Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal
Volume 41, Number 2, 2020

The Second Person in Fichte and Levinas

Michael L. Morgan and Owen Ware

1. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas makes every effort to mark what is distinctive in his account of intersubjectivity and the second person. He proposes and experiments with numerous terms for the relation, and he uses various expressions that emphasize and even exaggerate its distinctiveness. At the same time, he notices others in western philosophical and religious thought who have taken intersubjectivity to play a central role in their thinking and who are for this reason his compatriots—figures like Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel.[1] It is natural to add to this list those two figures in the tradition of German Idealism who give pride of place to the second-person encounter: Hegel and Fichte. Some have gone so far as to say that once we have their accounts on hand, Levinas' treatment is unnecessary, redundant, or even defective. In this paper we aim to compare Fichte and Levinas with this warning in mind and show how, for all their differences, Levinas and Fichte share important affinities.

From an early stage in his career, Levinas had Hegel in mind as a primary representative of the tradition of western philosophy and as someone from whose work he wanted to distinguish his own. Fichte does not seem to have been on his mind at this early stage, but there are two places in "Substitution," chapter 4 of *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), where he mentions Fichte by name.[2] In this chapter, Levinas introduces the term "exteriority" to describe the way in which the other influences us without that influence tracing back to the subject. He writes:

> This relationship is not an act, not a thematization, not a position in the Fichtean sense [*n'est pas position au sens fichtéen*]. Not everything that is in consciousness would be posited by consciousness—contrary to the proposition that seemed to Fichte to be fundamental. (OB 101; AE 127)

Levinas then goes on to ask how the subject can be affected by the other. This is where we find a second reference: "How can the Fichtean free ego undergo the suffering that would come to it from the non-ego" (OB 123; AE 159)?[3] The point that Levinas underscores in both

of these passages is that the other's encounter with the subject is not the outcome of the subject's freedom; it is not posited by the subject, as Fichte has it, but is prior to any free activity. In short, what Levinas rejects is Fichte's idealism; he rejects his starting point.[4]

A comprehensive examination of Levinas' criticism of Fichte would have to examine more than this line of objection. It would also have to consider more fully Fichte's doctrine of right, his theory of ethics, and the special role that intersubjectivity plays in both. It would then have to consider the ways in which Levinas' own account differs. This is certainly too large a task for a single paper, but we shall attempt to make a few, hopefully fruitful, steps in this direction. One striking result that will emerge from our comparison is that both Levinas and Fichte end up viewing the second person in a way that has no equivalent in the current philosophical literature.[5] As we shall see, they each view responsibility to the other, not only as an immediate obligation but as an asymmetrical relation that gives the other moral priority.[6]

2. Fichte on the Summons and Intersubjectivity

Scholarship on Fichte's doctrine of the "summons" (*Aufforderung*) is substantial and conflicted.[7] Daniel Breazeale, for example, argues that the concept of the summons first occurs in Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* (1795–96), although there is some indication that he had pointed to the importance of the second person in his *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–95).[8] In his comments, Breazeale begins by describing Fichte's "famous demonstration that the very possibility of self-consciousness depends upon one's consciousness of oneself not simply as an 'I as such' but as a determinate *individual* person" and that "this in turn . . . [depends] upon one's recognition of *other* free individuals . . . that is accomplished and signaled by the voluntary self-limitation of one's own freedom out of respect for the freedom of others."[9] Breazeale then makes special note of its context in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, stating that this demonstration "provides the foundation for a new account of juridical rights as conditions for the possibility of a *community* of mutually recognizing and self-limiting free individuals."[10]

Complications arise as soon as we try to locate the summons within the structure of Fichte's overall account. There are at least three places where it occurs: (1) in the self's positing of the not-I; (2) in the self's positing of a subject that issues the summons; and (3) in the self's positing of another rational being. But how does Fichte understand each of these three stages in his transcendental account of the conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness? Exactly what does the summons add to the positing of the not-I and the determination that it provides for the self as free

activity? And how does it lead to the external, other person—the other free and rational being—and the self's relation to it?

These are among the questions that any complete account of Fichte's deduction must answer. Let us start with the proof for the second theorem in Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right*. The theorem is this: "The finite rational being cannot ascribe to itself a free efficacy in the sensible world without also ascribing such efficacy to others, and thus without also presupposing the existence of other finite rational beings outside of itself" (FNR 29; GN 30). In other words, a rational subject cannot take itself to be acting freely without also taking other free rational beings to be doing the same and hence without also "presupposing" finite rational beings other than itself. Prior to this in the text, Fichte had argued that a finite rational subject cannot take itself to act freely unless it takes itself to be acting on an independently existing object, which limits that subject's activity (FNR 18–29; GN 17–29). He now claims that the subject's consciousness of its own activity—its taking itself to be acting freely—depends upon prior consciousness of free activity; but this chain cannot extend back infinitely, each such moment of consciousness depending upon a prior one, without end. At some point, this consciousness of the subject's activity must be grounded beyond itself. For if it were not, "consciousness can be explained only circularly; thus, it cannot be explained at all, and so it appears to be impossible" (FNR 29–30; GN 30). But, and this is crucial, the consciousness of the subject's free activity must be grounded both beyond itself and within itself. For this reason, the main purpose of Fichte's deduction is to show how the relation between the object of the free activity and that activity itself must be understood as a kind of "synthesis"; this is why his proof directs us first to a summons and then to another person who issues that summons. The subject can be determined only if it determines itself, and it can do this only if it is summoned by another to do so.

