

Levinas, substitution, and transcendental subjectivity¹

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Abstract. The task of this paper is to clarify the status and implications of Levinas's insistence on the necessity of subjectivity to the ethical relation. Focusing in particular on the discussion of substitution in *Otherwise than Being*, it is argued that the description of subjectivity as substitution enables Levinas to articulate the necessity of the subject to the approach of the other in a manner which avoids the transcendental character which such claims to necessity usually embody. This argument proceeds from an initial characterization of substitution within the constellation of themes pursued by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* to a detailed examination of the first four sections of the "Substitution" chapter. The essay concludes by noting the unity of the ethical exceeding of the transcendental character of subjectivity with the project which animates Levinas's work from its beginnings: the exceeding of the ontological by the ethical.

It would take little argument to persuade a careful reader of Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* that the question of subjectivity plays a considerable role in the book's thematic development. From the preliminary note to the concluding pages, Levinas insists that central to the attempt to "name the *beyond essence*," is the question of ". . . catch[ing] sight, in the substantiality of the subject, in the hard core of the 'unique' in me, in my unparalleled identity, of a substitution for the other . . ." (AQ x/OB.xli–xlii).² This concentration on the question of subjectivity may not be surprising to Levinas's readers, but it may be somewhat puzzling, especially when this emphasis is considered in light of Jacques Derrida's insistence, in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics," on the transcendental character of subjectivity – the extent to which it is only on the basis of a recognition of the foundational character of subjectivity that we can suppose to locate a space, in our discourse, for the other. For, as Derrida writes, following Husserl, ". . . it is impossible to encounter the alter ego . . . impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general)" (VeM 181/VaM 123). Of course, this identification of the other as it appears, as an intentional modification of a constituting consciousness, apparently denies to the other its absolute alterity, thus problematizing Levinas's attempted subversion of ontology in the name of the ethical.

And yet, already in "Phenomenon and Enigma," first published in *Esprit*³ less than a year after "Violence and Metaphysics," we find Levinas, rather than retreating from the necessity which Derrida insists upon, emphasizing

instead the recognition, already operative in *Totality and Infinity*,⁴ that, “. . . the Enigma concerns . . . particularly subjectivity, which alone can retain its insinuation” (EP 212/PE 70). This concern, rather than signaling a certain impossibility of the approach to the other, “. . . takes on the sense of an assignation alone raising up such a being as subjectivity. Summoned to appear, called to an inalienable responsibility . . . subjectivity is the partner of Enigma and of the transcendence that disturbs being” (EP 213/PE 70).⁵ With this notion of subjectivity as the partner of enigma, Levinas recognizes the extent to which the subject, as that within which the imperative of responsibility comes to the fore, is fundamental to the signification of the “other than being.” As will become apparent, the understanding of *this* fundamental status remains rigorously opposed to that suggested by the insistence on subjectivity’s transcendental.⁶ Of course, “Phenomenon and Enigma” is in many ways only an initial articulation of Levinas’s reworking of these themes. However, already in the identification of enigma as the non-phenomenality of the manifestation of the other (EP 209/PE 66), as well as in the understanding of subjectivity as an assignation, the distance of the understanding of subjectivity which is “partner at the transcendence that disturbs being” from that which conditions the appearance of beings can be recognized.

It is not until *Otherwise than Being* that the terms of this difference become fully evident. There, with ‘substitution,’ Levinas articulates a notion of subjectivity which, while recognizing the force of Derrida’s insistence on the necessity of the subject to the approach of the other, exceeds the apparently transcendental character of this necessity in the direction of the ethical. It is the purpose of this present essay to bring into relief the features of Levinas’s attempt, with this notion of substitution, to think beyond the constraints of the transcendental.⁷ This purpose is accomplished in two steps. The first serves to orient the discussion of substitution within the constellation of questions Levinas concerns himself with in *Otherwise than Being*. The task of this orientation will be to indicate, in general terms, the elements of Levinas’s continued rethinking of subjectivity in its relation to the transcendental features insisted upon by Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics.” On the basis of this more general view, we will then shift to the development of the “Substitution” chapter itself, focusing in particular on the first four sections. There, with the discussion of recurrence, and its most careful formulation as substitution, Levinas locates a notion of subjectivity equal to the necessities imposed by his analysis. The notion of substitution thus articulated serves to indicate not only Levinas’s response to Derrida, but also the necessity of his continued attention to the question of subjectivity.

