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WILLIAM FRANKE

The Ethical Vision of Dante's *Paradiso* in Light of Levinas

Prolegomenon Concerning the Scope of Ethics

Ethics is prima facie concerned with what one does or should do. Philosophically, it belongs to an area distinct from fundamental inquiries into what is (ontology) or how we know (epistemology). Yet at certain junctures in intellectual history ethics becomes more than that. It becomes essential to interpreting all realms of philosophy and of life. Ethics comes to be understood as fundamental to any disclosure of the world and to the very consciousness of self. From this perspective, what things are and how we know them cannot even be considered until an ethical relation has been taken up vis-à-vis others and perhaps even vis-à-vis an absolute or divine Other. Cosmology, or the representation of the universe, and the very foundation of knowing become irreducibly ethical matters and must necessarily be grasped in ethical terms. Ethics in this sense is more than one branch of knowledge among others; it enfolds in embryo a comprehensive vision of the world and its conditions of possibility.

What does it mean to have an ethical vision of human existence and relatedness in the world? How does life look when viewed through radically ethical optics? Certain intellectual projects push the ethical point of view to its limits and reveal its scarcely fathomable depths of significance. Among them are those of Dante and Levinas. The famous Dantesque, or possibly pseudo-Dantesque, Letter to Can Grande classifies the *Paradiso* as ethical or moral philosophy ("morale negotium, sive ethica," *Epistolae* XIII.16.40). This may strike us as somewhat surprising, given the sweeping cosmological and metaphysical scope of the poem. The encyclopedic embrace of all knowledge and culture, natural and divine, makes the poem philosophical in the broadest and highest sense. But evidently all this philosophic and general knowledge is to be understood as in essence ethical, in the sense that the significance of any kind of knowledge is realized according to [illegible] such an outlook has been accomplished in explicit opposition to [illegible] Emmanuel Levinas. In his conception of ethics as "first philosophy," a radical claim again is made that all wisdom, human and divine, reduces in

the end to an ethical knowing or unknowing.[1]

Seen in historical perspective, the Letter to Can Grande's classification of Dante's poem as a work of ethics is actually not idiosyncratic but belongs broadly to the culture of rhetorical humanism, stemming from Cicero, in which Dante was steeped. Such a conception of ethics is attested, for example, in the twelfth century by John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*. Dante follows the Latin humanist tradition in elevating ethics to a preeminent position as the sum and goal of all knowledge. Quintilian provided a formulation of this principle that remained influential throughout the Middle Ages. Equated with the whole of oratory, itself considered to be an omni-comprehensive art and science, ethics comprehended all the other disciplines within itself.[2] By this account, knowledge generally is considered to be fundamentally ethical. Yet Dante gives a more specific and much more powerful motivation to "ethics" in a sense that can be seen as pointing in the direction of Levinas's revival of ethical thinking. Interestingly, Levinas also recognizes "humanism" as a term with which his style of philosophy resonates, particularly in *L'humanisme de l'autre homme*.

It will be instructive for readers of Dante to glimpse the philosophical depths that ethical vision can entail as it is envisioned by Levinas. Beyond the sentiments involved and magisterially expressed by the poet, ethical vision constitutes an original access to truth of the kind that Dante wishes to impart. The benefits, furthermore, of this comparison are reciprocal. Dante's example helps to render palpable and compelling some far-reaching motivations for ethical vision that Levinas tends to overlook or exclude. A number of Levinas scholars have felt that his stringently ethical thinking is lacking in a cosmological and aesthetic sensibility, and they have wished to integrate his ethics with these other dimensions of knowledge and experience.[3] Something of the kind can be found in full flower in Dante: he thereby helps us to imagine how a fully fleshed-out universe might be integrated into an ethical perspective, even where Levinas himself was not able or willing to pursue such a comprehensive synthesis.

This particular comparison, then, is illuminating because Levinas seems to lack the cosmic-aesthetic dimension of ethical vision that is so powerfully and vividly elaborated by Dante. Conversely, the deeper philosophical motivations for Dante's vision as a rigorously ethical one are not readily apparent without explicit philosophical meditation on the meaning of ethical vision, and this is what Levinas supplies with such insight. Preliminarily, let it be said that for both authors the essence of ethics is a radical transcendence of oneself in relation to an Other who is other than all one can say. This relation is constituted in language, but specifically as its limit-condition and as manifest in the failure of language adequately to represent or express this unapproachable, inappropriable otherness.

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[1] Another such instance of elevating "ethics" to preeminence can be found in the Romantic philosophy of the youthful Hegel and Schelling, according to whose "Oldest System Program of German Idealism" (1796), all future metaphysics was to fall under ethics: "—*eine Ethik*. Da die ganze Metaphysik künftig in die Moral fällt" (*Frühe Schriften* 1.234).

[2] See *Institutiones oratoriae*, XII. 2.15, which begins with this phrase: "iam quidem pars illa moralis, quae dicitur Ethice, certe tota oratori est accommodata."

[3] I refer particularly to Wiemar. Somewhat comparable concerns regarding Levinas may be found in Ciaramelli and in other essays contained in Bernasconi and Critchley.

In their different idioms, both Dante and Levinas tell of an experience of radical transcendence that reduces the individual subject to an absolute passivity and passion vis-à-vis what is characterized as not characterizable at all. Both find themselves face to face with the ineffable. Their angles of approach to this ultimate experience of transcendence, however, are very different: Dante's universal cosmological journey of consciousness culminates in the vision of God, whereas Levinas's effort is primarily aimed at acknowledging the claim made by the particular other person facing one, a claim upon one's unconditional responsibility as a limitless obligation. Nevertheless, crucial aspects of what I am calling ethical vision can be brought into focus by comparing these two very different ethical visionaries. In particular, this convergence can help us recognize more clearly the dimension of the ineffable as the final, inarticulable, ethical burden of language.