The core of Fichte's argument takes up only a few pages in his account, but they are a very dense set of pages indeed (FNR 30–5; GN 30–7). What we need is an object that is both an object of the subject's free activity and, in a sense, the very same as that free activity. As Fichte puts it,

> only if it is assumed that *the subject's efficacy* is synthetically unified with the *object* in one and the same moment, that the subject's efficacy is itself the object that is perceived and comprehended, and that the object is nothing other than the subject's efficacy (and thus that the two are same). (FNR 31; GN 32)

This synthesis, unity, or identity is the "absolute condition of self-consciousness" (FNR 31; GN 32). Fichte's point is that the subject is a subject only if it acts freely and is aware of itself as acting, but that requires the subject to act on something—call it the "object." However, if the object is other than the subject, it must already be grasped by the

subject prior to the subject recognizing itself as acting. The only way to terminate this regress or to interrupt this circle is to identify an object that is both other than the subject and related to it. And this is what leads Fichte to the concept of the "summons."

3. Fichte on Positing: Discovery or Creation?

In the next section, we shall turn to the summons and then to the key inference that takes Fichte from this concept to the other freely active subject that issues it. But it might be helpful to anticipate two ways of challenging Fichte's deduction.

First, we can see that Fichte is treating the summons as having two aspects: the *subjective* and the *objective*. A summons is an object of a subject's activity only if it in some way determines that activity and in this sense is identical with the activity as determined. At the same time, that determination cannot wholly be the product of the subject's activity itself; it must be a determining that comes from outside the subject. A "summons" or "call" or "claim" must be aimed at a subject and also come from another subject. Fichte's argument requires that a summons have these two aspects, but one can easily imagine the criticism that such a claim is tendentious and is itself an argument that raises the question it is tailored to answer. Fichte believes that a subject's awareness of its own free activity requires a special kind of object that is also identical to itself, but one might protest that Fichte has not *discovered* such an object as much as *created* one. We will return to this kind of criticism of Fichte below, but for the moment let us turn to a second, related challenge, which may very well be the one that Levinas, in his two comments on Fichte, is calling to our attention.

Levinas' challenge to Fichte concerns the notion of "positing."[11] What kind of activity is this? Is positing a form of discovery or is it a form of constitution? In the present case of the summons, does the subject discover a summons or does it constitute such an object? The way Levinas describes his disagreement with Fichte in *Otherwise Than Being* suggests that this is the kind of criticism that he has in mind. For Levinas, the other as the absolutely other, the face of the other person, is given to the self as an "epiphany": its moral bindingness in part comes from the fact that its *wholly other character* is an imposition, a claim, and a "putting into question," as he describes it (TI 75; *TI* 73). On Levinas' reading, what Fichte means by positing is an act of cognitive creation. Both the summons and the other person who issues it are products of the only agency available in Fichte's system, the free agency of the I as such. In short, while Levinas is very much a *realist* about the other—specifically, what he would call a Platonic realist—, he challenges Fichte

for being an uncompromising *idealist*, and for this reason a philosopher of totality.

For his part, Fichte is aware that identifying the most suitable object of the subject's efficacy is problematic. The very same object must be itself free and yet constrained, self-determining and yet determined. What kind of object might have these seemingly contradictory properties? Fichte never says that one and the same thing must be constrained and free in the same way or in the same act or in the same respect; it would be sufficient if the same thing were constrained in one respect and free in another. It is therefore not surprising that he suggests that the subject and object are "unified if we think of the subject's being determined as *its being-determined to be self-determining* [*ein Bestimmtseyn des Subjects zur Selbstbestimmung*]," and hence if we take the object to be "a summons to the subject, calling upon it to resolve to exercise its efficacy" (FNR 31; GN 33). The appropriate object that unifies the external and the internal is a *call* to the subject to respond by acting freely. But then we must ask: How can the subject's self-awareness be simultaneously constrained and the object of a free subject?

Fichte takes up this puzzle in a long, two-paragraph parenthesis (FNR 32–3; GN 33–4). His basic idea, we may recall, is that in order for this object, the "summons," to be both subject and object, we must distinguish between the subject as determined and the subject as self-determining. The latter is unproblematic, for it is what we would expect of a subject that is self-conscious, that is, conscious of itself as a freely active being. The former, however, is problematic. How can the subject be aware of itself as an object, as *being-determined*? Fichte's answer is this: only if the subject finds itself "as determined to be self-active by means of an external check [*Anstoss*], which must nevertheless leave the subject in full possession of its freedom to be self-determining" (FNR 32; GN 33). This possibility is about something external to the subject that is a constraint but that at the same time leaves "the subject in full possession of its freedom" (FNR 32; GN 33). Whatever this check is, it cannot necessitate the subject to act, for if it did, then the subject's activity would not be free. Whatever the external object is that is present to the subject, it must make it possible for the subject to act freely toward it, but at the same time allow it to refrain from acting as well. Hence, Fichte seems to suggest, the check must be a presence toward which the subject can act or refuse to act, which it can appropriate or reject, and toward which it can act positively or negatively. It is the idea of a summons—a calling upon that is also a demand—that, for Fichte, captures these twin dimensions. It is a constraint that does not simply prevent, block or limit; it also provokes a form of activity.