The initial task of this essay then falls into two parts. The first is to establish, at least provisionally, the character of Levinas’s response to Derrida’s ques-

tions in “Violence and Metaphysics” concerning the transcendental character of subjectivity. As the admittedly impoverished characterization of the force of these questions above has already indicated, the questions extend well beyond the discussion of subjectivity itself to that of language and the very possibility of a discourse of, on, or towards the Other. This is a challenge that Levinas could seemingly not avoid, and indeed, as will become immediately evident, it is, from the beginning of *Otherwise than Being*, one of the concerns which propels the argument presented therein. To provide a first account of Levinas’s resolution of these questions, I am going to begin my exposition with an interpretation of the sentence, “Substitution – signification” (AQ 16/OB 13).⁸ This exposition also provides the means of accomplishing the second of these initial tasks: namely, locating substitution in its place amongst the other themes at work in *Otherwise than Being*. We begin here then, without having yet provided any account of Levinas’s understanding of this notion of substitution, by concentrating on the relations which this notion has with others in the series of terms he uses to introduce us to his problematic: being, essence, transcendence, saying, responsibility. Thus, our exposition has a positive, as well as a negative or merely reactive element; it provides us with a first glimpse of the shape that Levinas’s thought on subjectivity takes as it is presented in *Otherwise than Being* – a shape which will become more completely manifest when we turn to a discussion of the “Substitution” chapter itself.

1.

Levinas begins *Otherwise than Being* on familiar territory, insisting on his own peculiar understanding of transcendence as a “Passing over to the *other* of being, otherwise than being” (AQ 3/OB 3).⁹ Already, in the gap between this understanding, with its resonances with the traditional, even religious meaning, and that which has, with phenomenology, become dominant – transcendence as the movement of consciousness – Levinas marks out the space of his departure from phenomenology, and indeed from the tradition itself. This “passing over” which is not death, not not-being, points to the possibility of a “. . . difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness” (AQ 4/OB 3), and thus, at least on the face of it, points to a difference between beings, between myself and the Other, which is already outside of, as before, the identity of knowledge, consciousness and being. Already, however, the possibility of this departure is faced with the question concerning the status of this ‘pointing;’ for, to ask a question much like those asked by Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics,” “upon what basis does either the expression of this transcendence in discourse or the expression which this

discourse is, as a pointing towards this otherwise than being, evade the return to the economy of the verb to be?"¹⁰ This is a question that Levinas feels acutely, and one to which he responds at least in part with the distinction between the saying and the said.¹¹ The particulars of this distinction should be familiar. It is perhaps enough to note here that in *Otherwise than Being*, as always, saying is identified with the approach of the Other, ". . . it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification" (AQ 6/OB 5). This approach, transcendence, being's otherwise – and the responsibility which the priority, the preoriginality thus indicated, engenders – can and are all said, and thus betrayed, in language – can and are and must be said according to Levinas, for "The *otherwise than being* is stated in a saying which must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said" (AQ 8/OB 7). We see here already the form that Levinas's response takes to questions like Derrida's, not only about the gravity, the unavoidable violence of language, but also about the possibility of speaking about the Other. The possibility and the necessity of signification are not located most originally at the level of the subject, at the level of the ego, but prior to it, with the approach of the other.¹² What is missing from our discussion, and what is clearly necessary if we are to understand Levinas on this point, is an understanding of the notion of subjectivity operative in this account.

Levinas has already, with the description of the "one for the other" mentioned above in the discussion of proximity, given us an indication of the structure in question. The break from the economy of being and non-being which "transcendence" names, requires, in response to the exceptionlessness and neutrality upon which this economy rests, the supposition of a unique and incomparable subject. Levinas locates the possibility of this uniqueness in the call to responsibility of the Other, "Saying is a denuding, of the unqualifiable *one*, the pure *someone*, unique and chosen" (AQ 65/OB 50). The other calls me, in my singularity, taking me hostage and demanding my, and no other's, response. This call to responsibility for the Other, ". . . commands me and ordains me to the other . . ." It thus diverges from nothingness as well as from being. It provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other . . ." (AQ 14/OB 11). This is substitution, as initially formulated: "me for the other." I am hostage because my responsibility for the Other arises not from my free choice, but rather comes before any choice; subjectivity is not, on this account, made manifest in the freedom of my willing, but is located prior to freedom, in the unavoidability of the Other's call, "The infinite does not signal itself to a subjectivity, a unity already formed by its order to turn toward the neighbor. In its *being* subjectivity undoes *essence* by substituting itself for another" (AQ 16/OB 13). According to Levinas, the

possibility that we speak of and to the Other is founded not on the basis of the establishment of an ego for and to which the Other appears, but precisely, and only because my subjectivity, in substitution, is nothing but the proximity of the Other, their commanding height, “The identity of the same in the “I” comes to it despite itself from the outside, as an election or inspiration, in the form of the uniqueness of someone assigned” (AQ 67/OB 52).¹³

