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THE VACCINATION OF THE INFINITE:  
LEVINAS' METAPHYSICAL DESIRE AND THE CALL OF THE OTHER

**The Dialectics of Desire**

*Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (Duquesne University Press, 2009) began with a rather simple question of what to make of that unusual claim which plays such a central role in Levinas' philosophy: his identification of a *metaphysical desire* at work within the ethical predicament. I sought to answer this question by tracing the genealogy of Levinas' thought from his read of Plato on *eros* (chapter 1), through his re-interpretation of Descartes' idea of the infinite and the German Idealists account of longing (*sehnsucht*) (chapters 3 and 4) and terminating finally in his critical differentiation from Heidegger (chapter 2 and 5). It was my goal in doing so not only to un-pack what appears to be a concept in Levinas' account of the ethical life of the subject, but, moreover, to illuminate our own existential experience of desire in relation to the question of otherness.

Metaphysical Desire, according to Levinas, is a desire unlike any of our other more quotidian desires. Desire has of course been traditionally defined as: (1) arising out of some determinate lack, (2) proceeding towards some determinate presence or object, and (3) concluding in the satisfaction or restoration of the subject in the absorption of that object. Take hunger for example. Hunger emerges out of a nutritive lack within us, corresponds to some determinate object, say a ham sandwich (which once consumed and absorbed by the body restores us to our normal functional state), and rewards us with pleasure or satisfaction. Note that in such a desire it is the object, as the *end* of the desire (both its goal and its cessation), which sets its limit, de-fining it as it were. So, a desire which seeks food as an object and is satisfied in that object we call hunger, a desire which seeks drink we call thirst, a desire for sexual gratification we call lust, etc. The object, as the end of desire (both conceived as *telos* and *peras*) is what has traditionally been seen as what establishes its parameters as a definite and singular

phenomenon. Its object, conceived phenomenologically, appears to be what allows a desire to emerge as it does in a particular form.

Interpreted along these lines, it would seem that what would distinguish a particularly *metaphysical desire* would be the peculiar nature of its object, that it would lie *outside of or beyond (meta)* the realm of finite *being (physis)*. And, indeed, many have interpreted Levinas account of metaphysical desire in this way, as what has traditionally been termed a kind of *religious desire*, a desire which finds its object in the divine. After all, Levinas says himself that *metaphysical desire* is distinct in as much as it “tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other.”<sup>1</sup> One would not be remiss then, taking what they have inherited from the traditional account of desire, to assume that metaphysical desire is defined by some metaphysical object it pursues—such as the divine. Read in this way metaphysical desire would appear as emergent from the absence of its infinite object (read: God), perhaps as the result of sin or some other such fall from grace, and the move towards its final satisfaction in God’s eternal presence, say in Heaven. This is, for example, how Augustine understands the nature of religious desire in his *Confessions*. Therein, he writes that “our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee, oh God.”<sup>2</sup> Note that in this reading, operating as it does no differently than any other form of determinate desire, metaphysical desire becomes akin to something like a spiritual hunger with the divine functioning as little more than an infinite and transcendent ham sandwich, the object which promises to fill the infinite absence within the subject and slate its restlessness. This idea, or something like it, is what is expressed in the popular theological claim that there is a “God shaped hole in our hearts.” It should be clear that God, or perhaps the Other, becomes in this account a consumable object for the subject – an exceptional one, granted, but something which the subject pursues for its own satisfaction nonetheless. Isn’t this, after all, what is modeled in certain religious practices? Take the Christian liturgy of the Eucharist, for example, which makes this understanding explicit (“This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper,” etc.)

I argue that this is a misreading of Levinas’ account of metaphysical desire. Indeed, Levinas goes to great lengths to distinguish between what he calls *desire* and what he terms *need* or *hunger* which seems to function much more in line with the traditional account of the dialectical progress of desire. The origin of this potential misunderstanding, I think, is an incorrect pronunciation of Levinas’ phrase. The emphasis, of course, should fall not on the *desire*, but on the *metaphysical*.

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. William Watts (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1912), 1, 1.5.

### Levinas' METAPHYSICAL Desire

The concept of the metaphysical is in many ways *the* central theme in Levinas' work. It is, in fact, the subject of the first three lines of *Totality and Infinity*. There he writes, quoting Rimbaud, that "[t]he true life is absent.' But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi."<sup>3</sup> Metaphysical desire is thus distinguished, he claims, in that it moves, as we have already quoted, "towards something else entirely, toward the *absolutely other*."<sup>4</sup> Now, we should follow Levinas closely here, the metaphysical is not *merely* other, it is *absolutely* other. Its otherness is not, therefore, defined in contrast to subjectivity. Instead, it is the otherwise *par excellence* – its vale and meaning belong wholly to itself. As such, the metaphysical is, for Levinas, fundamentally superior – not merely superior to us, but superior as such. It is situated, he says, on a *height*.<sup>5</sup> The metaphysical is thus the transcendent proper.