4. Fichte's Inference to Another Rational Being

This brings us to the final step of Fichte's deduction. What the self-conscious subject has posited so far is the summons, and the point Fichte now makes is that there must be something external to the subject that is the ground of the summons. This external something must be necessary, posited simultaneously with the summons, and sensibly expressed, much like the summons. Fichte here calls the summons an "influence" on the subject, and he argues that this influence must be determinate (FNR 34; GN 35–6). The summons cannot, however, determine the subject causally; rather, it must appeal to the subject to determine itself, as we just noted. But this means that the subject to whom the summons is addressed must first be able to "understand and comprehend" the summons, and thus "the external being that is posited as the cause of the summons must at the very least presuppose the possibility that the subject is capable of understanding and comprehending; otherwise its summons to the subject would have no purpose at all" (FNR 35; GN 36). The being that issues the summons must itself have a concept of the subject to whom the summons is issued, and therefore the being must itself be an intelligence.[12]

Later on, Fichte tells us that the positing of the summons is part of an exposition and so is a mere philosophical elucidation of what self-consciousness requires, namely a synthesis of being determined and determining itself (FNR 31; GN 33). Yet he also says that the summons cannot be an object of inner sense; it must be an object of outer sense and the cause of the summons must also be an external cause (FNR 32; GN 33). In light of Levinas' criticism, then, we must ask: Is this still to treat positing as discovery? Or has Fichte simply helped himself to the notion of "externality," so that it is hard to say that the summoner is a genuinely independent being? Levinas takes our subjectivity to require an independent being and claims as well that the summons to which his account points must be imposed and not posited. But, as we shall see, Levinas' criticism rests largely on his doubts that Fichte's account provides access to an independently existing other person.

5. The Target of Levinas' Criticism of Fichte

Levinas' conception of the "face" is precisely the conception of a real, existing other person, and for that reason the face cannot be an object of reflection in any ordinary way. As Levinas puts it, it is beyond intentionality in the Husserlian sense and thus beyond comprehension. To be sure, we engage with and encounter other persons in our daily lives but relating to "the face of the other [*le visage de l'autre*]" is to reach, somehow, beyond the boundaries of concepts, reason, and all

the determinations that make up ordinary experience.[13] It is vital for Levinas that we encounter others in both ways. Even without further elaboration, then, it should be clear that what Levinas means by the absolute alterity of the face of the other and what Fichte means by the other rationally free agent, who must be posited if the subject is to be free, are not one and the same. Moreover, the Levinasian relation to the other is not the same connection as the Fichtean relation to the other rational agent. It is no wonder that Levinas' criticism of Fichte is a criticism of his idealism. To him, Fichte simply presents an earlier version of the positions Hegel, Heidegger, and so many others in the tradition of western philosophy that Levinas disparagingly calls "autonomous."

We can now distinguish three levels at which to compare Levinas and Fichte. One is the metaphysical level (concerning first principles); a second is the legal level (concerning rights); and a third is the moral level (concerning duties). As we noted above, Levinas' passing comments about Fichte concern primarily the metaphysical level. He takes the face of the other person to be absolutely different from what Fichte calls the "I as such," and he claims, in a highly idiosyncratic way, that the subject's relation to that absolute other is wholly passive, receptive, and orienting. Moreover, Levinas takes Fichte to deny that such otherness is possible and disagrees with Fichte's denial that there is anything in consciousness that is not posited by consciousness (OB 101; AE 127). The subject does have a "relationship with exteriority" that is of a different sort, which he calls by a host of terms, among them "obsession," "substitution," "proximity," and "responsibility" (OB 100–1, 113–8, 124; AE 127, 144–56, 159). Levinas says nothing, however, about the legal and moral levels of Fichte's thought. Yet it is here that we gain insight into a number of affinities in how Levinas and Fichte view second-person responsibility.

6. The Role of Sociality in Fichte's *System of Ethics*

Fichte introduces the social character of human existence in the second section of *The System of Ethics* (1798), titled "The Material Content of the Moral Law, or Systematic Survey of Our Duties."[14] Here Fichte seeks to examine the conditions of action available to us in the sensible world that give substance to the moral law and its final end. As he puts it, "the final end of the moral law is absolute independence and self-sufficiency, not merely with respect to our will, for the latter is always independent, but also with respect to our entire being" (SE 198–9; SS 209). Actions that move us along the path toward complete self-sufficiency are those that the moral law will require of us. In this sense, our duties are those actions that the I and its rational nature determine to be the best

path to self-sufficiency. But since we cannot will the totality of our drive to self-sufficiency all at once, every determinate duty will be limited in its content. The question Fichte puts before us, then, is: What limitations are constitutive of the individual I as such? To act upon these limitations—"to preserve them and to bring them to perfection," as he puts it—will yield material content for the moral law (SE 76; SS 75).[15]

In *The System of Ethics*, Fichte identifies three limitations: corporeity (the condition of the I's embodiment) (SE 203–6; SS 213–7), spontaneity (the condition of the I's intelligence) (SE 209–10; SS 219–21), and sociality (the condition of the I's relation with others) (SE 210–3; SS 221–5). Concerning the last, Fichte reminds us that the individual I must be limited, and since the I is free activity, it must be limited by another free activity:

> The I is absolutely unable to appropriate to itself any free activity unless the latter is a quantum, and—given that every quantum is necessarily limited—the I is therefore unable to appropriate to itself any free activity without at the same time positing, along with this act of thinking . . . another free activity, one which, to this extent, does not belong to the I. (SE 208; SS 219)