Dante's *Paradiso* in crucial ways stages the undoing of the constructive metaphysics of the *Divine Comedy* as a whole. The project of a total interpretation of the universe runs up here against its limit and falters. Opening metaphysics in the direction of an apophatic theology that recognizes God as ineffable and as manifest precisely in the experience of language's *failure* brings the *Paradiso* close to various postmodern modes of thinking. Highlighting these affinities with Levinas is purely heuristic: other juxtapositions could be proposed that would cast illuminations in other directions.[4] However, Levinas distinguishes himself as the preeminent thinker of ethical encounter with absolute otherness as unsayable and yet as a pre-verbal Saying (*le Dire*), an opening and offering of self before anything whatsoever that can be Said (*le Dit*). In these characteristic concerns, he happens to match Dante's undertaking in the *Paradiso* of journeying to an encounter with an absolute Other on the basis of a Saying that obsessively runs up against Unsayability, the ineffable divine instance or rather ultimate concern of his poem. Levinas can illuminate the specifically ethical motives for the unsayability that is the enabling condition, as well as the limit, of Dante's whole venture in the *Paradiso*.

Paradiso as the Trace of the Other

In the last canto of the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradiso* XXXIII, very near the culmination of his journey, Dante describes his mental state as resembling that of a man awaking from sleep who is still filled with the feeling of what he has envisioned in dream, although the vision itself has vanished. He can no longer say for sure what, if anything, it was that shook and stirred and left him in such a state of ravishment. Still, he senses that he has been profoundly affected by something.

> Qual è colui che sognando vede,
> che dopo il sogno la passione impressa
> rimane, e l'altro alla mente non riede,
> cotal son io, che quasi tutta cessa
> mia visione, e ancor mi distilla
> nel cor il dolce che nacque da essa
> (XXXIII.58–63).

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[4] Both ethical outlooks have also been developed in recent romances, for example, by Slavoj Žižek and Monika Zagar; Franz Rosenzweig and Søren Kierkegaard provide classical formulations.

(Like one who dreaming sees,
upon whom after dreaming a passion is left
impressed, while the rest does not return to mind,
so am I, since my vision almost completely
ceases, and still in my heart there continues to be distilled
the sweetness that was born of it.)[1]

What Dante is able to recount of his "vision" depends exclusively on what we might call the "subjective correlative," the affective state induced in him, for that is all that can be described or even, at this stage, be retained in memory. This state—the impression of a passion, the sweetness distilled in his heart—is *felt* to be correlative to an experience of something so radically other that it cannot be expressed, or even remembered. The transformation wrought in Dante and the state of exaltation it has induced make reference to something beyond themselves, but irretrievably lost. This reference therefore remains necessarily indeterminate. The subjective state induced is inherently referential, but it refers to what is simply "other" than all that can be articulated. This state can be interpreted precisely as a "trace" in the sense defined by Levinas.[2] To this extent, the subjective state itself becomes, in effect, the origin of the poem and of its vision, at least in so far as the latter can be communicated.

The same structure of inference from a subjective, purely emotional residue that becomes the origin of all possibility of representation repeats itself a few lines later, still within the frame of the ascent toward the poem's final "vision":

La forma universal di questo nodo
credo ch' i' vidi, perché più di largo,
dicendo questo, mi sento ch' i' godo.
(XXXIII.91-93)

(The universal form of this knot
I believe I saw, because in saying this,
I feel that I enjoy more amply.)

Again, Dante's belief about what he saw is not based on the memory of any actual object, but rather on what he feels, a feeling of delight in dilation when he says that he saw what he now imagines and articulates in his poem—the universal form of this "knot" or complex unity reflected in itself. This is indeed the whole universe, substance and accidents and their modes conflated together in the simple light of divinity (XXXIII.88-90). This feeling is produced in conjunction with a present act of speech and in the absence of any actual object of vision. The way he feels *now* in saying it vouches for the validity of his belief as to what he saw *then*. In this way, the "vision" of the poem is projected backwards from the fulfillment experienced in the language of vision.

The same pattern of inference, in different forms, can be found elsewhere in the *Paradiso*—indeed everywhere else, for it structures the poem in its entirety. For example, in the heaven of Mars, when Dante beholds Beatrice, or more exactly the light of divinity reflected in Beatrice, her surpassing beauty constrains him to despair of describing it, for what he sees is ineffable. But he nevertheless does

[1] All unattributed translations throughout this essay are my own.

[2] Levinas, "La Trace de l'Autre," translated as "The Trace of the Other." On the theological underpinnings of Levinas's theory of the trace, see *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*.

espousal upon what he feels—that is, his "affect"—in correlation with this indescribable beauty:

> Io mi rivolsi a l'amoroso suono
> del mio conforto, e qual io allor vidi
> ne li occhi santi amor, qui l'abbandono:
> non perch'io pur del mio parlar diffidi,
> ma per la mente che non può redire
> sovra sé tanto, s'altri non la guidi.
> Tanto posso di quel punto ridire,
> che, rimirando lei, lo mio affetto
> libero fu da ogne altro disire,
> fin che 'l piacere etterno, che diretto
> raggiava in Beatrice, dal bel viso
> mi contentava col secondo aspetto.
> (XVIII.7-18)

> (I turned towards the amorous sound
> of my comfort; and what love I then
> saw in her holy eyes, I abandon [the attempt to say]:
> not only because I distrust my speech,
> but because of memory which cannot return
> so high above itself, unless another guide it.
> So much of that moment [or point] can I retell,
> that, intently looking at her, my affections
> were free from every other desire,
> while the eternal joy that radiated
> directly in Beatrice satisfied me with
> the second aspect of her beautiful face.)