This then is the meaning of the sentence “Substitution – signification.” Substitution, as transcendence, as proximity, points to the otherwise than being; it is nothing more than a non-phenomenal manifestation of the address of the other, “An exposure to the other, it is signification, is signification itself, the-one-for-the-other to the point of substitution, but a substitution in separation, that is, responsibility” (AQ 70/OB 54). This is not to suggest, of course, the identification of the Other’s address and my signification of it – an identification which would reinstate, at a more fundamental level, the identity of the ego and the other which Levinas suggests is an unavoidable result of Husserl’s analysis, and which the notion of substitution is supposed to resist. Rather, substitution signifies this address by unfailingly responding, by being unavoidably responsible. This is the secret which the description of the relationship to the other as intentionality fails to uncover, but which it necessarily indicates, “*Toward another* culminates in a *for another*, a suffering for his suffering. . . .” (AQ 22/OB 18). It is in these terms that Levinas responds to Derrida’s question concerning the possibility of speaking of another, and indeed, ultimately, to the series of questions about language which Derrida poses in “Violence and Metaphysics.” At this point, having provisionally described the form of Levinas’s answer to at least one element of Derrida’s insistence upon the transcendental character of subjectivity, and in the process, having located the discussion of substitution within the more general framework of Levinas’s rethinking of his problematic in *Otherwise than Being*, we are now in a position to turn to the extended treatment of substitution which Levinas himself indicates is the “centerpiece” of this work (AQ ix/OB xli).

2.

As the analysis just offered would seem to necessitate, the chapter “Substitution” is perhaps best read as a meditation on identity. In this, Levinas remains consistent with a central tendency of his thought; from the “being riveted to oneself” of his “*De l’évasion*” to the separated subject of *Totality and Infinity*, the question of identity has been a constant context for Levinas’s treatment of subjectivity.¹⁴ The traditional nature of this topic, one which merely reemphasizes Levinas’s continual insistence that “. . . the tradition of the other

. . . is philosophical,”¹⁵ undermines neither the radicality nor the difficulty of the analyses presented in *Otherwise than Being* – the most important of which are pursued in the three sections entitled variously, “Recurrence,” “The Self,” and “Substitution.” It is our initial task here to recount the progress of the arguments contained in these sections in order that, on the basis of this presentation, we will be able to consider with greater clarity and precision the ways and extent to which Levinas’s treatment of subjectivity in terms of the movement of substitution exceeds the transcendental description of the necessity of the subject in the name of an ethical necessity.

Levinas begins the discussion in “Substitution,” in the section entitled “Principle and Anarchy,” with consciousness which, according to the tradition (and the tradition is for the most part exemplified by its highest development: phenomenology), is constitutive of the identity of both the ego and its objects. Levinas opposes to this account the notion of proximity, which, as we have already seen, “. . . is an assignation of me by another” (AQ 127/OB 100). This assignation, a relationship before the possibility of any commitment and thus irreducible to consciousness, is identified by Levinas as “obsession” (AQ 129/OB 101). For Levinas, obsession signals the extent to which proximity breaks with the synchronic economy of pure relatedness. The relation of proximity is an irreversible one – one that I suffer, “. . . before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused . . . there is a relationship . . . ‘against all logic’ ” (AQ 109/OB 87). The question that arises on the basis of this alternative account is, “How in consciousness can there be an undergoing or a passion whose active source does not, in any way, occur in consciousness” (AQ 129/OB 102). It is a question which, precisely because of this necessary exteriority of the activity to consciousness, is answerable only in terms of persecution, which Levinas here describes as a “. . . being called into question prior to questioning, responsibility over and beyond the logos of response” (AQ 130/OB 102). However, this identification (or at least correlation) of obsession and persecution, rather than resolving the issue, serves merely to bring to the fore once again the question that confronts Levinas in this chapter; namely, how are we to understand the possibility of both the identity and the unique responsibility of the subject on the basis of the commanding approach of the Other?

It is necessary to be careful here. First, it must be stressed that this is a problem as such only in light of an insistence on the transcendental of the subject. Levinas is explicit about this, asking in relation to obsession, “Is not a becoming conscious, a receiving of the given, as Husserl wants it, the precursor of every relation” (AQ 111/OB 87)? As has been provisionally indicated, Levinas’s response to this insistence comes precisely by way of a rethinking of the relation of the Other to subjectivity. Second, it is perhaps advisable to

stress that the question of the identity of the subject is not primarily a factual one; what is at stake for Levinas is not an account of the development of my particular subjectivity in all its contingency. Rather, rejecting as fundamental the traditional account which, starting from consciousness, proceeds by a simple self-grasping, and thus as if according to an identity relationship, to subjectivity, Levinas is confronted with establishing what resembles, at least in form, a similar structure: locating the possibility of the subject in the interruption of the other.