Yet, as Fichte goes on to explain, this limiting free activity cannot be a merely imaginable activity of another I. It must be a real and actual free activity of another I, and hence when I take myself to be free, I find myself to be free precisely insofar as this other activity limits my own freedom. Fichte's point is that when the I becomes conscious of itself—as free activity—that activity must already be in place; the subject's self-consciousness does not make it so but finds it so. And this means that there must be another freely acting being that limits the subject. As Fichte puts it:

> To say, "my self-determination is present without any help from me," can mean only that it is present as a *concept*, or, in short, that I am summoned [*aufgefordert*] to determine myself in this way. Just as surely as I understand this summons, I also think of my self-determination as something given in this summons; and I am given to myself as free in the concept of this summons. (SE 209; SS 220)

In grasping a summons, then, I am both determined by it and determine myself to act in response to it. This brings Fichte to the next step of his argument, which is the claim that "I cannot comprehend the summons to self-activity without ascribing it to an actual being outside of myself" (SE 209; SS 220). Here, as in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte moves from an exposition of the summons to an inference of its source, that is, to the rational and free being issuing the summons, and then to the conclusion that "it is a condition of self-consciousness, of I-hood, to assume that there is an actual rational being outside of oneself" (SE 210; SS 221).

But what is the new moral dimension of this argument? What follows from the fact that my individuality is dependent on another rational being who summons me? It could be argued that Fichte's treatment of the summons gets us no further than a descriptive claim about how we are constituted in a second-person relation, without getting us to a prescriptive claim about how we ought to regulate our conduct within that relation. Yet, this assertion overlooks the fact that Fichte's strategy of argument in *The System of Ethics* is teleological: it asks what limitations make up the individual I, and what ways of acting upon those limitations approximate the final end of the moral law, that is, absolute self-sufficiency. This is how Fichte moves from corporeity as a necessary condition of my individuality to the conclusion that I have a duty to preserve and perfect my body, and likewise, how he moves from spontaneity as a necessary condition of my individuality to the conclusion that I have a duty to preserve and perfect my mind. Having established that the freedom of the other who summons me is also a necessary condition of my individuality, it follows from Fichte's line of argument that I have a duty to preserve and perfect the freedom of the other.

This does not mean that duties to others and duties to body or duties to mind are equal in normative weight; and this point is crucial. Fichte argues that sociality is unlike the limitations of my corporeity and spontaneity in that the former constitutes "the root [*Wurzel*] of my individuality" (SE 211; SS 222). While I cannot exist either without a body or without a mind, my capacity for free efficacy is conditioned by the summons of another, and for that reason the limitation imposed upon me by the other is a deeper condition for being a self. But what does this entail?

The conclusion Fichte draws here has far-reaching implications for his ethics, since he ends up affirming the asymmetry of self-other obligations in a way that puts him in closer proximity to Levinas. All duties, Fichte now argues, have the freedom of others as their point of reference—that is, the material content for the self-sufficiency of reason as such (SE 220; SS 231). Actions that pertain to the preservation and perfection of the self are "mediated" or "conditioned": they are means to an end beyond the individual I, the rational community outside of me (SE 246; SS 257). Thus, the drive to self-sufficiency is not limited to the particular individual's freedom; it is, instead, the end of reason itself, and since this end of reason is everyone's ultimate goal, it must be realized in the duties of reciprocity found in a moral community, or what Fichte calls the principles of the "reciprocal interaction of everyone with everyone for the purpose of producing communally shared convictions" (SE 224; SS 236). Obligations to others therefore enjoy primacy in Fichte's ethics, and he is quite explicit about this: "This ought to be the goal of

all our thinking and acting, and even of our individual cultivation: our final end is not ourselves but everyone" (SE 241; SS 253).[16]

7. Responsibility for the Other in Levinas

To deepen our comparison, let us now turn to consider Levinas' view of ethics. A good place to start is his paper "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," which claims that Descartes' position is an anticipation of the face-to-face encounter and a confirmation of an alternative tradition in western philosophy. It is well-known to readers of Levinas that his appeal to Descartes' conception of the "idea of the Infinite" is to its formal character and not to its role in Descartes' Third Meditation, where Descartes presents an argument for the existence of God.[17] Levinas is making note of Descartes' belief that we do in fact have an idea of the Infinite and hence that there is a relation between the subject, specifically the subject's consciousness, and the Infinite itself.[18] We can and do think the Infinite, and while our conscious grasp of such an idea is within our control, the fact that it is "of the Infinite" cannot be up to us but must be "caused" by the Infinite itself. In short, Descartes' "idea of the Infinite" is formally about the relation between the subject and something absolutely different, the Infinite itself. In traditional theological terms, the "idea of the Infinite" expresses the immanence in the human of divine transcendence. And in Levinas' metaphysical terms, it expresses the relation between the subject and the absolutely other.

Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, claims that while Descartes attests to such a foundational relationship, he mistakes its character. To Descartes, the relation is cognitive or epistemic, while Levinas claims that it is in reality ethical (TI 211; *TI* 232–3). This self-transcendence is realized not in thought but rather in the practical relation between one person and another. It is this aspect of our social relations that gives rise to our responsibility to each and every other person, precisely insofar as it gives rise to the other person's "calling into question" of the self, that is, the plea for acknowledgement and acceptance. Even this brief paraphrase of the "idea of the Infinite" in Levinas is suggestive. For, the absolutely other, simply in virtue of its presence to the self, makes an infinite claim on the self; it calls out to the other to provide "aid" and "succor," and its call amounts to both a petition and a command, at once. As Levinas puts it, the other speaks to the self from a "height" and out of its suffering, its nakedness, its nudity, and its vulnerability (TI 75; *TI* 72–3). Responding to the other is, for the self, unavoidable, as is responding for the other and being accountable to the other.