What is indescribable here is really not Beatrice's beautiful face but rather the unconditioned, the transcendent that appears therein and is represented here as a point of light (as also in XXVIII.16 and 41). The eternal joy, or more literally "pleasure" ("piacere etterno"), that is reflected in Beatrice's holy eyes is perhaps not a possible object of actual vision at all until it is represented as such by Dante in correlation with the sense of satisfaction it procures him. Here again, Dante's vision in paradise, specifically of the glory that according to *Paradiso* I, 1-3 in fact radiates throughout the universe, can be described only indirectly by its effects upon the emotions of the poem's speaker. In itself, what is referred to is simply and purely other than all that can be described, as is confirmed by its inaccessibility to memory, unless memory is guided by something or someone who is designated merely as "another" ("s'altri non la guidi").

Description of what is objectively indescribable in terms of the subjective state that contact with it induces in the author constitutes the general charter for all that Dante writes about paradise. The premise of the whole poem is that Dante has "been in" the highest heaven, the Empyrean, beyond the physical universe, and has beheld the divine essences. But he cannot express or even remember what he has "seen":

> a ciò ch'io vidi mi fu tolta parola
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> (I, 5-6)

> (In the heaven that receives the most of his light
> I was, and I saw things which whoever descends from there
> neither knows how nor is permitted to retell.)

Here at the outset of the poem Dante declares that he is conditioned by a multiplex ineffability: neither has he been able to comprehend and so remember what he "saw," nor would he be able to express it in words even if he had. As the Letter to Can Grande comments about this passage, "he does not know [what to express] because he forgets, and he is not able [to express it] because even if he remembers and retains the content, speech nevertheless fails" ("nescit quia oblitus, nequit quia, si recordatur et contentum tenet, sermo tamen deficit," sec. 83). The redundancy of the reasons given for the ineffability of the vision of paradise is one hint that it does not admit of any simple explanation. Its ineffability will turn out to be more essential and mysterious than anything that could simply be narrated—more a condition of possibility for the narration of paradise than one aspect or item among others *within* the narrative.[7]

A few verses after the opening statement of ineffability that frames the whole poem, the poet reaffirms in an invocation to Apollo the subjective character of his account of paradise with an incisive image. He declares that he cannot relate paradise as such but can only manifest the shadow of it incised in his head ("che l'ombra del beato regno/segnata nel mio capo io manifesti," I.22-24). That is to say, he can only convey an effect that has been wrought upon him, the impression that has been scored in his memory, by an encounter with what cannot itself be represented as such—God himself and, more generally, the whole blessed realm of paradise consisting essentially in nothing other than God's presence or proximity.

I am emphasizing that Dante underscores the "subjective" mediation of paradise—at one point he even calls it "*my* paradise" ("il mio paradiso," XV.36)—as it is represented and made present in his poem. At the same time, however, it must equally be stressed that Dante always seeks and finds objective expression for his experience.[8] He uses the most objective forms of culture, especially "scientific" and mathematical culture, available to him in order to offer "objective correlatives" for all the feelings he attempts to convey. Dante does not leave his exposition of personal experience at the level of merely intimistic romantic confessions. On the contrary, hard-edged, geometric images define his vision as he relates it in the *Paradiso*, perhaps most markedly towards its beginning (for example, in the use of optics to explain moon spots in Canto II) and at its end, with the reference to the geometer attempting to square the circle ("Qual è 'l geomètra

[7] That Dante's vision in paradise, in accordance with the premises of apophatic theology, must be essentially objectless has long been recognized by Dante scholarship: see, for example, Chiarenza. Still, it is hard to keep this in mind when interpreting the poem, given the wealth of objective forms that it produces and displays. Hence the importance of the attempt to understand why and how Dante's vision is necessarily objectless. We require a strong interpretation of what this vision is, after all, if it is not vision of any object. Useful treatments of this issue include Hawkins and Botterill.

[8] Critics have considered *Paradiso* to be distinguished precisely by the "objectivity." See, for example, Montano: "the Poet portrays scenes in their objective reality . . . the attention of the one who writes is concentrated entirely on rendering something objective, real" ("il Poeta ritrae le scene nella loro obiettiva realtà . . . l'attenzione di chi scrive è interamente concentrata nella considerazione e nella resa di qualcosa di obiettivo, reale").

. . . ," XXXIII.133).

Yet the fact remains that these terms and theories are used as metaphors for an experience that in itself eludes all objective accounts and is not even experience of an object (nor is it truly experience *by* a subject). Their "objectivity" consists not in their corresponding to an empirically given, or even possible, object but rather in the precision and coherence with which they are poetically constructed so as to take on definite, objective form in representing an ineffable one-knows-not-what. Whatever it is that they endeavor in vain to convey remains in itself irreducibly beyond expression and objectification. It cannot be properly signified by words but requires rather a first-person experience of "transhumanization" on the part of whoever is going to succeed in understanding the experience of paradise that Dante, from the very first canto, categorically renounces describing in any objective manner:

> Trasumanar significar per verba
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperienza grazia serba.
> (I.70-72)
>
> (Transhumanizing cannot be signified by words:
> so let the example suffice for the one
> to whom grace reserves the experience)."

Thus the rhetoric of objective vision of determinate forms, however intensively and emphatically Dante employs it, must be interpreted as, strictly speaking, metaphorical. In order to give any account at all of this transcendent experience called "paradise," Dante consistently and inevitably falls back on the portrayal of the subjective impressions that linger in him after all purportedly objective vision has vanished, and this is the immediate source of his poetry in the *Paradiso*, as he explicitly admits in passages such as those that have just been considered. It is the very relating in poetry of an experience which in itself is ineffable that objectifies "the ineffable" in the first place. Thus the very idea that the vision *was* a vision of an object may belong more to the poetic form in which this vision is presented than to any original core of essential experience of the Ineffable as such. The ineffable would in this case be a poetic hypothesis, one that is found in religious and mystical representations of various sorts. It is, nonetheless, a *necessary* hypothesis, to the extent that these representations are communicated, transgressing the injunction to silence that typically surrounds and shrouds such visions. Elaborating a poetry of the Ineffable would, accordingly, constitute a translation *into* representation from a radically non-representational register of contact with the Ineffable—rather than just a translation *of* representations of a visual nature, whether sensible or purely spiritual, into a verbal form of representation.

