedom as autonomy is just that; it is concerned only with formal conditions. Freedom, on this procedural conception, is identical with the *form* of the will: it is freedom *of* the will.

In his own writings, Levinas sometimes associates this conception of infinite freedom with Fichte (see, e.g., Levinas 1998: 162), whose theory of subjectivity posits a freedom that is a kind of "unconditionedness," a "freedom from limitations," which, as A.W. Moore has noted, "involve[s] an infinitude of sorts" (Moore 2012: 157). More concretely, though, Levinas develops his conception of infinite freedom historically, with reference to a spiritual development introduced with Christianity. Rightly or wrongly (we shall not argue the point here), Levinas suggests that "the Christian notion of the soul," in allowing for the possibility that "at any moment [the Christian] can regain [through repentance and forgiveness] the nudity he had during the first days of creation," fosters a conception of freedom "which is infinite with regard to any attachment and through which no attachment is ultimately definitive" (Levinas 1990: 65). This freedom, in other words, is the capacity to *detach* oneself from all finite attachments. Perhaps surprisingly, this Christian idea is well captured by Sartre, whose famous conception of radical freedom canvasses the thought that one's reflective awareness of what is psychically given involves positing one's freedom with respect to it. With reference to the relevant practice of confession, Sartre thus suggests in *Being and Nothingness* that:

The man who confesses that he is evil has exchanged his disturbing 'freedom for evil' for an inanimate character of evil; he *is* evil, he clings to himself, he is what he is. But by the same stroke, he escapes from that *thing*, since it is he who contemplates it...In confessing it, I posit my freedom in respect to it; my future is virgin; everything is

allowed to me. A person frees himself by the very act by which he makes himself an object for himself. (Sartre 1978: 65)

The capacity of the I to take up a reflective attitude with regard to its finite, worldly existence, then, is also a capacity to *detach* or *distance* itself from its finite, worldly attachments at will; it is an ability, for instance, to resist having oneself be defined by one's past or conditioned by one's circumstance, and thereby to define oneself—and there is a sort of infinitude in this.

IV

Sartre also famously declared that "I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free" (Sartre 1978: 439). And, in a highly qualified way, Levinas would agree. Although Levinas will ultimately claim that this freedom, which Sartre takes to constitute the fixed plight of human existence, is yet immature, he uses comparably carceral language in suggesting that one consequence of the conception of one's freedom as infinite is, paradoxically, "enchainment to oneself" (Levinas 2001: 89). That is to say, like Sartre, Levinas acknowledges that with freedom (so construed) comes responsibility (of sorts): one must laboriously maintain one's own "commitment to exist;" "one has to do something, one has to aspire after and undertake" (Levinas 2001: 89)—there is no giving up. And this can naturally sometimes lead to "weariness" and "*ennui*" (Levinas 2001: 12). This point, shared by Sartre and Levinas, introduces the beginnings of a difficulty for infinite freedom.

The distinctive kind of *ennui* Levinas has in mind is viscerally captured in its extremity in *Crime and Punishment*. There we find Raskolnikov, having selected *murder* as the act with which to assert his freedom, recoiling from this choice in disgust. Yet, despite himself,

Raskolnikov is unable to drop the idea: it was “as if [murder] were a sort of predetermination of his fate” (Dostoevsky 1993: 60); and, after happening upon a key piece of information for his homicidal plot, he felt “like a man condemned to death...he suddenly felt with his whole being that he no longer had any freedom whether of mind or of will, and that everything had been suddenly and finally decided” (Dostoevsky 1993: 62). In other words, because Raskolnikov had arbitrarily loaded so much meaning onto the act of murder—as the ultimate symbol of individual freedom—the patently hateful thought of actually carrying out his intention became an unbearable, unshakeable burden. He couldn't escape the fact that it was up to him whether he murdered or not. And he had very good reason not to. But, in his mind, failure to carry out his heinous intention was tantamount to surrendering his freedom and becoming no more than a “louse” (Dostoevsky 1993: 419). In effect, Raskolnikov's free choice had become weirdly transfigured into an unavoidable and unbearable fate, where—paradoxically—its punishing fatefulness consisted precisely in its absolute freedom.