We have not given any arguments for Levinas' account; in fact, his arguments are not direct and decisive as much as they are suggestive

and provocative. But enough has been said for us to consider how—and whether—Fichte's "summons" and Levinas' "idea of the Infinite" might be thought to introduce similar features into our idea of the second-person relation. An initial observation is that while Fichte's summons is posited by the reflective free agent as a condition for making its free activity possible, for Levinas the call is grasped by the subject as the appeal and force of the other person's presence. Moreover, Fichte proceeds to *infer* the other free, rational agent as the source of the summons, whereas Levinas takes the self's obligation to respond to be the way that the other is *experienced*.[19] Of course, for Levinas, "experience" is not to be taken literally, nor would it be correct to say that the subject "feels," "grasps," or "understands" the other's presence. But he does want us to appreciate that every interpersonal relation we have involves this sense of responsiveness and that the relation to the other is immediate and not an inference.

Having said that, we can now consider some of the vocabulary that Levinas uses to understand how the other's presence as appeal does inform the identity of the self. Recall that, for Fichte, the "summons" is identical with the self as "determined and self-determining." In the face-to-face relation, for Levinas, the other determines the self to be responsive and hence makes it responsible. If the "objective" side of the face-to-face is the other person's claim on the self and its calling the self into question, then the "subjective" side of the face-to-face is the infinite responsibility for the other that constitutes the self's identity. In virtue of the face-to-face, the self is "substitution for" and "obsession with" and "being hostage to" and "being persecuted by" the other. Levinas also calls this "disinterestedness," and he says that the other's presence "hollows out" the self, as it were. These expressions are all from Levinas' later work—the essays "Essence and Disinterestedness" and "Substitution," and his book *Otherwise Than Being*—and what they share is the way in which the self, while wholly separate from the other person, is nonetheless affected by it—primordially, we might say.[20] Its interests, desires, and needs are overwhelmed, so that the self starts out, metaphorically speaking, as the other person's custodian and servant, its delegate or hostage, both different from the other and yet standing in relation to it. It is no surprise that this stratum of all of our interpersonal relations is best depicted, for Levinas, not by the relation between two adult rational agents but rather by the relation between a new-born infant, helpless and needy, and its mother (OB 75, 108; AE 95, 137).

8. The Second-Person Relation

Where does all this leave our comparison? From what we have discussed

so far, it seems safe to say that both Fichte and Levinas view the second-person relation in the following way:

> (ASYMMETRY) Second-person responsibility is asymmetrical because responsibility to the other takes priority over responsibility to the self. Duties to others are primary.
>
> (IMMEDIACY) Responsibility to the other is an immediate responsibility because it is for its own sake and not for any other aim or end. Duties to others are unconditioned.
>
> (PARTICULARITY) Second-person responsibility concerns a particular other. Duties to others are person-to-person.

Among these three views, the last may be less evident in Fichte's case, since he describes our final end in seemingly impersonal terms, "everyone [*Alle*]" (SE 241; SS 253). Yet it is important to observe that, for Fichte, we can approximate the self-sufficiency of the rational community only by acting in relation to specific others: my duty is always a duty to a particular *you* in any given situation of choice. Indeed, Fichte is opposed to making generalized calculations at the interpersonal level, say, about what would promote the greatest good for the greatest number of persons. Later in *The System of Ethics*, for example, we are presented with a thought experiment in which "the bodies and lives of several of my fellow human beings are in danger," and here Fichte poses the difficult question: "How shall I choose whom to save" (SE 289; SS 304)? In normal circumstances, he says, I should choose to save those in most need of help ("children, sick people and old people") (ibid.). But if I have a personal relationship to one of them, then I should give that individual precedence on the grounds that "a particular duty always takes precedence over a universal one" (ibid.). However, Fichte argues that if no such personal tie is present, "I should rescue the first person I can rescue, *the first person I see*" (ibid.; emphasis added). So even when my responsibility is not borne from a personal relationship (as it is, he thinks, with one's spouse or child), I ought never to deliberate from a point of view across persons. My obligations remain person-to-person in all cases.

What is interesting is that these three overlapping ways of viewing second-person responsibility are the product of very different argumentative paths. Fichte's path begins with the first principle of his system of ethics, which he says escapes ordinary comprehension but admits of an "intellectual intuition" (SE 50; SS 47). We can, as philosophers, *immediately grasp* the self-activity of our own I and thereby *postulate* the self-activity of "the I as such." It is only when Fichte asks how an individual I is possible that he invokes the concept of a summons and argues, as we have seen, that an original intersubjective relation lies at the root of my finite self. This point is worth emphasizing. The very notion of

a second-person relation emerges in *The System of Ethics* when Fichte turns to the question of how the moral law can have material content and apply to a set of substantive duties. Prior to this question, Fichte's investigation proceeds strictly from the I as such, which is a thoroughly transpersonal concept. Levinas, by contrast, has no first principle, at least not in any conventional sense of the term, since the absolute alterity of the other does not serve to ground a science of ethics. For that reason, it is all the more striking that while Fichte begins with the absolute freedom of the I, and Levinas begins with the absolute alterity of the other, both end up characterizing the second-person relation in terms of asymmetry, immediacy, and particularity.