Witnessing to the Transcendent

The poem presents itself constantly as a visionary experience, and yet the object—or better, the sense—of that vision turns out to be beyond vision and repre-

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[1] See also V.15, 74-75, 147-48; XIV.25-27, 103-108; XIX.39, etc.

sentation. Although Dante insists on invoking the epistemological categories of vision and revelation throughout, he is always also sensitive to the relational conditions vis-à-vis a transcendent God that circumscribe and even defeat this quest for objective knowledge. At the last moment, he always recoils from direct representation of the Godhead and assumes an attitude that needs to be understood as an ethical stance towards what in its innermost core remains irreducibly external to representation and knowledge. The limits of knowledge and representation he runs up against disclose to him his own subjectivity and its limits, but also its inherent reference to what exceeds it, to what involves him passionately, even though he cannot represent it. To this he-knows-not-what he cannot help but bear witness and testify—and indeed that is all that he can do. To begin to understand the poem from the specifically ethical perspective that is the ethos pervading Dante's whole *oeuvre*, as is stated explicitly with respect to the *Paradiso* by the "Letter to Can Grande," we have an incomparable resource in the philosophical reflections of Emmanuel Levinas.[10]

Levinas is an invaluable guide into the inaccessible reaches of an ethical "experience" that is, properly speaking, beyond experience and expression. His ultra-phenomenological explorations illuminate philosophically what may after all be the only possible path through the territory of the ineffable and unrepresentable, a territory that is also charted, however differently, by the *Paradiso*, in which the metaphysical imagery functions as a metaphor for what in the end demands to be understood as an ethical relation to the unrepresentable Other—whether this be God or a significant Other like Beatrice.[11]

Levinas's thought probes deeply how the ethical remains unrepresentable because it necessarily originates in the absolutely Other—other to all that can be thought or said. Western thought, ever since its inception with Parmenides, and again in modern times with Descartes, has generally attempted to derive all that is, all being, from the Self and the Same. But whatever originates in the Self or the Same always returns to self-interest and so misses the whole point of the ethical, namely, responsibility to the Other. Since I cannot represent the Other without mediating it in terms that are inevitably my own, I cannot represent the absolutely or wholly other ("le tout autre"). There is no phenomenon that can make manifest, nor any words that can directly represent, this sort of contact. I can, however, represent my obsession with this Other. Only its bearing upon me and the infinite obligations with which it binds me can genuinely be "experienced"—that is, irresistibly produce an ethical conviction in me. And on this basis, then, representations, not of the Other but of its effects on me, can and indeed do proliferate. This is what, according to Levinas, engenders the ethical subject, the core of the me ("le moi"), in its uniqueness. This originary contact with the Other belongs to a past that is never present and to a passivity more passive than that of any subject, because it is before the "I" can act or fail to act or

[10] In what follows, I quote and translate from Levinas's mature and radical formulation of his ideas in *Autrement qu'être et au-delà de l'essence*. Also constantly impinging on my representations of Levinas's thought is *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*.

[11] These alternatives, as absolutely other, are not finally distinct but merge into infinite beauty, goodness, and truth, so for the sake of simplicity I will primarily treat the Other here as God.

even be conscious of itself and its freedom as an autonomous agent: relation to the Other is the precondition of all these forms and faculties of ethical selfhood.

What Dante offers in the *Paradiso* is, in Levinas's terms, witness or "testimony" to the vision of God in Paradise, the indescribable experience that is described as one of being directly present in and to the divine. Dante testifies to the effects on him of an "experience" that defies representation. Even to call it an experience is not quite correct. It can best be understood as belonging to a pre-experiential order consisting in unrecognizable, unrealizable relatedness to an absolute Other before we can even be aware of ourselves as ourselves or of the Other as other. This is the "before," the antecedent, of all human experience that Levinas elucidates in ethical terms. Experience tends to posit an experiential subject with an identity, whereas the ethical relation with the Other (and at this stage it is not possible even to distinguish between the Other as the other person and as God) is anterior to all self-aware experience and self-identity. To encounter the Other in its otherness one must be radically undone as a self, deprived of the structures of self-relation that close out the absolutely other by appropriating and defining everything else in the self's own terms.

The Other is not a phenomenon that I can perceive and process, though I am ethically aware of my being in relation to this Other, of my obligation to be concerned for this Other and ethically to put the Other first. And while I cannot represent the Other, I can testify to "it" by recognizing that my ethical responsibility for or to the Other is prior to my own constitution as a self. In this way, the Other is not known but is rather acknowledged as residing at the very core and origin of my own being and identity as a subject. Dante's poem is such a response to the Other ultimately as God, and it registers Dante's "experience" of God by the effects that this divine Other has upon Dante. The effects constitute Dante's subjectivity by destroying all his own constructions of himself and so laying him open in infinite vulnerability to the invasion of otherness. For Levinas, this passion of the subject is the only way that the contact with the Other can be made manifest. Indeed, it is this passion of the subject, speaking in accents of a bold new individuality, that assumes in Dante's poetic reenactment of the Christ event the centrality that we would otherwise expect to be reserved for the Passion. Hence direct representation of the drama of Christ's Passion is conspicuously absent from the poem, being only alluded to and recalled symbolically.[12]

Whatever Dante may actually hear and see, the ethical core of his experience of the otherness of God must necessarily be guarded in blind silence, as the poem continually attests. Levinas is the modern thinker who has made it most clear that testimony of this order refers to what is prior to all appearing and manifestation. He explains how in testimony it is impossible to go behind the response to what provokes it (except blindly by faith). The only observable phenomenon is the response, the testimony, to what cannot be independently veri-

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[illegible] Jorge Luis Borges's [illegible] some basis, though not [illegible] because [illegible] humano. Esta persona es Jesús [illegible] que no podía estar porque hubiera sido demasiado humano [illegible] persona es Jesús [illegible]

fied. That to which it is a response does not and cannot present itself, though it has occasioned and apparently compelled the response. Levinas undertakes to explain ". . . that the call is heard in the response, that the 'provocation' coming from God is in my invocation, that gratitude is already gratitude for this state of gratitude, which would be, at once or by turns, gift and gratitude" (". . . que l'appel s'y entend dans la réponse, que la 'provocation' venant de Dieu est dans mon invocation, que la gratitude est déjà gratitude pour cet état de gratitude *qui* serait, à la fois ou tour à tour, le don et la gratitude," *Autrement qu'être* 234).