As such, metaphysical *desire* expresses a kind of *transcendence*, a movement towards the *transcendent*. Defined as it is in relation to this transcendent, absolutely other, the transcendence exhibited in metaphysical desire is not merely that of the *I*'s non-coincidence with itself, although this too is part of it. It is not merely a matter of alienation, discontent and restlessness as experienced in hunger. Instead this transcendence pays homage to the *height* inhabited by the metaphysical. The transcendence exhibited in our longings is thus an elevation, an ascent – it is what Levinas calls a *trans-ascendence*.<sup>6</sup> This movement is thus not defined in terms of the subject *who* desires, but in terms of the trajectory of that desire, in terms of its movement towards the superlative and elevated Other.

But what is the nature of this movement? Towards what does metaphysical desire strive? It is at this point we must make a crucial point concerning Levinas' concept of this metaphysical height aspired to in this desire, and this is in many ways a crucial distinction to understanding his thought as a whole as well. Though the Other pursued by longing seems to ring in the register of the religious, nominated as it is by Levinas as transcendent, superlative, elevated and *meta*-physical, this Other must not be understood as situated beyond the pale of our everyday experiences. Though in this absolute Otherness Levinas seems to be talking about what we might call God, metaphysical desire is not ultimately for Levinas about some unmediated relation to the divine. After all, the divine Other does not appear, it is not a phenomenon to which we can relate. We cannot see God nor hear God. God has no borders, edges, limits, *fine* or *peras* which define it or set it apart as a phenomenon which can be perceived. And, yet, in some sense, an absolute Otherness does appear, argues Levinas, in the concrete determinate Other, the Other person, the neighbor, orphan, widow, colleague, student etc. whom we can never fully totalize, and who resists our attempts to describe him or her through finite appropriations. This Other who appears to us and solicits us, whom we encounter everyday as

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<sup>3</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35, 200, 297.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

a determinate finite appearance, remains, despite its appearance, absolutely elusive, still always Other than his or her finite appearance. This determinate Other who speaks to us and has a name, cannot be reduced or fully defined by his or her apparent traits, physical or otherwise.<sup>7</sup> No finite list of descriptors can ever capture the infinite otherness of the Other. Who you are, in other words, is not totalized by how you appear. This infinite otherness which expresses itself in the incompletable singularity of a determinately finite Other is what Levinas terms the *face*.<sup>8</sup>

### Ethical Desire and the Other

Metaphysical desire, understood as the movement towards this absolute Other who appears with a face, though definitely a religious or spiritual phenomenon, nevertheless remains inexorably bound to the human. Thus, though *perhaps* a religious phenomenon, metaphysical desire is an experience which is, for Levinas, fundamentally articulated in the realm of the *social*. It is a phenomenon which speaks in the language of *ethics*. Or, as Levinas puts it, using a visual metaphor rather than an auditory one, "Ethics is the spiritual optics," – ethics is the lens or window through which we might perceive the transcendent (God).<sup>9</sup> Put another way, the finite face of the Other shines with the infinite light of the divine. It is in the face of the concrete other (the human) that we see the absolutely Other (the divine). The movement of metaphysical desire is thus for Levinas simultaneously vertical and horizontal – or to put it strangely, *it moves upwards by moving laterally, by reaching out towards the neighbor*.

But note that even this approach towards the human Other, conflated as it is with the divine, is marked by the same absolute separation, height and distance. We can never close the gap with this Other towards whom our longings are directed. The human other remains just as absolutely other as any presumed divine other. Metaphysical desire for Levinas is thus most definitely not "nostalgia" or "a longing for return."<sup>10</sup> Its journey is not like Odysseus' – it is not directed towards "a lost fatherland or plenitude; it is not homesickness."<sup>11</sup> Whereas these sorts of desires strive to re-attain "what has been lost," metaphysical desire, on the other hand, is, in Levinas' words, "a desire for a land not of our birth," a desire for the always still Other.<sup>12</sup> He thus analogizes it to the exile of Abraham as a movement which is always directed away from the familiar. Understood thusly, Levinas' metaphysical desire should not be subsumed under the genus of desire as it has traditionally been understood, as a movement which seeks to re-stabilize itself by returning to a satiated state lost through exertion. Instead, it must be understood on its own ground – independent from such movements. It is not, in a sense, a