It is precisely to the problem thus posed that the notion of recurrence is offered as an initial solution. With the term recurrence, Levinas names the contra-logical relatedness from the Other made manifest in the analysis of proximity and obsession. Persecuted, obsessed – “one and irreplaceable” – the subject of the Other’s call can never be in-itself and for-itself as the philosophy of consciousness describes it. Under the terms of Levinas’s analysis, the oneself’s identity is never simple, never immediate and self-formed, never the product of a thematizing identification. Behind all of these traditional formulations of the identity of the “I” – which Levinas calls here the “subjective condition” – the notion of recurrence locates an identity proper to the sense of the oneself which, suffering under an irreversible assignation, is only in-itself outside of itself. Unfortunately, though we can, with Levinas, name the sense which is proper to the relation of proximity, it is only with difficulty that we can begin to unfold it. For the most part, Levinas’s discussion of recurrence proceeds, as was just indicated, by way of a discrimination of it from the various modalities of the traditional account of identity. Of course, this *via negativa* is, at least in one sense, necessitated by the formulations of this tradition, “Verbs, possessive adjectives, and syntactical figures that one would like to use to disarticulate the singular torsion and contraction of the *oneself*, refugee and exile in its own fullness to the point of explosion (*éclater*) and fission . . . already carry the mark of the oneself, of this torsion, this contraction, this fission” (AQ 132/OB 104). In as much as Levinas insists that the marks thus born by these formulations are the marks of their condition, it is with properly phenomenological fidelity to his object that Levinas proceeds thus negatively towards it.¹⁶ Such fidelity, however, provides few resources for a positive exposition. What is found by way of a positive discussion in the section “Recurrence” is a series of tropes, the articulation of which serves in place of an exposition of the sense of the relation in question.

With the first of these, the recognition that, “The ego is in itself like a sound that would resound in its own echo, the node of a wave which is not once again consciousness,” Levinas attempts to account for the restlessness of the oneself, the extent, (already indicated) to which the oneself is “in itself as in exile” (AQ 130/OB 103). The identity in indiscernibility of the sound in its

echo undoes the identity, as freedom, of consciousness, which proclaims its uniqueness in its giving to itself a meaning. The uniqueness of the oneself, on the other hand, is given to it, “It has meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment. . . .” (AQ 131/OB 103). Lest this notion of the self recurring like a wave be mistaken for some sort of activist philosophy of consciousness, which, like Husserl’s,¹⁷ understands consciousness as a self-grasping of itself, “. . . across the multiplicity of ‘psychic adumbrations’ . . .” (AQ 132/OB 104), Levinas suggests another trope: the self “uneasy in its skin” (“*mal dans sa peau*”). With this expression, Levinas connects the discussion of recurrence to the passivity and suffering already indicated in the discussion of obsession and its correlate, persecution. The passivity thus evoked is of course not to be understood in opposition to – and thus in correspondence with – activity. This is absolute passivity, “The most passive, unassumable, passivity, the subjectivity or the very subjection of the subject, [which] is due to my being obsessed with responsibility for the oppressed who is other than myself,” (AQ 70/OB 55, addition mine). Thus, this absolute passivity is prior not only to the activity of consciousness, but also to the passivity and inertia of objects.

This evocation of recurrence as a being uneasy in one’s skin does more work, however, than merely making explicit the connection between recurrence and the obsession/persecution dyad. As was noted in the discussion of proximity, the correlation of persecution and obsession serves to make explicit the force of the question concerning the attempt to articulate a notion of subjectivity which refuses the traditional privileging of the subject in favor of the Other. As was also noted, however, up to this point in Levinas’s analysis it is unclear to what extent this identification of persecution and obsession answers this question. Indeed, it is only when recurrence is expressed as an uneasiness in one’s skin, with the materiality thus implicated, that the resources offered by this correlation between persecution and obsession become evident. According to Levinas, the absolute passivity marked by the oneself’s uneasiness ultimately refers to its incarnation, “It is as though,” he suggests, “the identity of matter resting in itself concealed a dimension in which a retreat to the hither side of immediate coincidence were possible, concealed a materiality more material than all matter” (AQ 137/OB 108). With this emphasis on incarnate subjectivity, Levinas acknowledges the tradition of post-Husserlian phenomenology, with its insistence on the irreducibility of our embodiment. As the passage just quoted makes evident, however, Levinas maintains a difference between himself and this tradition; for Levinas, the body is not primarily the site of the dispersion – and eventual recuperation – of consciousness, but rather, “. . . it is the distinctive *in-oneseif* of the contraction of ipseity and its explosion (*éclatement*)” (AQ 138–139/OB 109).