Stemming from biblical roots, the pattern of relationship that Levinas conceptualizes here is common in Christian mystical approaches to God.[15] God's address to humans is discerned in and as the human invocation of God, where the invocation itself is ambiguously the source of the divine presence—a paradox from which Augustine begins and on which the entire discourse of the *Confessions* is predicated. This effects a reversal in which response becomes originary —at least in so far as any possible manifestation, any presentation or representation, is concerned. Yet, at the same time, Levinas stresses that response is precisely *not* its own origin, for it originates in the Other, beyond or before representation. This is a past that was never present because it cannot be manifest and so happen at all. It is always already past, "older" than every past that was ever present. Still, it belongs to the originary structure of any possibility of representation to a subject and therefore of any experience in the present.

I have already suggested that Levinas has made possible a deep philosophical understanding of why ethics necessarily has its grounds in what cannot be represented. The Other in its radical otherness can never be attained by representation, for representation always circles back to the Self and the Same. To *re*-present is to assimilate and appropriate the Other into a framework that cannot recognize the Other except as a species of the Same. Representation remains the activity of a self presenting its world to itself in terms commensurate with itself and therefore confined within the circle of its autonomy and egotism. The ethical recognition of the otherness of the Other must break away from all such systems of self-reference. And to do so, it must move beyond representation to what Levinas calls "signification."

Levinas describes a kind of signification wholly other than that based on reference to visible (or otherwise appearing and thematizable) objects in the indifference and distance of simply "knowing" them. It is a kind of signification born rather of contact and even obsession. This kind of signification he calls "transcending," and he designates it as the significance of signification itself. It is what renders signification in the ordinary sense possible:

> Not to be able to stay within a theme, not to be able to appear—this invisibility which makes itself contact and obsession, stems not from the insignificance of that which is approached, but from a way of signifying that is wholly other than that which binds ostention to vision: here, beyond visibility, what is exposed is not any signification that would still be thematized in the sign, it is *transcending* itself of this same beyond that is signification. Signification, that is to say, the contradictory trope of the *one for the other*. (*Autrement qu'être* 158)

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[15] That Levinas is a proponent of neither Christianity nor mysticism makes this convergence all the more surprising and significant.

The originary sense of signification is transcending. That means transcending all that can be thematically signified by a sign. But as a relation to something other, the sign is not simply what it is nor even what it thematically signifies. It opens beyond itself towards an Other. What it is emerges through and cannot be abstracted from what it signifies in this sense of transcending all thematic signification. Signification in this sense involves a substitution of the one for the other, as in the basic structure of signification (A for B). Such substitution has an ethical sense and is accomplished in the ethical passion of responsibility, of being "for the other" in one's outmost being, in the very act, or rather passion, by which one is constituted as "one." All human significance comes from transcending the self towards the Other to whom one is ethically responsible before one is even conscious of being oneself—for this ethical responsibility vis-à-vis an Other is the bond that first makes a human being individual and "one." Nothing means or signifies anything humanly outside of this indispensable condition of all significance—namely, one's ethical responsibility for the Other. This alone anchors values of whatever kind and gives them human significance—that is, if the human is to be anything more than raw egotism. This originary or rather preoriginary relatedness to the Other is what Levinas calls the ethical, for it means that we are bound by obligation to the Other before we are "ourselves" at all and as a condition of our becoming self-conscious individuals.

Levinas's central claim is that sense or significance does not proceed from essence (*Autrement qu'être* 271). The meanings of things and persons are not determined by what they are essentially; to the contrary, their meanings proceed from their relation to the Other. Being, as a system of essences with identities, is relativized by the ethical demand that comes from the Other. This is a philosophy in which sense—significance *for* someone—precedes being and essence. The sense of my being *for* you, the one for the other, comes ethically before any determinations of being or essence. It is not because of what I am that I give myself. This would lead me back ineluctably into the circle of self-interest. The sense of the one as for the other, unconditionally, before having any essence in and for myself, must come first, since this sense comes from the Other and ignores all dictates of being, evades any identity, and transgresses all supposed guidelines or laws of essence. To this degree, the self cannot but be absolutely passive vis-a-vis the Other; any activity would be an appropriation of the Other by the self that would allow it no longer to be wholly other. This uncompromising orientation toward the Other is what Levinas conceives as "otherwise than being and beyond essence."

Now Dante's whole poem, not least in its impassioned pleas for justice on earth, is an attempt to describe the passion whereby one becomes possessed by the Other as "God"; in the failure of its descriptions it illustrates the passivity in which one is affected by the Other at the very core of and indeed before the origin of one's being. Dante's most profound reality is that of the Infinite, and it is thus wholly incommensurable with any humanly definable identity. Just as Augustine had found God to be more interior than his own self ("interior meo," *Confessiones* III, vi, 11), so Dante transcends himself as he moves towards an infinite and unknowable God at every stage of his journey through Paradise. The poem is noth-

ing but a series of rehearsals of this notion of transcendence, which is registered on Dante's sensibility as exceeding his capacities ever anew. It is the search for, and thereby the discovery and manifestation of, a signification that cannot be expressed *per verba*.[14]

This is to say, in Levinas's language, that Dante's "I" is affected by the Infinite and Transcendent. The whole of the *Paradiso* testifies to the Divine in terms of its effects upon the subject who says "I" in the poem. Yet what it is that affects the speaker cannot be represented or spoken. He can only give an account of the ethical relation of being beholden to the Other—as witnessed to by the obsession it has inspired in him. Given this condition, all the metaphors of the poem, in the guise of metaphysical revelations, are determined fundamentally as metaphors for this ethical sense, which is itself referred to something, or rather someone, who remains as such unrepresentable.