One can, however, anticipate the criticism from Levinas that Fichte's first principle, his starting point in the I as such, leaves him unable to grasp the most important feature of the second-person relation, which we might call:

> (IRREDUCIBILITY) Responsibility to the other is irreducibly second-personal: there is, outside this relation, no other source of its normativity.

For Levinas, the other, and not the I (and certainly not Fichte's first principle of the I) is the source of moral normativity. Respect for the other person arises directly as a result of the other's right to be treated with concern, and this right is another way of understanding the self's infinite responsibilities to each and every other person. For Fichte, the source of moral normativity is the final end of reason as such, and my duties to others come into the picture only when we ask how a command to approximate this end can have material content. Particularity is a feature of the second-person relation, for Fichte, because absolute self-sufficiency is an unrealizable ideal; that is why we must always act in determinate ways, in relation to our bodies and minds as well as to other people. The challenge we can suppose Levinas offering, then, is that Fichte's ethics has no room for genuine responsibility, since the orientation of his system, from start to end, is the self-sufficiency of the I. We see that, for Levinas, our responsibility to the other is irreducibly second-personal only when we start from the absolute alterity of the other. The point of origin, we might say, makes all the difference for how we understand ethics.

It is not difficult to imagine how Fichte would reply were he presented with such an argument. A recurring theme in his writings is that all philosophical systems divide into two standpoints: the standpoint of idealism, which gives primacy to the I, and the standpoint of dogmatism, which gives the thing-in-itself primacy (see, e.g., SE 30–4, 126–30, 214–7; SS 24–9, 132–6, 225–9). On the basis of this distinction, Fichte would likely say that treating the second person as reducible to the principle of the I is not a criticism at all but a clear and definitive statement of the

system of freedom he wishes to defend. He would likely accuse Levinas of denying the freedom of reason, in the manner of the dogmatist, and of harboring faith in the "not-I." At this stage in our comparison, it may seem that Fichte and Levinas have lost any common thread to keep a dialogue alive. Yet, it is worth pointing out that Levinas is closer to the spirit of idealism, at least as Fichte defines it, than to the spirit of dogmatism, since he is not reifying the concept of the other or treating it as something inert, the thing-in-itself. Levinas' other and Fichte's I have this much in common: both escape comprehension by ordinary understanding and yet both admit of a certain disclosure—either by intellectual intuition or by epiphany.

9. A Final Worry: Levinas on Asymmetry

For Levinas, our obligations to others, the ones we act upon in particular circumstances, are the outcome of deciding in those circumstances how to respond. Yet, he maintains that our responsibilities to others are unlimited. There is no upper limit to the asymmetrical relation of responsibility that defines the self and its moral activity in the face-to-face encounter. On this issue, Fichte would appear to be more faithful to the Kantian tradition in leaving room for permissible self-regard, and he even distinguishes duties of self-perfection at the bodily and cognitive levels of human life, as we touched on above. In the history of ethics, Levinas is virtually alone in claiming that the subject's relation to the other is one-way and asymmetrical and that the subject is completely bound to the force of the other's claim on it. Levinas is both emphatic and even dramatic in the way he makes this point; he makes it again and again and in a host of ways. But it appears to come at the cost of excluding symmetry and reciprocity in the second-person relation—and many today will no doubt find that cost far too high to accept.

Of course, once we see that Levinas associates this view with a strand of western thought in which the human encounter with the divine is one of total subordination, his position might seem less surprising. It might seem that what Levinas provides is a humanistic interpretation of a view of divine otherness that one associates with figures from Saint Augustine and Martin Luther to Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth in the Christian tradition, with neo-Platonism and Descartes, as well as with a number of Jewish thinkers. Still, even if Levinas is indebted to these intellectual lineages, one can appreciate that privileging such a relation with absolute otherness in human intersubjectivity is novel. But this view might also strike the contemporary reader as strange. For why should we think that every interpersonal encounter involves a face-to-face relation, in which the subject is completely passive and the

other makes an infinite claim against the subject for acknowledgement, acceptance, assistance, and more? Not even Fichte, who is otherwise committed to a version of asymmetry, is willing to go this far.

In thinking through Levinas' position, it is important to begin with our ordinary, everyday relations with others and to realize that every relation is particular and complex. That is, every relation is an event that happens between an I and a particular other person, and it has many dimensions: each I has a vast array of determinate relations with every person she encounters. Some of these dimensions depend upon special relations we have with others; some depend upon circumstances or features that we share or that situate us. Our relations, moreover, can be described from our first-person perspectives or from a detached, third-person perspective. Among this myriad of dimensions, some will invite or call for responses on our part. In fact, as Levinas sees it, there is a sense in which they all do, and since, for Levinas, we are related to every other person in a complex of ways, there is a sense in which each of us, as a subject, is infinitely responsive to each and every other person. Further, we are not only capable of responding to the other person; we ought also to respond, and the "ought" is grounded in the special way that each other person "makes a claim against us" or "calls us into question" because she depends upon us, needs us, and cannot do without us.