It is important to bear in mind here that Levinas goes beyond Sartre in wanting not just to acknowledge the psychic burdens of infinite freedom, but also to *criticise* its conceptual immaturity—from the inside. Levinas develops this internal criticism towards the end of *Totality and Infinity*, where he claims that

the irrational in freedom is not due to its limits but to the infinity of its arbitrariness.

Freedom must justify itself; reduced to itself it is accomplished not in sovereignty but in arbitrariness. Precisely through freedom—and not because of its limitation—the being freedom is to express in its plenitude appears as not having itself reason in itself. Freedom is not justified by freedom. (Levinas 1969: 303)

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Here, Levinas means to match the familiar thought that determinism constitutes a threat to freedom with its inverse: that infinite, unconditioned freedom is a threat to itself. We may extrapolate on this thought by setting up a contrast between infinite freedom *simpliciter*, on the one hand, and, on the other, autonomous action, governed, constrained and justified by reason. On a Levinasian view, this contrast articulates a problematic tension that can confront the I who entertains a conception of their own freedom as infinite. The tension pertains to whether the procedures that define infinite freedom are always already rationally determined. If they are, then, in a sense, the I's infinite freedom is subject to determination by a source outside itself: reason. Rational determination is seen here as a form of heteronomy. But if the I's autonomous procedures are in no wise constrained by reason, then the free choice they make possible will be practically indistinguishable from arbitrary, whimsical plumping. And this cannot be autonomy.

Of course, Kantians will balk at the idea that governance by reason should be considered a form of heteronomy. On Kant's view, rational determination is precisely what constitutes *autonomy* and frees the subject from the heteronomous reign of desires and passions. But note that Levinas's view has some intuitive force. In the mythical beginning of his narrative, Levinas finds the most basic sense of freedom to be the freedom to satisfy one's own desires: at this primitive stage, the subject identifies fully with their desires. Levinas then recognises, with Kant, that one's desires ought to be constrained by reason, as wholly unconstrained infinite freedom can become the source of unbearable *ennui*. But his picture departs from Kant's in preserving the residue of that earlier feeling of freedom so that realising that reason sometimes requires one to act contrarily to one's desires is an awkward, disappointing realisation. To that extent, rational determination can feel like a

heteronomous imposition to the I-*qua*-subject-of-desires. The fact that Levinas' view is able to explain this sense of disappointment as a product of the I being less than fully free is an apparent advantage that his approach has over Kant's.

Granting this, Levinas's critique of infinite freedom thus yields a problematic dilemma for the infinitely free I, between the disappointing unfreedom of heteronomous governance by a source external to the I—reason—or the wearying unfreedom associated with arbitrary choice, without the reflective processes of reasoned endorsement that alone can render a decision one's own.⁵ That is, Levinas regards the I who considers themselves to be infinitely free to be mired in a palpable dilemma: it seems that the I's choices must be enslaved to reason, or they are mere whimsical acts of plumping. This is the first of two ultimately decisive criticisms that Levinas raises against infinite freedom.

V

In his second criticism, Levinas questions the thought associated with conceptions of infinite freedom that the ideal state of the I's freedom involves independence from others: from their influence, from the burden of their interests, from their control. Here is Levinas:

The encounter with the Other in Sartre threatens my freedom, and is equivalent to the fall of my freedom under the gaze of another freedom. Here perhaps is manifested most forcefully being's incompatibility with what remains veritably exterior. But to us here there rather appears the problem of the justification of freedom: does the presence of the Other put in question the naïve legitimacy of [infinite] freedom? (Levinas 1969: 303)

On the Sartrean conception of freedom under Levinas' analysis, any relations with other people pose a threat to the freedom of the I.⁶ Other people, whose interests and perspectives conflict with one's own, threaten to constrain the extent to which the I is able to realise its ends. In the rhetorical question of this quoted passage, though, Levinas invites us to wonder whether this image of necessarily unremitting conflict and constraint paints a plausible picture of the role that interpersonal relations play in connection with individual freedom. His suggestion is that this picture is an expression of a deep confusion about the social nature of mature freedom. This is Levinas's second objection to infinite freedom. And his conception of *finite* freedom, which includes a positive role for interpersonal relations in the realization of human freedom, can best be presented in concert with it.