While the Transcendent cannot as such appear, it is irresistible and imperious and indeed operates as an imperative in opening up a realm of revelation and representation for the one who has come into contact with it. The poem is the witness to what it is not, to the Transcendent that has passed through the subject's experience, leaving the subject in effect traumatized, at the same time as it constitutes the ethical subject in the first place. This is, after all, the traditional structure of witness and testimony as it is found in the words of the Bible. What so profoundly affects and changes people in their lives and hearts is not objectifiable. It is only the *effect* that can be expressed: such is the nature of revelation in religious experience. It is patent, for example, in the testimony provided by the gospels to Jesus as the Son of God, as worker of miracles and as resurrected from the dead—where the emphasis falls always on the extraordinary effects upon the witnesses to events which themselves remain recalcitrant to representation. The same can be said of the Exodus and specifically of God's appearance shrouded in smoke and lightning during the theophany at Sinai (Exodus 19-20).

Levinas's thinking can illuminate aspects of the ethical that have been operative in representations of religious revelation all through Western tradition, particularly in the wake of the Bible, but that have never before been elucidated philosophically with such penetration. His thinking suggests that what religious revelation reveals fundamentally is the transcendence of the Other. The ethical Other is infinite and in effect divine: one is obligated to the Other without reservation or limit. At this level of absoluteness, the ethical relation to God and to one's neighbor tend to coincide. The primary reference of Dante's ethical relation in the *Paradiso* is God, whereas for Levinas it is in the first instance the neighbor, but the same dissymmetry and infinite responsibility or obligation apply in either case. Indeed the two relations, to God and to neighbor, are for both authors and their respective traditions deeply inseparable.[15] They are different

[14] Moevs reads the complete transcendence and dissolution of self as belonging to the poem's "metaphysics." Curiously, this type of metaphysics beyond essence and identities comes closer to Levinas's understanding of metaphysics as transcendence than to the typical textbook Scholastic metaphysics of Dante's time.

[15] In "Donner la mort," Jacques Derrida observes that Levinas's thought maintains itself in the play of difference between the face of God and the face of the neighbor as the face of the (infinitely) other: ". . . la pensée de Lévinas se tient dans le jeu—jeu de la différence et de l'analogie —

registers of representation for contact with an unrepresentable otherness.

For Levinas, the ethical is experienced in the approach to the radically other and unassimilable, the Other that remains irreducibly external to the sphere of conscious experience and its phenomena. This relation is what Levinas calls "proximity," and it is enacted by Dante's asymptotic nearing of the desired goal of his journey alluded to from the poem's opening sentence—"drawing near to its desire" ("appressandosi al suo desire," I.7)—as well as in its concluding canto: "And I, who was nearing the end of all desires" ("e io ch'al fine di tutti disii/appropinquava," XXXIII.46–47). The God that is beyond all objective experience and inexpressible can, so far as any discourse is concerned, only be approached, and thus the whole poem is but an approach to God. Even in the final vision of the last canto, it is only the approach and not the union itself that can actually be experienced and described. In this dimension of proximity, the Other cannot be apprehended as an object but only in and through desire and the other effects engendered in the subject.

For all the resources that he deploys, borrowed especially from Christian mystical tradition, in order to burrow into the light of God that penetrates the whole universe in diverse degrees, Dante winds up offering a striking testimony to the ultimate impossibility of penetrating the divine essence, and so to its status as irreducibly other to all human experience and comprehension. In "figuring" paradise he is forced to jump "like one who finds his path cut off" ("come chi trova suo cammin riciso," XXIII.61–63; cf. Barolini chap. 10). The poem's constant emphasis on impasses to writing about and even to remembering this impossible "experience" of transcending the human ("trasumanar") witness to Dante's awareness of the constitutive non-representability of his encounter with what is radically inassimilable and indescribable—in Dante's words, "ineffabile" (see Colombo). The modes of subjective experience to which Dante makes recourse are precisely those of witness, testimony, and obsession, and Levinas's philosophical exposition of these terms illuminates crucial aspects of Dante's poem as a fundamentally ethical journey of approach to the unknowable Other. At its deepest level, the content of Dante's representations cannot but be read as illustrating the kind of radical ethics of the unrepresentable and inexpressible contact with otherness around which Levinas's thinking revolves.

As we have already begun to see, the effects upon the subject of its ethical contact with the unknowable and inexpressible, whether the absolute Other of God or simply the absolute of the other person, are described by Levinas in terms of "obsession," "trauma," and, of course, "desire."[6] These are indeed the states that most aptly describe Dante's subjective experience in the *Paradiso*, as symbolized, for example, by Semele at the beginning of Canto XXI: destroyed as a result of insisting that her lover, Jove, show himself to her, Semele is recalled to illustrate how Dante could be incinerated by the complete unveiling of the radiance of Beatrice's smile. In heaven, in the approach to the Face of God, even

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[6] "Le désir ne se satisfait pas de l'image de Dieu et il est désir du tout autre. Enfoncement sans commune mesure" ("Desire is not satisfied with the image of God and is desire for the totally other. Infinite movement without common measure"; *Totalité et infini* 34). For discussion of these terms in relation to Dante, see especially Perella.

triumphs can be traumatic.