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 194, 197

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 57.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33-34.

desire, in as much as desire is understood as this movement from absence to presence. Metaphysical desire is, thinks Levinas, “a desire that [fundamentally] cannot be satisfied.”<sup>13</sup>

Note that it is not merely a desire which remains *unsatisfied*, as Heidegger might argue – perpetually striving towards some satisfaction which it is denied or delayed from attaining. It is, by Levinas’ account, fundamentally and by nature insatiable. There is no eventual unity between the desiring subject and any presumed desired object in metaphysical desire. Instead, it operates to maintain an insurmountable distance between the subject and its aim. In fact, this relationship is such that, though metaphysical desire is directed towards a specific end, namely the other, this end never amounts to the status of an *object*.<sup>14</sup> The Other keeps its distance and remains forever too other to be reduced or defined as an object of desire or treated as the end of my restlessness. The Other cannot be treated in this way as a means to my satisfaction and pleasure. It is not therefore the case that were the subject of metaphysical desire to somehow reach the metaphysical “itself,” whatever that would be, it would find itself placated. No, metaphysical desire is in its very essence incomplete, and not merely accidentally or because of the subject’s finitude.<sup>15</sup> That is, it is not the case that metaphysical desire “coincides with an unsatisfied need,” but rather, in Levinas’ words, “it is situated beyond satisfaction and nonsatisfaction.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, “the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.”<sup>17</sup> In its pursuit of the metaphysical this desire finds itself even more desirous, even more restless.<sup>18</sup>

As perpetually and by nature incomplete, metaphysical desire is fundamentally the articulation of a kind of infinitude within the subject, a suggestion which Levinas explores by way of Descartes’ conception of the *idea of the infinite*. The idea of the infinite is “exceptional” and distinct, says Levinas, “in that its *ideatum* surpasses its *idea*.”<sup>19</sup> It expresses an intuition that cannot be completed nor contained by ratiocination. Thus, according to Levinas, “in thinking infinity the I from the first thinks more than it thinks. Infinity does not enter into the idea of infinite, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept.”<sup>20</sup> As such thinks Levinas, the idea of the infinite expresses the presence within us of that which exceeds us – of that which, despite our attempts to master, grasp or comprehend, perpetually evades us, remaining “radically, absolutely, other.”<sup>21</sup> Since one cannot comprehend nor wrap one’s mind around it, the idea of the infinite signifies an *openness* within subjectivity.

The idea of infinity, expressing as it does the presence of something within us which is immeasurably beyond us and our ability to comprehend, cannot manifest itself in a

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, italics added.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

straightforward way to the conscious mind. After all, it expresses a thought which, in a sense, *cannot be* truly thought. Thus the infinite, though *in* the subject, as it were, remains *hidden* from the subject. And yet its legacy is felt, Levinas suggests, in the form of metaphysical desire. It appears without fully taking on form and definition in our passive affections: in our longings. Thus, we might conclude, though we cannot rationally intuit the infinite within us, we experience its presence through our metaphysical desire for the absolutely otherwise. In this sense, metaphysical desire becomes the symptom of some infinite movement within us of which we are, by *its* very nature, denied consciousness.

### **The Function of Metaphysical Desire: The Vaccination of the Infinite**

From this we discover the radical difference between Levinas' understanding of the nature of metaphysical desire and the traditional account. Indeed, metaphysical desire, seems to stand in almost direct opposition for him to the traditional account in three ways: (1) it does not arise out of a privation or lack, but is instead emergent from an over abundance within our being, this infinite aperture of otherness at the heart of subjectivity, (2) it does not seek any determinate object or end, but moves always otherwise than and away from being, and (3) as such it is denied any promised completion or satisfaction.

Note that it is absolutely essential to a proper understanding of the nature of metaphysical desire that its infinite trajectory towards the absolutely Other is recognized. Only thusly, Levinas argues, can the true function of such a phenomenon be understood: it attempts to engender a religious encounter through ethics; to awaken us to our responsibilities to the Other person. When misunderstood and reduced to the orbit of a finite desire, understood traditionally as a purely ontological phenomena emergent from some presumed absence within my being and seeking a recuperation of that being through the consumption and absorption of another being, (put another way, when metaphysical desire is read in light of consumerism) this responsibility is obscured resulting in disastrous consequences.