In the note appended to this sentence, one of the few notes in this chapter which serve to clarify, rather than problematize, the issue at hand, Levinas indicates the sense in which incarnation is the unity of obsession and persecution. This surplus of materiality – the body, understood here not as a phenomenon, but as the principle of absolute passivity – is the non-conditioned condition of the subject's unity as this "recurrent contraction," as well as the very possibility of exposure to the Other's call, "The body is neither an obstacle opposed to the soul, nor a tomb that imprisons it, but that by which the self is susceptibility itself . . . to be exposed to sickness, suffering, death, is to be exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gift that costs" (AQ 139n 12/OB 195n 12). To be more precise, it is as the possibility of persecution that incarnation is this contraction. Thus, with this identification of persecution and obsession in incarnation, Levinas points to a notion of subjectivity which, in opposition to the identification of the subject as the possibility of any relation, recognizes it as an effect of the irreversible relatedness of the Other, "It is in the passivity of obsession, or incarnated passivity, that an identity individuates itself as unique . . . in the impossibility of evading (*carence*) the assignation of the other . . ." (AQ 142/OB 112). Thus, the claim that recurrence names this relatedness ultimately amounts to the recognition that the subject, obsessed, always already outside of itself, exposed to the trauma of the Other's approach, ". . . is a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other. . . ." Thinking this necessary correlation of obsession and persecution allows Levinas to develop a notion of subjectivity adequate to this exigency. The movement of recurrence is the emergence of subjectivity in its responsibility, an emergence prior to the freedom of any self-having – in itself outside of itself in the approach of the Other, and thus bearing the weight of this approach.¹⁸

This articulation of the subject in its responsibility in terms of the recurrent contraction and explosion of the subject makes evident one final feature of the correlation of persecution and obsession. In the section entitled "The Self," Levinas insists that, in as much as an immediate implication of incarnation is the extent to which the Other's persecuting approach and the unity of the subject in this upsurge must be thought together, it is clear that responsibility extends beyond the movement towards the Other to the persecution itself; this is, of course, just what it means for the subject to bear the weight of the other's approach. As thus understood, the passivity marked by the expression of recurrence as an uneasiness in one's skin, ". . . deserves the epithet complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor" (AQ 141/OB 111). It is with this insistence that Levinas most clearly distinguishes the notion of subjectivity in question here from that operative in the philosophy of consciousness. The claim that the self is liable for the Other to the extent

to being liable for the Other's fault undermines any attempt to re-impose the logical economy of the relation in the relatedness of the Other to the self, and thus reasserts the centrality of the self to it. The singularity of the Other's approach does not allow me the comfort of a return to my self, either under the guise of the particularity of auto-affection or of the universality of the neuter. The oneself is at fault before the possibility of any sin, accused, and thus in itself only for others, "For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution" (AQ 142/OB 112). Recurrence signifies a passion the self undergoes on the hither side of freedom and possibility, before consciousness and any of its claims. This undergoing is the oneself's substitution for the Other.¹⁹

With recurrence then, Levinas seems to have articulated a notion of subjectivity which resists Derrida's insistence on subjectivity's transcendentalism. Before we can consider Levinas's most rigorous and complete articulation of this notion as it is presented in the movement of substitution, it is first necessary to supplement the scandalously brief characterization of Derrida's insistence with which I have been working up to this point. Though any supplementation possible in the space remaining will continue to be inadequate to Derrida's text, it is necessary, if we are to recognize the features of Levinas's opposition to the character, if not the fact, of this insistence, that such an attempt be made.

3.

Though Derrida begins his discussion of the particulars of the relationship between Husserl and Levinas, within which the material in question is located, with questions concerning Levinas's position towards what are, in Husserl, the intertwined notions of the phenomenological method and the concept of intentionality – both of which figure importantly in the discussion of Husserl's alleged theoretism – the majority of Derrida's discussion of this relation concerns itself, as is well known, with Levinas's frequent, though never entirely systematic, criticisms of Husserl's attempted resolution of the problem of intersubjectivity.²⁰ To summarize this discussion, Derrida attempts to indicate the extent to which Husserl's work in this area, especially in the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, "resist[s] Levinas's criticisms" (VeM 194n1/VaM 316n51), insisting that, rather than failing to account for the radical alterity of the Other, Husserl, in both his careful attention to the elements contained in the sense "other ego," and the resultant insistence on the necessarily mediate intentionality constitutive of this sense, evidences a great respect for this alterity, "The necessary reference to analogical appresentation," a necessity imposed by this unavoidable mediacy of intentionality, "far from signifying

an analogical and assimilatory reduction of the other to the same, confirms and respects separation . . ." (VeM 182/VaM. 124).

On the basis of this initial characterization, Derrida proceeds to consider more thoroughly Husserl's examination of the sense "Other," which is what it is precisely as "other ego." That is, according to this examination, that which distinguishes the other from other transcendent objects in the world is precisely its being "like me," an ego (VeM 184/VaM. 125). According to Derrida, still following Husserl, there are two important conclusions which must be drawn from the recognition of the other as ego. First, in as much as the other, as ego, is like me, it is unavoidable that I am the other of the other.²¹ Secondly, the peculiar transcendental character of the ego already indicated above must be widened to include the other ego. The condition of the possibility of the appearance of all transcendencies, including that unique one, the other, is, when most properly and fully understood, what Husserl identifies as transcendental intersubjectivity. It is in terms of these two distinctions that Derrida identifies the structures of subjectivity in its relation to the other as, ". . . the transcendental symmetry of two empirical asymmetries" (VeM 185/VaM. 126). That is, the other appears to me, and I to the other, only on the basis of the constituted intersubjectivity.