Levinas makes this point by saying that encountering the face of the other person is to be infinitely responsible for and to the other person (TI 244; *TI* 273–4). The normativity of this relation is not already present in the myriad of ordinary relations we have with others; it comes with this distinctive relation, the face-to-face, which is there along with or together with all the others. But unlike them, it is not wholly immanent to our natural existence. It is present not "horizontally," we might say, but "vertically." It comes obliquely with every relation and with every particular other. Levinas' picture of second-person normativity is a kind of transcendental one. The face of the other is the source of moral normativity, because it brings the force of an "ought" into our lives, one that arises out of the very particularized dependency of our social relations. As a transcendental structure that is wholly normative, the face-to-face relation is never realized perfectly or completely in ordinary experience.[21] At any moment, what we decide and what we do depends upon many considerations, but, if we are sensitive to our infinite responsibilities, our decisions and actions will be guided by this orientation and the particular claims of others, whose presence we take to be relevant to our decisions and our conduct.

Returning to the worry that Levinas' commitment to asymmetry is too strong, we can now begin to see that one-way or exclusive asymmetry occurs only within the vertical structure of the face-to-face encounter. In ordinary circumstances, when we deliberate, choose, and act, the

relations we have with others are interactive, often symmetrical and reciprocal, and interdependent to some degree. Within the horizontal structure of everyday life, then, even if the focus is on you and me, each of us is responsible to and for the other; each of us must consider how to act toward the other, what to say, what to do. And when there are more than two of us, as there always are given the countless number of relations in which we are involved at any moment, the complexity of every decision and all the various circumstantial factors at play mean that our interpersonal responsibilities will always be qualified and regimented or orchestrated and arranged. Levinas calls this everyday project of employing categories and principles to make decisions about how to respond to the claim of others upon us, "justice," but we might also call it moral life and even, at one level, political life (TI 71–2; *TI* 67–8).

In the end, while Levinas' conception of what grounds moral normativity in our social and political lives is utterly particular, involving an infinitely ramified network of face-to-face relations, it is also completely universal, in that every person is related to every other in the same way and with the same original responsibility to each and every other person. Our social lives consist of a "fraternity" (OB 82; AE 104), as Levinas calls it, and it involves a form of mutual respect of every person for every other, but this respect still refers to each person's infinite responsibility to every other person. While the subject's encounter with the other is unconditionally passive and asymmetrical at what we are calling the vertical level, our relations with others are often reciprocal and interdependent at the level of ordinary life. For Levinas, therefore, the infinite asymmetry characteristic of the face-to-face encounter does not exclude symmetry in the second-person relation but rather conditions its very possibility.

10. Conclusion

Levinas' brief comments on Fichte tell us that he did not study Fichte's writings systematically. If anything, Levinas' knowledge of Fichte was based on the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, which introduces the concept of the I as the first principle of all philosophy. Given his limited focus on this text, it is not surprising that Levinas' comments are of a critical bent, since Fichte's privileging of the I would have struck him as yet another instance in the history of philosophy where consciousness, reason, and being take priority. As we have seen, Fichte's later works, *Foundations of Natural Right* and *The System of Ethics*, both assign the second person a central role. In this paper, we have tried to show that important differences separate Levinas and Fichte, differences that trace back to their ideas of how philosophy should proceed and where

philosophy should begin. But we have also uncovered a set of affinities in how they view the second-person relation, and these affinities are of lasting value, if only in raising a challenge to much of the scholarship today on the second-person concept. For all their differences, Levinas and Fichte agree that second-person responsibility is an asymmetrical relation, and this claim, while not part of our current philosophical discourse, certainly merits further study.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 68; henceforth TI, followed by page number; *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 64; henceforth *TI*, followed by page number.
2. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," chap. 4 of *Otherwise Than Being, or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), pp. 99–130; henceforth OB, followed by page number; "La substitution," chap. 4 of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 125–66; henceforth AE, followed by page number.
3. We find a similar remark in a footnote to *Humanism of the Other*, in which Levinas defines his position "against Fichte and against Sartre, who think that everything that is in the subject, all the way to the subject itself, goes back to a position due to the subject itself" (*Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006], p. 73n. 13).
4. In his review of *Fichte's* Foundations of Natural Right, George di Giovanni criticizes Allen Wood and John Russon for being "too rash comparing Fichte's phenomenology of 'face' with Levinas', which is religiously motivated" (review of *Fichte's* Foundations of Natural Right*: A Critical Guide*, ed. Gabriel Gottlieb, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal, https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/fichtes-foundations-of-natural-right-a-critical-guide/ [accessed August 17, 2020]). Continuing in this vein, he writes: "For Fichte, 'face' is a subject's internally motivated idealizing projection. For Levinas, it constitutes rather a self-revelatory and independently imposing presence." But di Giovanni does not elaborate upon this contrast, nor does he explore further potential affinities between Fichte and Levinas, which is what we aim to do in this paper.
5. A truism in this recent literature (which includes the work of Peter Frederick Strawson, T.M. Scanlon, Jürgen Habermas, Stephen Darwall, R. Jay Wallace, and Evan Thompson) is that second-person responsibility is fundamentally symmetrical: my claims upon you are equal and reciprocal to your claims upon me. Levinas and Fichte both reject this, as we shall see below. Another thinker who holds this minority position is K.E. Løgstrup (see *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Theodor I. Jensen, Gary

Puckering, and Eric Watkins [Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1997]). For further discussion, see Robert Stern's helpful text "'Duty and Virtue Are Moral Introversions': On Løgstrup's Critique of Morality," chap. 13 of *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], pp. 224–43).

6. In one of the very few treatments of the Fichte-Levinas connection in the secondary literature, Ives Radrizzani argues that Levinas' position is ultimately flawed (see Radrizzani, "Das Selbst, der Andere und die Grenze bei Fichte und Levinas," *Fichte-Studien* 37 [2013], pp. 319–32). We shall propose a more charitable reading in the final section of this paper.