One possible result of such an eclipse of the nature of longing is that we may try to subsume metaphysical desire into the realm of the finite and read it as any other determinate need or hunger as has traditionally been done. That is, we may try to satisfy this phenomenon which is, as we've stated, situated beyond satisfaction and non-satisfaction, beyond placation by any determinate object, with an infinite number of finite objects. The problem being, of course, that no amount of finitude can fill out the infinite. The result of a confusion of this sort is, sadly, all too obvious and apparent: a kind of reckless, endless consumerism – in a word, greed. Indeed, this attempt to reduce the infinite to the finite, to, in a word, totalize it, is the source, argues Levinas, of all determinate evil in the world. And don't we witness precisely a link here, an immediate connection between our seemingly limitless consumer desires and evil in the world. What Levinas asks of us is to probe the true nature of our desires and ask whether what we want when we want *some-thing* is actually *no-thing* at all, whether what we seek therein is not actually some peace with the suffering Other who calls out to us in our desires? He asks us to see whether when we think we desire *some-thing*, we're not really longing for *some-one*, an

ethical relation with the neighbor, orphan, widow or stranger in whom we can perceive the divine and through whom we're invited, according to Levinas, into the realm of the Good.<sup>22</sup> This is an essential question to ask, especially in the capitalist West, where all sorts of charlatans, salesmen, politicians and priests are quick to convince you that the restlessness you feel is indicative of some lack within us; and, what's more, that they can satisfy this lack so long as you give them your dollar, vote or faith.

This last metaphor we should make explicit: even if we read metaphysical desire as *a kind of religious desire*, i.e. place God as its object, we do not yet escape the perniciousness of a consumerist model of desire. Indeed, quite to the contrary, we seem to find ourselves even more dangerously in its grip, at risk what we could call a kind of spiritual greed, or, as I would argue its more commonly known: *fundamentalism*, which is of course nothing more than an extreme enthusiasm for the divine as an *object* of possible achievement the pursuit of which works only to strengthen our attachment to our own being and position in the world, our own convictions and assumptions instead of calling us away from them towards something new and unexpected.

Against this interpretation, I argue that the nature of metaphysical desire is not to draw us towards such a communion with the divine, but precisely the opposite. Metaphysical desire is what protects us from such a communion. Indeed, as I contend more fully in the later chapters of the book, metaphysical desire functions in Levinas' work as a way of meting out the metaphysical into the created order in such a way that it can be experienced concretely without threatening the destruction of the one who perceives it affectively; that is, in a way that resists and refuses fundamentalism and greed. In this regard, and in contradiction to the traditional theological analysis, metaphysical desire does not appear to be for Levinas that which carries us to God, and which, if we follow diligently, promises to conclude in God's presence, as is conceived by Augustine, but precisely that which protects us from the divine by maintaining a regulated distance from it. Indeed, I argue that metaphysical desire appears to be a kind of defense against an improper relation to the infinite – a way of encountering it without being overwhelmed by the temptation it poses to either lose ourselves in it or transform it into an object of fundamentalism and greed. Metaphysical desire is thus for Levinas a kind of discrete expression of the absolute otherness of the beyond – a way in which we may, like Moses' bush, appear within the illuminative sphere of the Other without being consumed by that Other.

In this regard, to use a different metaphor entirely, metaphysical desire appears to be a kind of *vaccination of the infinite*: an infection, a sign that we have been pricked and invaded by that which lies beyond us, which actually operates to heal and protect us from wholesale corruption. Figured as an infection of the infinite within the finite, metaphysical desire wards off a possible epidemic of the infinite, a contagion which could threaten the very nature of independent existence from two sides. It protects us, on the one hand from our own tendency to pursue

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<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 123.

infinitely our own self-satisfaction (Greed). On the other hand, it protects us from the overwhelming totality of an infinite object the realization of which would obliterate all determinate existence.

For Levinas, metaphysical desire appears to be a small dose of the infinite contracted at the very outset of creation (the concept of which I explore in chapter 4 of the book). For Levinas, metaphysical desire is felt as the trace of the primordial contraction of God in the creative act – the immemorial explosion of the infinite, the glow of which serves as the illuminative clearing for determinate existence. As the trace of or shrapnel from this explosion of an infinite totality (an infinite object), metaphysical desire operates like a kind of talisman warning of the danger of the infinite and thereby protecting us from its return, either in ourselves or in some object.

Understood in its function as a kind of defense against the numinosity of an infinite object, metaphysical desire can perhaps also be understood as the expression of something resembling a bound infinitude, if such an idea can be conceived (what Levinas calls, borrowing from Hegel, a good infinitude as opposed to the sort of bad infinitudes discussed above). Bound within the discrete realm of human finitude as an affective experience, the infinite becomes somehow manageable for us – still profoundly other, but not threateningly so. Metaphysical desire thus serves, we might conclude, in Levinas as an operation by which the infinite can express itself within the finite without exploding its limits and transgressing into evil.

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