Though this exposition of Derrida's questions to Levinas on this matter is far from complete, the extent to which Levinas, with the notion of recurrence, opposes this understanding of subjectivity should be evident. He contests first the assumption of the primordially of the other as appearance, arguing instead that "Proximity appears as the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into "images" or be exposed in a theme" (AQ 126/OB 100). On the basis of this understanding he also rejects the supposition that the ego and its activity is the proper starting point for the understanding of the subject in its relatedness to the Other, opposing to it the passivity in persecution of the oneself. Most significantly however, Levinas refuses the understanding of the relation of the self and the other evident in Derrida's characterization of it as a transcendental symmetry. As we have seen, he replaces the logic and economy of the relation with the irrecoverability and irreversibility of obsession. In opposition then to the supposition of subjectivity as a constituting pole of this transcendental symmetry, Levinas insists on the asymmetry of substitution, the recurrent contraction in explosion of the oneself which, ". . . becomes identity in breaking up the limits of identity" (AQ 145/OB 114). In the *me voici* proper to the accusation of the other, a bearing of the Other's fault, the movement of substitution becomes recognizable as, ". . . the force of an alterity in me" (AQ 146/OB 114). It is to make manifest the implications of this recognition then – and thus, by implication, the ultimate form of

Levinas's response to Derrida – that we must follow Levinas to the discussion of substitution.²²

Recognizing this necessity is essential for understanding the progress of Levinas's argument in the "Substitution" chapter, for, bracketing for the moment this necessity, it must be noted that, on the face of it, Levinas's insistence on the articulation of recurrence as substitution seems odd. By the end of the section "The Self," Levinas has unfolded, by way of an examination of the implications of the various tropes which stand in for recurrence, the sense of the relatedness thus named. Yet, though the sense thus expressed seems both complete and rigorously opposed to that presupposed by the tradition, Levinas reasserts the force of the question which has propelled his analysis from the beginning, asking whether, despite the care taken to locate the possibility of subjectivity in absolute passivity, this claim, ". . . does . . . not presuppose an activity behind the absolutely anarchical passivity of obsession, a clandestine and dissimulated freedom" (AQ 144/OB 113)? This question retains its force not only because of the necessity that we consider the recognition of the other in the same implied by the extension of responsibility to the Other's persecution of me, but also because it is only in the non-relationship of responsibility, as it is articulated as substitution, that, ". . . the overdetermination of the ontological categories" – the categories which continue to threaten the radicality of the discussion of recurrence – "which transforms them into ethical terms is evident (*se montre*)" (AQ 146/OB 115).

As has already been suggested, it is precisely the recognition as fundamental of the passion of recurrence – the fact that, ". . . recurrence to self cannot stop at self, but goes to the hither side of self . . ." (AQ 145/OB 114) – which distinguishes the fullest sense of the relatedness of the Other expressed as substitution, from the expression of this relatedness as recurrence. This absolute exposure to the Other, the possibility of which Levinas locates in the subject's materiality, signifies an identity which is accomplished in the inability to return to oneself, "Recurrence becomes identity in breaking up the limits of identity . . . [to be self] is to hold on to oneself while gnawing away at oneself" (AQ 145–6/OB 114). The nominative is thus produced (in the double sense articulated in the "Preface" to *Totality and Infinity*)²³ in the accusative – the *Je* in the *me voici* (AQ 146/OB 114). Substitution is this production, a production which Levinas carefully distinguishes from alienation, which in any case would presuppose an identity distinct from this "coming to identity," insisting instead that we understand the subject's absolute exposure to the Other as both "inspiration" and "expiation."

As has already been noted in the explication of the sentence "Substitution – Signification," my identity, the unicity of the *Je*, arises in responsibility because it is me and no other that is called by the Other. I am inspired,

that is, anarchically accused. Connecting the discussion of substitution to his earliest work, Levinas identifies this inspiration with evasion.²⁴ Unlike the earlier work, where the need to depart from being can never be satisfied, here inspiration marks the exceeding, in ethical subjectivity, of the economy of being, “In this most passive passivity, the self liberates itself ethically from every other (*autre*) and from itself. Its responsibility for the other (*autre*) . . . signifies an opening in which being’s *essence* is surpassed in inspiration (AQ 146/OB 115).²⁵ Freed from itself, freed from being, the self is unconditioned, absolute. It is only as thus absolute that the subject could be “the partner of Enigma.” for only as such could it and the Other escape, “. . . the inevitable limitation that the terms within relation undergo” (Ibid.).²⁶ But as we have seen, the subject is absolute only in bearing the weight of the other’s fault, in substituting itself for another. To make use of Levinas’s self-deformation with Rimbaud, the phrase “*Je est un autre*” signifies the necessity that the self is in itself only as for another. As such, the inspiration of the subject is an, “. . . expiation . . . uniting identity and alterity. The ego is not an entity ‘capable’ of expiating for others: it is this original expiation” (AQ 151/OB 118). Thus, substitution is not, most properly understood, only the effect of the other in the self, but also, necessarily, the excessive responsibility by which this effect is signified. It is with this notion of the subject in substitution, as the unity of inspiration and expiation, that Levinas ultimately replies to the insistence on the transcendental of the subject.