The effects of contact with the Other on the Self testify to the "Other in me," which Levinas describes as "sensibility": "the being acted upon of sensibility beyond its capacity to be acted upon—which describes the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as the *other-in-me*" ("le subir de la sensibilité au-delà de sa capacité de subir—ce qui décrit la souffrance et la vulnérabilité du sensible comme l'*autre-en-moi*," *Autrement qu'être* 198). It is my vulnerability to suffering as a sensible creature that makes me open to being affected externally. My embodied condition is not added on but is rather the way I am constituted originally as openness or exposure to the Other. Before anything definable in terms of consciousness, I *am* my vulnerability to being hurt, and the immediacy of my bodily existence exposed externally is the sign of this. Humanly and ethically, I am constituted by the exposure to and responsibility for the Other. This is what Levinas calls "incarnation."

In the *Paradiso*, Dante's senses and what they suffer become the sign of God, that is, of the Other-in-me. This is curious, since he is in Paradise and presumably beyond sense experience (although this is rigorously so only in the Empyrean (Cantos XXX.37—XXXIII), which alone is "paradise" in the strictest sense). Nonetheless, it is precisely sensibility which opens the beyond-being, the ethical "region" beyond the phenomenal universe of the manifestation of beings, and this is what *Paradiso* ultimately is about. Although it is questionable whether his body can be present in the heavens, the poem constantly expresses his experience in terms of the bodily senses and of a wealth of natural sights and sounds right from the first canto: lightning sparks and flowing water and leaping fire. The senses are necessary to express metaphorically the sort of proximity and susceptibility that contact with the Other entails. Dante leaves unresolved the question of whether he really experiences Paradise (at least up to the Empyrean) with his physical senses, in his body or without it: "Whether I was only that which you created/newly, you alone, Love, who govern heaven, know" ("S'i era sol de me quel che creasti/novellamente, amor che 'l ciel governi, tu 'l sai," I.73-75). In this he echoes Saint Paul, who writes that he was "caught up into paradise," "whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth" (II Corinthians 12.3-2). But in any case sensibility is the indispensable metaphor for this experience of proximity to the Other that affects one beyond one's ability to know and apprehend it.

As is pointed up by a plethora of intense images of sensation, Dante's journey in the *Paradiso* is a radical *un*grounding of self in the search for an origin in transcendence. Only in the face of the Other, God, is Dante anything at all. Every stage of the journey traumatizes him and "unselfs" him a degree further. Indeed, a self constituted intrinsically by relation to an Other cannot be anything in and for itself. Its being comes to it only as a result of this relation. It must orient itself otherwise than by the presumed truth of Being and the givenness of beings. It is before all else subject to the ethical imperative of the Other first: "Après vous, Monsieur" ("After you, Sir"), as Levinas puts it in disarmingly simple, colloquial terms. Putting the Other first is the heart of ethics; one's own very being must be suspended in the total abandon of self for the Other. To claim nothing

for oneself, no identity, not even being itself, in order that all that one is be given from and to the Other—such is the radical ethical challenge discerned by Levinas by phenomenological reflection but also on the basis of the ethical vision and call of the Bible, particularly as announced by the prophets (see, especially, *Au-delà du verset*).

Ethical Un-Selfing of Metaphysical Self-Building

Dante's notoriously self-assertive aplomb and egocentricity seem at first flagrantly to contradict such ethical self-effacement in the face of the Other. Indeed, Dante's poem as a whole is evidently a self-staging of megalomaniac proportions. Yet its last leg, the *Paradiso*, undoes this whole construction, unsays the said, opens Dante's carefully constructed and strongly asserted self to an Infinity and otherness in its midst. In one of its concluding images, contiguous with the verses quoted at the outset of this essay, the very pages of the poem are depicted as being dispersed like the oracles that Sibyl committed to leaves that were blown about her cave by the winds of prophecy, or like snow being "unsealed" in the sun that melts it:

> Così la neve al sol si disigilla;
> così al vento ne le foglie levi
> si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.
> (XXXIII.64-66)
>
> (Thus the snow under the sun comes unsealed:
> thus on light leaves in the wind
> the oracles of Sybil were dispersed.)

A few lines later, God is represented as a book in which everything that unfolds itself throughout the universe is united as if in a simple light (85-90). In God, everything is gathered into "one volume bound by love" ("legato con amore in un volume," XXXIII.86). However, the metaphorical dispersion of the leaves of Dante's book signals the final unknowability to him of this God represented as the book that remains bound and that binds everything within it in the bond of love. Only a lightning flash of grace in the final lines suspends Dante's inability to gather his experience of Godhead into one and know it. He is taken over to the side of the Other in direct contact, but this remains an aporia for his mind like the squaring of the circle for the geometer; it is not within reach for his own wings—or pens: "non era da ciò le proprie penne" (XXXIII.133-41). It is, in effect, a transcending and losing of himself in relation to the Transcendent. This is an "ethical" relation of transcendence in Levinas's sense, and such transcendence remains beyond Dante's powers of representation.

Dante does conceive of God as "the great sea of being" ("il gran mar dell'essere," I.113) upon which he journeys in order to return to his true home and origin. Yet he also feels out the limits of this structure and intimates that it passes into its opposite. For he must lose this being in order to find it again, and this is what the passions suffered in the overwhelming sensory experience of the *Paradiso* are finally about. They reduce Dante to naught; his undoing is the necessary means of his progress. Dante is repeatedly shattered at each successive level of his as-

cent. He loses sight and consciousness and experiences his absolute inadequacy —"mi sento in questa/disagguaglianza" ("I feel myself in this inequality," XXV.85) —before his heavenly interlocutors. Thus, the opening of Canto XXV imagines Dante's return to Florence with quite another appearance ("con altra voce omai, con altro vello") than that with which he left his native city. It registers the poet's sense of his having become irreversibly other by aging, an irreversibility that is likewise a major pivot of Levinas's theory of diachronicity as structural openness to the Other in *Totalité et infini*.[17]

Dante's *Paradiso* surely is a song of the self, and the journey it recounts is an apotheosis of the self. But at every stage Dante encounters the limits and the groundlessness of this same self, for it is rooted in a God that is so radically other as to be incapable of being described or comprehended. To this extent, the self's own origin is in otherness. Dante's pilgrimage is a return home, but it is a return to an unknown, never before experienced "home" in the otherness of God, and to this extent it is a being at home in exile. This was Dante's historical and intimate experience as an individual, and it is reflected in the language he created, especially in its culminating form in the *Paradiso*. The poem's ideology remains one of return to one's own, to a God to whom one belongs, but if we read Dante's insistent declarations of the impossibility of his task in the *Paradiso* —as we must —it is clear that this reconciliation of self and other is leveraged from the Other and the unknown. "God" is the truth of a self that can never truly know itself except in the God who transcends knowledge.