Before turning to Levinas's discussion, it is worth noting that a comparable line of thinking has been forcefully promoted in recent years by so-called relational autonomists. According to the version of autonomy developed by some feminist proponents of this view, it is argued that people do not typically live as isolated, independent individuals in the way this concept might seem to imply. We are always influenced by others. Furthermore, their interests are, often, not burdens but ends that we want to promote. And insofar as we live together with others, sharing our lives with them, it is right that to some extent the decisions we make for ourselves should be decisions that they take part in making: not to control us, but to share the deliberations regarding matters of mutual concern. What it is to be autonomous, on this view, then, is to be competent in "creating and sustaining relations of empathy and mutual intersubjectivity" (Held 1993: 60). Similar claims, it should be added, have been made by thinkers influenced by Hegel's theory of recognition, albeit with less emphasis on empathic care. In a manner comparable to their feminist counterparts, these

thinkers affirm the Hegelian view concerning what Robert Stern calls “the sociality of freedom” (Stern 2012: 359). That is, the view that mutual recognition is constitutive of human freedom. As Robert Pippin puts it, on this view, “*subjects cannot be free unless recognised by others in a certain way*” (Pippin 2000: 156); and, correspondingly, as Stern adds, “it is only by recognizing others as equal to ourselves that we can in fact realise [our] freedom” (Stern 2012: 358).

It will come as no surprise to those readers who have some familiarity with Levinas’s work, that there is some *prima facie* compelling evidence in support of the view that Levinas’s notion of finite freedom will be relational. His most forthright statement on it, for instance, runs as follows: “What of the notion of finite freedom? No doubt the idea of a responsibility prior to freedom, and the compossibility of freedom and the other such as it shows itself in responsibility for the other...” (Levinas 1998: 122). Finite freedom, we might then plausibly suppose, labels a view according to which one’s freedom constitutively involves standing in relations of responsibility with others. As such, Levinas may be understood as a relational autonomist *avant la lettre*.⁷

It is on this basis that we think it is worth canvassing a serious objection that has been put to proponents of relational autonomy, before considering Levinas’s view in greater detail.⁸ The objection is this. One crucial function of the concept of autonomy is that it serves to identify cases of illegitimate paternalism. That is, on a traditional construal of this aspect of individual freedom, if one makes a decision autonomously, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is illegitimate for another to intervene and overrule that decision on one’s behalf. Moreover, only one sort of consideration can factor in determining whether a person’s

decisions are sufficiently well-made to rule out the legitimacy of paternalistic intervention.

Those are matters concerning how the individual made their decision: procedural considerations. Considerations about what kinds of social relations a person stands in, by contrast, are just not of the right kind to factor in determining whether their choices can legitimately be the subject of paternalistic intervention. And so, relational accounts of autonomy, the likes of which Levinas may appear to be advancing, cannot fulfil this traditional role of a concept of autonomy, to differentiate legitimate from illegitimate cases of paternalism.

This *paternalism objection* may not be one that Levinas himself explicitly considered, but, as we will show shortly, his dialectical presentation of the degrees of mature freedom provides the resources to respond to this concern. In short, he does so by allowing for a range of conceptions of freedom which can serve different functions for practical philosophy.

VI

In the final stage of Levinas's dialectical *Bildungsgeschichte* of freedom, the I comes face to face with another free individual.⁹ And the I's infinite freedom is thereby brought forcefully into a special kind of finite worldly context, which transforms it.