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Notes

1. This paper was first presented at the thirty-second annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, hosted by Loyola University, New Orleans in October 1993. I would like to thank my fellow panel members and the audience for their helpful comments. I would also like to thank Robert Bemasconi and John Drabinski, in whose company the understanding of Levinas's thought underlying this paper was developed, for the generosity of their criticism.
2. For the most part, the translations from the French in this essay are from the published English translations of the various works. They will all follow the indicated format, with the page numbers from the French editions preceding those from the English. I have occasionally taken the liberty of altering the translations of Levinas's works when it seemed necessary.
3. *Esprit*, No. 339, June 1965, pp. 1128–1142.
4. Cf. for example, the following: "The I is thus the mode in which the break-up of totality, which leads to the presence of the absolutely other, is concretely accomplished" (Tel 90/Tal 118). There are important differences between the understanding of subjectivity employed in *Totality and Infinity*, and that worked out in *Otherwise than Being*. Though the present essay presupposes this distinction between Levinas' two major works, the articulation of the difference is the project of another essay.
5. The (perhaps surprising) claim that the subject is an irreducible element of the question of transcendence is also central to the discussion in *Otherwise than Being*, "The problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence – irreducible to essential immanence – go together" (AQ 20/OB 17). It is as an explanation of this claim that Levinas develops the notion of substitution.
6. In the interview with Richard Kearney published in *Face to Face with Levinas* ed. R. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). Levinas calls this understanding of subjectivity, as it is presented in *Autrement qu'être*, the 'meontological' (p. 27). The 'meontological' is that which, ". . . affirms a meaning beyond being . . ." (Ibid., p. 25), and thus the articulation of a meontological subjectivity points to a sense of subjectivity which exceeds that of the totalizing "subject" of the ontological tradition.
7. In this I join a number of commentators on Levinas who have attempted to account for Levinas's somewhat ambiguous stance towards transcendental philosophy, including Theodore de Boer's "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," in Richard Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), and John E. Drabinski's "The Status of the Transcendental in Levinas' Thought," *Philosophy Today*, Summer 1994. Unlike de Boer or Drabinski, however, I am not here arguing either for or against a transcendental interpretation of Levinas's project. Rather, I am presupposing that there is a tension in Levinas's work between those analyses which are embedded in the factual relationships between subjects and those which, like the ones in question, have an undeniably "foundational" air. It is I would suggest Levinas's recognition of the unavoidability of this tension which leads him, in response to a question asking him to expand on his claim that philosophy has its beginning in the Face of the Other, to insist that, "It is in so far as I have not only to answer to the Face of the other man, but when beside him I approach the third, that the very necessity of the theoretical attitude arises" ("*Philosophie, Justice et Amour*," in *Entre Nous, Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris: Bernard Grasset, p. 121; cf., also, AQ 8/OB 7). Thus, rather than attempting with de Boer to locate this necessity in Levinas's work, or with Drabinski to problematize it in the name of another understanding of 'transcendental,' I am here concerned to demonstrate that the identification of subjectivity as substitution is an expression of and response to this necessity.
8. Though he is not always as careful, Levinas (unlike the translator of OB) here avoids the apophantic 'is.'
9. This description of transcendence, and in particular its distance from the phenomenological understanding, has been a feature of Levinas's work since the "proto-ethical" investigations