Levinas insists on the "beyond" of being because everything in the system of manifestations of being presupposes an identity that is not totally dependent upon and beholden to the Other. Being, with its essences, posits a foundation in self-identity and thus in an egoism that rules out radical ethical responsibility from the start. Only by starting from the Other can ethics, or responsibility, in the basic sense of "the one for the other," or of "I-responsible-for-you," emerge. For being in its self-sufficiency and autotelic self-enclosedness is essentially opposed to the openness of passion towards the Other as the first moment and movement of what, before being, is in the process of becoming a subject. On the way to responsible personhood, to which it is called by the Other, the subject as yet has no essential identity in and for itself. Levinas calls this pre-originary or "an-archic" im-personality "illeité."

Now Dante certainly thinks within the philosophy of being and essence as he found it in the Scholastic philosophers and theologians (especially in Thomas Aquinas), for whom God was Being itself (*esse ipsum*). And yet in his writing he presses this conception to an extreme where it tends to collapse into its opposite. The whole metaphysical construction is turned inside out by its emergent ethical sense. In Dante's poetic rendition, pivoting from his addresses to the reader, the *significance* of theological doctrine *for* the one who receives it, rather than just its doctrinal content or intrinsic truth, becomes paramount, and this significance is ethical.[18] The *Paradiso* is in this regard the capstone of Dante's project of vul-

[17] This book constitutes Levinas's major formulation of his thinking before the revisions he undertook in *Autrement qu'être*, partly in reaction to Derrida's critique.

[18] "The primacy of ethics" in Dante has been recognized by the neo-Scholastic philosopher par excellence among Dante's critics, Etienne Gilson. In *Dante et la philosophie*, chap. 2, section 2 ("Le

garizing theology and philosophy, of translating Latin learning into the vernacular (cf. Cornish 169–82).

Prima facie, Dante's poem, as a pillar of Western metaphysical and mystical tradition, seems to be the epitome of all that Levinas's thought aims to challenge and dismantle. Dante offers a totalizing representation of the whole order of Being. He is thoroughly immersed in the vocabulary of essences and identities. The new Scholastic language and vision are among the materials fundamental for his poem. Yet in the *Paradiso* he also exposes the system of Being as all based on what itself has no definable identity or knowable essence, on what can only be testified to as beyond all possibility of representation. In Dante's poem being and knowledge show themselves to be metaphors for something else, something other, something ultimately of an irreducibly ethical character. Thus the poem illustrates how the metaphysical, ontological tradition already carries its own critique active within it, at the very heart of its inspiration. In effect, the poem brings out the negative, apophatic theology that necessarily conditions all genuine theological epiphany and metaphysical revelation. This emphasis is the constant message and general posture of the *Paradiso*. It constitutes a reply *avant la lettre* to a prevalent postmodern rejection of metaphysics, recalling that the rejection was already anticipated in the original assertion because that very assertion of a total system of being is itself motivated by a relation to the Other that is beyond Being. This comes out clearly in the self-declared impossible attempt of writing the *Paradiso*. It also suggests that in order to go beyond Being one must not simply suppress Being. Being is what one needs in order to go beyond. This is what Dante's poem, as a celebration of being in a self-transcending song of the self, in effect demonstrates.

It must be admitted (and has been) that at another and much more obvious level Dante stands rather for the antithesis of Levinas's ideas. In terms of the fiction of his narration, Dante proposes a metaphysical vision founded on the direct intuition of the divine essence. He expresses this consistently as a seeing. I do not wish to diminish the importance of this form of expression for Dante. In canto II (as again at the poem's end) he defines his driving motivation as the desire to see "that essence in which is seen how our nature is united with God" ("il disio, di veder quella essenza in che si vede/come nostra natura e Dio s'unio"), and he indicates that there, at his journey's end in God's presence, this divine essence will be immediately "seen," without demonstration, as a primary truth:

> Lì si vedrà ciò che tenem per fede,
> non dimostrato, ma ha per sé noto
> a guisa del ver primo che l'uom crede.
> (II. 40–42)
>
> (There one will see what we hold by faith,
> not demonstrated, but self-evident
> like the first truth that man believes.)

Dante's description of metaphysics as the science or ethics of ecstatic participation in the divine essence that contrasts Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and stands out as an exception in the Middle Ages "from a subordinate, marginal position" to the dominant view of metaphysics as a divine science of invisible, intelligible entities, ethics "more necessary for living as a human being" (Gilson 108). It comes first for us, even if not in the order of things as such in their absolute objectivity.

Nevertheless, this way of imagining the contact with the divine does not prevent Dante from exploring in essentially ethical terms a "vision" which cannot actually be seen, as he obsessively reminds us, except perhaps in the failure of the representations of his poetry. The vision in this sense remains a theological hypothesis that serves, narratively, as a mythic scaffolding for the ethical revelation worked out concretely by the poet in the language of the poem with its impassioned political content and urgent moral message. In this way, Dante's final work assumes a dimension of otherness with respect to its own and every possible representation that makes his poetry profoundly contemporary with the postmodern age. This enables it also to expose—together with Levinas, a postmodern prophet of transcendence in an ethical sense—what is lacking in our own age, which has often sought to become immune to all the nevertheless irrepressible testimonials of "transcendence" in its midst.[19]

Vanderbilt University

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[19] For examples of such testimonies in modern and postmodern literature, see Schwartz.

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