The first point to note about the face-to-face encounter is that its distinctiveness is characterized, in part, by the I's unbridgeable "separation" from the other person (Levinas 1998: 14). Recall, in this connection, that according to Levinas's narrative the I won its infinite freedom through the labour of grasping and possessing the element; and this process constitutively involved the I distancing or detaching itself from the element,

eventually coming to see the element as its *other*. One consequence of this process, according to Levinas, is the emergence in the I of a deepened "inner life" (Levinas 1969: 54). And the action of the free will is said to consist not just in distancing the I from the element but also of bringing the previously indeterminate and uncontained element unthreateningly into the I's inner life, as part of the *I's world*: "[I]n labouring, possession reduces to the same what at first presented itself as other" (Levinas 1969: 175). We shall have to build some more complexity into this picture in a moment. But, for now, it is enough just to note that the context in which the I encounters the other is one in which the I is a separated being with an inner life.

But so is the other person. So, in the encounter with the other the I faces something unlike anything else it has come across in the element: it faces another "free one" (Levinas 1969: 39), with their own analogously separated inner life. Being free, the other cannot be grasped or possessed in the manner of the element; the separated other remains, uniquely, a *stranger*: "the strangeness of the Other, his very freedom! Free beings alone can be strangers to one another. Their freedom which is 'common' to them is precisely what separates them" (Levinas 1969: 74). The other, it seems, is just as inaccessible—ungraspable—to me as I take myself to be to all that is other.

There is a crucial ambivalence at play here, however. It is true that the other free being is the most distant and estranged from the I. And yet, by virtue of the freedom that they hold in "common," the other can get *closest* to the I, in a specific way; the other can get under my skin, as it were, and pry into my inner life. The other does this, according to Levinas, in the way that they "inhibit" the I's freedom—not merely by resisting possession,

but by *contesting* and *questioning* it: "freedom...is inhibited, not as countered by resistance, but as arbitrary, guilty and timid" (Levinas 1969: 203). Or, as Levinas also puts it: under the gaze of the other person, "my arbitrary freedom reads shame in the eyes that look at me" (Levinas 1969: 252); and, facing the other, "freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise" (Levinas 1969: 84).

In order to understand this difficult line of thinking, we must first note that for Levinas the I's capacity to infinitely detach itself from all of its finite, worldly attachments, and to thus build its own inner life and world opens up the possibility of the I becoming entirely *detached from reality*, lost to its own interiority: this is the *egoism* of the I (Levinas 1969: 26ff.). Consider, by way of illustration, the case of Raskolnikov once again, who, on Rowan Williams's reading, appears beholden to "the doomed enterprise of a self-sufficient inner world" (Williams 2008: 119). As a result, Raskolnikov has gradually "lost the capacity to hear and speak, to engage humanly with others and to change in response...The crime comes out of the intensity of an inner dialogue that is practically never interrupted by a real other" (Williams 2008: 116). Admittedly, Raskolnikov represents an extreme case of detachment from reality—but it is one which highlights what Levinas thinks of as the murderousness latent in unchecked, infinite freedom.

Levinas is suggesting, then, that in the encounter with the other the I's infinite detachment from reality can be dramatically recast as a form of criminal negligence towards all that is other. This is because, for Levinas, it is in the encounter with the other that the dangerous extent of the I's egoistical and irresponsible detachment from reality is brought to the I's own attention for the first time. To continue with the case of Raskolnikov, we can

note that Raskolnikov epitomizes a state of detachment and separation: he “kept aloof from everyone;” and was “haughtily proud and unsociable, as though he were keeping something to himself” (Doestoevsky 1993: 51). He imagined himself to be intellectually superior to his peers and with respect to the murder he had a miscellaneous assortment of ingenious justifications ready at hand. But when Raskolnikov was actually called to account for his actions and to explain himself to another person—as in his tense negotiations with the cunning inspector, Porfiry Petrovich, or in his pathetic confession to Sonya—his intricate web of inner thought became more like a labyrinth in which he was hopelessly and utterly lost. Indeed, witnessing Raskolnikov’s encounters with other people, the reader is struck, first of all, by the feeling that despite the arrogant decisiveness of his action Raskolnikov had no *real* idea of what he was doing. And it is only in the encounter with the other person (especially Sonya) that Raskolnikov himself starts to become aware of his infinite detachment from reality; aware that he has become hopelessly ensnared in a labyrinth of fantastical, obsessional scheming.