7. For a valuable account of Fichte's treatment of the problem of intersubjectivity as the problem of other minds, see Paul Franks, "The Discovery of the Other: Cavell, Fichte, and Skepticism," in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 166–203, esp. 175–9.

8. See Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking through the* Wissenschaftslehre*: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 174–5, esp. n. 58; J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right: According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. Michael Baur, ed. Frederick Neuhouser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); henceforth FNR, followed by page number; *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*, in pt. 1 of *Zur Rechts- und Sittenlehre*, vol. 3 of *Sämmtliche Werke* (Berlin: Veit, 1845); henceforth GN, followed by page number; J.G. Fichte, *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794–95)*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Breazeale argues against Eckhart Förster and others who opine that Fichte already has the summons in mind in 1794 (see Eckhart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012], pp. 210–1; cited in Breazeale, *Thinking through the* Wissenschaftslehre, p. 174). Breazeale also notes Fichte's indebtedness to Jacobi, but he claims that in both Jacobi's "Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn" and his "David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism," it is clear that *Du* or Thou refers to an external object and not to another self or subject (Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel* Allwill, trans. George di Giovanni [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994], pp. 231, 277). But it is not so clear to all; the *Du* may refer to the You or Thou of revelation (see Paul Franks, "Fichte's Kabbalistic Realism: Summons as *zimzum*," in *Fichte's* Foundations of Natural Right*: A Critical Guide*, ed. Gabriel Gottlieb [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016], pp. 100–1; see also Breazeale, "*Anstoß*, Abstract Realism, and the Finitude of the I," chap. 7 of *Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 156–96, esp. 171–86).

9. Breazeale, *Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre*, p. 175.

10. Ibid.

11. Thanks to Robert Stern for pressing this issue.

12. Fichte describes the skeleton of the deduction in this way: "The rational being cannot posit itself as such, except in response to a summons calling

upon it to act freely. But if there is such a summons, then the rational being must necessarily posit a rational being outside itself as the cause of the summons, and thus it must posit a rational being outside itself in general" (FNR 37; GN 39). Fichte details the steps (FNR 35; GN 36–7), but we can skip over them. The crucial point is that the external cause of the summons must be a free rational being—i.e., another person, like the subject. Fichte elaborates and clarifies these final steps in terms of Kant's notion of reflective judgment (FNR 35–7; GN 36–9).

13. In his relatively early work, for example in his 1957 essay, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," and in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas calls attention to the Cartesian "idea of the Infinite" and the role it plays for Descartes in the Third Meditation ("Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998], pp. 47–60; TI 50; *TI* 42; see René Descartes, "Third Meditation: *The Existence of God*," in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in vol. 2 of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], pp. 24–36). What attracts Levinas is the structural form of this notion; it represents the presence of what is wholly other, the Infinite, in the subject as an idea—i.e., the phrase represents Descartes' belief that human beings have a relation with what is wholly other or radically different. For Descartes, this relation is epistemic or cognitive; for Levinas, the relation to the face is ethical; but both share an idea of the form of the embodied subject's relatedness with what is wholly other than it. In a sense, then, "the idea of the Infinite" is Levinas' replacement for the Fichtean "summons," as Levinas sees it.

14. J.G. Fichte, "The Material Content of the Moral Law, or Systematic Survey of Our Duties," section 2 of *The System of Ethics: According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 196–242; henceforth SE, followed by page number; "Ueber das materiale des Sittengesetzes, oder systematische Uebersicht unserer Pflichten," section 2 of *Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*, in pt. 2 of *Zur Rechts- und Sittenlehre*, vol. 4 of *Sämmtliche Werke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), pp. 206–53; henceforth SS, followed by page number.

15. For further discussion, see Owen Ware, *Fichte's Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

16. Elsewhere in *The System of Ethics*, Fichte says: "Everyone, however, with whom we are in any way acquainted becomes assigned to our care simply by virtue of this acquaintance; he becomes our neighbor and a part of our rational world [*Vernunftwelt*], just as the objects of our experience belong to our sensible world [*Sinnenwelt*]. We cannot abandon him unless we lack conscience" (SE 223; SS 235). Fichte also says that from a moral standpoint "all the human beings on earth" are to be viewed "as one single family—which is also what they ought gradually to become in actuality" (SE 327; SS 346).

17. For further discussion on this point, see Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 47–9.

18. See Descartes, *Meditations*, pp. 28–9.

19. That being said, Fichte anticipates aspects of Levinas' position later in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, in the context of asking how we can "schematize" the freedom of another rational being. His answer draws attention to features of the human form, from its "upright position," to the "eye," to the "mouth," and finally, to the "whole expressive face" (FNR 78; GN 74–5). Interestingly, Fichte then adds that "all . . . these things—not considered in isolation, the way philosophers split them up, but rather in their amazing, instantaneously grasped connection, as given to the senses—these are what compels everyone with a human countenance to recognize and respect the human shape everywhere" (FNR 78; GN 75).

20. Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," trans. Simon Critchley, Peter Atterton, and Graham Noctor; and "Essence and Disinterestedness," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 79–96; 109–28. The essay "Substitution" was extensively revised and later included as a chapter in *Otherwise Than Being* (see Adriaan T. Peperzak, preface to *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. xiii).

21. Here again there is a parallel to Løgstrup worth considering (see Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*).