- of 1947. Cf., for example, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 64–66, TeI 20/TaI 49, and LeP 226/LaP 117.
10. Cf., for example VeM 195/VaM 133.
 11. Cf., for example, AQ 6/OB 5. It is worth noting that the necessity that this question be asked, the fact that “Language belongs to the very work of truth, as a thematization. . . .” (LeP 223/LaP 115), and thus the fact that we can never be ‘satisfied’ by language, is not, for Levinas, to be bemoaned. For, where, according to Levinas, Derrida, “. . . tends to see the deconstruction of the western metaphysics of presence as an irredeemable crisis, I see it as a golden opportunity for Western philosophy to open itself to the dimension of otherness and transcendence beyond being” (“Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, p. 28).
 12. As Robert Bemasconi has suggested, in his “Levinas and Derrida: The Question of the Closure of Metaphysics,” in *Face to Face with Levinas* (pp. 186–190), the form of this response is already suggested in *Totality and Infinity*.
 13. Though there are some differences in emphasis between his position and my own, Fabio Ciaramelli, in his admirable “Levinas’s Ethical Discourse Between Individuation and Universality” in *Face to Face with Levinas* ed., by R. Bemasconi and S. Critchley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) pp. 83–105, provides a detailed account of the relationship between Levinas’s treatments of language and subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being*.
 14. *De l’évasion*, introduced and annotated by J. Rolland (Montpelier: Fata Morgana, 1982) p. 87. Cf., also, for example, DEE 167/EE 97, TA 65–66/TO 77 and TeI 6/TaI 36. Though Levinas’s rhetoric often seems to suggest it (the “Sans identité” of *Humanisme de l’autre homme* being a prime, but certainly not the only, example), this context must not be understood merely negatively (as Rudolf Funk, in his *Sprache und Transzendenz im Denken von Emmanuel Lévinas* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1989) seems to suggest (p. 381)). Though Levinas is at pains to separate himself from the traditional accounts of identity, it is in terms of a radicalization of the notion of identity, one which seeks precisely the roots of identity rather than pursuing its effects, that Levinas identifies the necessity of the subject to his ethical metaphysics. In both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, the awareness of this necessity arises in the recognition, discussed above, that the absolute alterity of the Other demands a unique and irreplaceable subject. As Levinas insists in *Totality and Infinity*, the very being of the infinite “. . . is produced in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, none the less contains what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies. . . .” (TeI xv/TaI 26–27). Thus, it is precisely by thinking through identity, thinking through the traditional accounts to their condition, and thus ultimately to that which exceeds, without dissipating, identity, that we can begin to understand the possibility of the signification which is the non-phenomenal manifestation of the absolutely other.
 15. Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987) p. 53.
 16. For an explicit statement of Levinas’ indebtedness to Husserlian phenomenology, see AQ 230/OB 183.
 17. “Despite the extension which phenomenology gives the word *intention*, intentionality bears the trace of the voluntary and the teleological” (AQ 122/OB 96).
 18. In his *Le sujet chez Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), Gérard Bailhache provides an extended discussion of this notion of materiality and its relation to the discussions of proximity, persecution and obsession (pp. 240–253).
 19. Conspicuous in its absence in the account of recurrence just presented is a discussion of hypostasis, a notion which figures prominently throughout Levinas’ discussion of recurrence. This omission is prompted by two considerations: first, accounting for hypostasis would necessitate a lengthy digression into Levinas’ *Existence and Existents*, second, in as much as Levinas’ articulation of hypostasis in *Existence and Existents* turns importantly

- on questions of temporality, it would be necessary to consider the understanding of temporality which orients *Otherwise than Being*. Both of these tasks are of course impossible to accomplish in the space allotted. Fortunately, though Levinas' use of hypostasis in the section on recurrence is both helpful and illuminating, it is not essential to the argument, and can thus be circumvented.
20. For an example of the types and character of the objections Levinas offers to Husserl's account of the Other, and of the project of transcendental idealism in general see, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989) pp. 75–87.
 21. Husserl goes even so far as to suggest that the recognition of this necessarily doubled structure serves not only as an element of the constitution of the other ego but in fact is essential to the constitution of myself as psychophysical unity. (cf. *Cartesian Meditations* §§53–54).
 22. I do not pretend in this essay any fairness to Derrida's position on this question. My purpose here has been to suggest an interpretation of the "Substitution" chapter organized around the question of the possibility of articulating a notion of subjectivity opposed to the insistence on the subject's transcendental. If this essay were truly aimed at establishing a dialogue between Levinas and Derrida on this question, I would first have to consider the extent to which the problem of the relation is most originally a problem in *Totality and Infinity*. Then, I would have to consider the ways in which Derrida's thinking on this question in relation to Levinas' work has shifted since the publication of *Otherwise than Being*. Such a shift is, I think, evident in Derrida's more recent work on Levinas.
 23. TeI xiv/TaI 26.
 24. *De l'évasion*, originally published in 1935.
 25. Compare this passage from *Otherwise than Being* with the following:

"Existence is an absolute which affirms itself without referring itself to anything other. It is identity. But in its reference to himself man distinguishes a space of duality. His identity with himself loses the character of a logical or tautological form. . . . In the identity of the *moi*, the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment for it appears under the form of suffering and invites evasion. So evasion is the need to depart from being, which is to say, *to break the most radical and irremissible enchainment, that fact that the moi is itself*" (*De l'évasion*, p. 73).

It is precisely the 'overdetermination of being' in ethics that separates these two accounts.
 26. "The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the Other (*Autre*), is possible only if the Other (*Autre*) is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as entry into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely. *A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure of the relationship only as Moi*" (TeI 6/TaI 36).