On the basis of our discussion so far, we can begin to understand one plausible reason why Levinas calls the encounter with the other “non-Utopian” (Op. Cit.): it often involves a painful intrusion of the other into one’s inner life. Yet, by the same token, we may also be able to see why Levinas suggests that the encounter with the other person nonetheless *liberates* the I’s freedom. On this point, Levinas asserts—rather breathlessly—that the encounter with the other “frees the subject from *ennui*, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity” (Levinas 1998: 124). The encounter with the other liberates the I’s freedom by reacquainting it with a reality that is other than itself. And, in so doing, it brings the I’s

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infinite freedom down to earth, as it were, by placing it in a finite context. (This, perhaps, points to a further meaning behind Levinas's anti-Utopian language: the scene of the face-to-face encounter is not unworldly or idealistic; it *exists*).

In addition to this, Levinas claims that the encounter with the other is also an "investiture that liberates freedom from arbitrariness" (Levinas 1969: 84). It does this, firstly, by providing the I with an outside perspective against which it can normatively orient its own freedom. The other person, we might say, can speak what the celebrated Dostoevsky scholar Mikhail Bakhtin has called the "*penetrated word*," that is, "a word capable of actively and confidently interfering in the interior dialogue of the other person, *helping that person to find his own voice*" (Bakhtin 1984: 242, our emphasis). That is why Levinas calls the other a "privileged heteronomy" (Levinas 1969: 88): not because the other can determine or constrain the I's freedom, but because they make the I answerable for its own freedom; the other invites the I to give *reasons* for its actions. As Levinas puts it, the encounter with the other makes possible "one[']s giving the world, his possession, to the other, or the positive act of the one justifying himself in his freedom before the other, that is, by apology" (Levinas 1969: 252). Confronted by the other, the I is called to arrive at a weighting of its own interests and intentions that is robust, in the sense that it could survive scrutiny by the other, who can be assumed to have interests, reasons and ends—an inner life—that are independent from the I's own. Notably, here reason may seem all the more heteronomous to the I, as it refuses to bend to the I's will, but for that very reason it is all the more liberating, as it helps the I escape its self-enchainment. In this way, the encounter with the other invests the I's freedom with a sort of normative discipline that it previously lacked.

But this is not all. The other also invests the I's freedom, according to Levinas, by "teaching" (Levinas 1969: 171) the I that *there is* an other whose own life and ends are important in and of themselves, despite their radical separation from the I's own. As Rudi Visker has noted, this teaching is an "investiture of freedom' because it introduced a degree of freedom I did not have before. What was inevitable and involuntary now turns out to be something about which I can decide: I can break the chains that tied me to my being and put the being of the Other above my own" (Visker 2004: 152). Minimally, this means that in the encounter with the other the I can gain vital perspective on their own freedom, values, and interests *as* finite or relative rather than infinite and absolute. Maximally, this invests the I with the possibility of volunteering their free agency to a cause that is not strictly speaking their own. The encounter with the other does not only bring the I's freedom back down to earth, it also *enriches* the possibilities for the I to exercise its freedom within that finite, peopled context.

VII

In conclusion, we would like to draw together some strands of our discussion with a view to recommending the value of Levinas's notion of finite freedom as the culmination of a multi-layered account of freedom. Its precursor, the infinite conception of freedom, is one of reflective distance or detachment from the I's finite, worldly context. The problems with this were two. First, the infinitely free individual faced a painful dilemma between heteronomy and arbitrariness. How can I be free if what I am to do is wholly determined by a factor outside myself, namely, reason? But, equally, how can I be free if my choices are arbitrary, and effectively indistinguishable from pure chance? Second, this conception of freedom

supposes—controversially—that I can be free entirely alone, and without supportive bonds of community with others. In response to these concerns, Levinas was pushed to a conception of freedom which augments the procedures of autonomy constitutive of infinite freedom with an element of sociality. Finite freedom, so understood, is an attractive characterisation of certain desiderata of human freedom that are lost from view on the individualistic, excessively procedural, orthodox views. We have argued that one distinctive contribution Levinas makes in this area consists in his suggestion that the elements of sociality conducive to mature, finite freedom need not be seen simply as ones of fraternal care or mutual recognition, but can also be non-utopian, involving interpersonal antagonism. This was one of the two distinguishing features of Levinas's account that we mentioned at the outset.

However, finite freedom would itself seem to be an inadequate account of freedom if it were supposed to serve every function that has been expected of that concept. This is the force of what we earlier set out as the paternalism objection. And yet, the dialectical *form* of Levinas' discussion—that of charting the maturation of freedom in the individual—points to a resolution of this concern. This is the second distinguishing feature of Levinas's account. Just as the shapes of freedom that emerge in Levinas' developmental account are distinct, so do they call for a distinct array of concepts for individual freedom. One concept is the minimal, threshold notion of what it takes to be free. Infinite freedom serves this purpose. It helps to illuminate what it takes for an individual's decisions to be their own, and to be free, in the sense that is relevant for delegitimising would-be acts of paternalistic intervention, for instance. Such freedom is a matter of individual procedures of reflection, endorsement and identification with one's choices. But of course it is possible to be more

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than minimally free. The objections that Levinas raised to infinite freedom can be best understood, therefore, as complaints about the immaturity of that minimal conception. Finite freedom, on this view, incorporates infinite freedom, and is mature by contrast. Plausibly, this is what Levinas means when he declares his interest as that of "reconciling autonomy and heteronomy" (Levinas 2008: 148). This dialectical structure does not sublate the earlier movements, as with Hegel, but incorporates them into a consequently enriched conception of freedom.

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¹ Compare Royce's (1919) analysis of Hegel's phenomenology as a *Bildungsroman*. The question of how to interpret Levinas' phenomenology of freedom permits of several further answers. For instance, one could understand the narrative as an ontogenetic account of

how each individual becomes free. Alternatively, it could be read as a phylogenetic story offering an explanation of the development of individual freedom in the history of our species or our society. Our suggestion here is that the account is best understood in neither of these ways, but rather as a hypothetical fictional narrative designed to articulate the conceptual structure of freedom including its distinct layers. It is uncharitable to interpret Levinas as engaged in either ontogeny or phylogeny, since his work is too far removed from any evidence in developmental or evolutionary psychology, respectively.

² The traumatic experience that Levinas envisions here, where the subject comes up against resistance in the world, stands in contrast to Fichte's doctrine of the *Anstoß*. For Fichte (1970: 188), the not-I is posited by the subject, whereas for Levinas the hostile and challenging elements of the world are explanatorily prior to any act of the subject (see Levinas 1998: 101 and 124).

³ Although it is oriented by the metaphor of possession and not destruction, Levinas's discussion here may be compared with Hegel's discussion of desire in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In that discussion, when the I is threatened by dissolution into the generality of mere "animal consciousness," it attempts to preserve its individuality by imposing its will on the world, where, as Robert Stern puts it, "any sense of estrangement from the world is countered by the destruction of the object, and so by the negation of its otherness in a literal sense" (Stern 2002: 73).

⁴ Examples of procedural accounts of autonomy, to which the present shape of freedom in Levinas' discussion bears an illuminating resemblance, include Frankfurt (1988), Watson (1975) and Dworkin (1970).

⁵ Interestingly, the dilemma that Levinas thus poses for infinite freedom is one that is echoed in recent work by Ruth Chang (2020: 298).

⁶ As Levinas knew, Sartre draws heavily on Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic in this area of his thought (see Sartre 1978: 235-244).

⁷ The relational autonomist whose work Levinas most closely recalls here could be Andrea Westlund (2011), who focuses on interpersonal relations of answerability and responsibility.

⁸ This line of criticism has been developed by Holroyd (2009).

⁹ Again, the move Levinas is making here bears comparison with Hegel. For Hegel, the recognition of the other as another free subject constitutes a "decisive turning point in the journey of consciousness" in the sense that in relations of mutual recognition, "neither side need fear that by acknowledging the other and feeling itself bound to it (in a relationship like love, for example) 'it has lost itself'" (Stern 2002: 74).